

Thimble Literary Magazine

Volume 3 · Number 2 · Autumn 2020

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The *Thimble Literary Magazine* is based on the belief that poetry is like armor. Like a thimble, it may be small and seem insignificant, but it will protect us when we are most vulnerable.

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Brief Guidelines for Submission

The *Thimble Literary Magazine* is primarily a poetry journal but invites submissions on related topics such as artwork, stories, and interviews. We are not looking for anything in particular in terms of form or style, but that it speaks to the reader or writer in some way. When selecting your poems or prose, please ask yourself, did this poem help me create shelter? Simultaneous submissions are accepted, but please notify us if the work is accepted elsewhere. All material must be original and cannot have appeared in another publication.

Poetry: Please send us three to five of your poems.

Short Stories: Please send a single work or around 1,000 words. It can be fiction, creative non-fiction, or somewhere in between.

Art: Please send us three to five examples of your art, which can include photographs and photographs of three-dimensional pieces.

Please send submissions to Nadia Wolnisty, Editor-in-Chief, Thimble Literary Magazine, thimblelitmag@gmail.com The author's biography should be included in the body of the email and the submission as a single attachment.

Cover art
Bill Wolack, *The Audacity of Burning*,
digital collage, 2018.

CONTENTS

Expectant	48
<i>Margaret Claahsen</i>	
Editor's Note	49
Pomegranate	51
<i>Susan Darlington</i>	
Fortune Telling	52
<i>Emma Demopoulos</i>	
even after eden	53
<i>Sr. Lou Ella Hickman</i>	
Unworn	54
<i>Kerry Trautman</i>	
That One Summer I Was Really into Sylvia Plath	56
<i>Rita Feinstein</i>	
when the house settles it's an exhale	57
<i>Maliyah Brielle</i>	
Bench	58
<i>Mike Knowles</i>	
Hieroglyphics Below	59
<i>Oak Morse</i>	
City Bike Map, New Orleans, Louisiana	62
<i>Agatha Beins</i>	
About Acacias	65
<i>Melanie Han</i>	

The Summer My Grandfather Dies I Plant a Pond <i>Brianna Pike</i>	66
Things That Are Supposed to Stop <i>Valerie Frost</i>	69
Using All 5 Senses to Study a Coconut <i>Mary M. Brown</i>	70
Strange Longings <i>Bill Wolak</i>	71
The Water Witch's Great Grandniece Nonetheless Divines <i>Shana Ross</i>	72
Spiderland <i>Lynn Finger</i>	74
I'm Uh, an A <i>Gabe Mamola</i>	76
Diagnosis <i>Jane Andrews</i>	81
Superstitions <i>Monica Kim</i>	82
Nature, Again <i>Marie Scarles</i>	84
Milkweed <i>Melissa Jenks</i>	86
A Story to Tell 2 <i>Edward Michael Supranowicz</i>	89
to go on living <i>Samantha Duncan</i>	90

there's a bird that lives in Africa, the greater honeyguide <i>Kate LaDew</i>	91
What I Learned from an Encyclopedia <i>Tiffany Jimenez</i>	92
Ode <i>Antoni Ooto</i>	95
Monster Child <i>Tufik Shayeb</i>	96
Bookshelves <i>Chris Stewart</i>	98
Using an Inclinator to Design a Mountain Bike Trail <i>J. MacBain-Stephens</i>	100
emptying <i>Alan Bern</i>	101
Ghost, Animal, Dead Body <i>Sarah Nichols</i>	102
A Weekend with Aunt Jean <i>Faith Paulsen</i>	103
Overgrown <i>Mike Knowles</i>	105



Margaret Claahsen, *Expectant*,
acrylic, 2020.

Editor's Note

Friends, I have been determined to win quarantine bingo. I got a new pet. I used a beard trimmer to buzz my hair (and it looks pretty good, all things considered). I ate zucchini bread from zucchinis I grew in my backyard. I edited my poetry manuscript. I cleaned the fridge and did other chores I've procrastinated. I wrote a protest poem. I watched all of *Tiger King*—to my discredit. Seriously, that show might corrupt the soul. Don't do it.

Anyways, this leads to the question, What's next? What is the next activity we might all agree is suitable for these times, that I too might be swept up in, for a week or afternoon?

I can't think of anything.

This weekend I was extraordinarily lazy. But I'm doing my duty and writing this. Goblin (the aforementioned new pet) is sitting next to me. My husband is playing the new *Paper Mario*.

I'm feeling listless. When Alice was falling slowly down the rabbit hole, she too felt sleepy and stupid. Do cats eat bats, or do bats eat cats?

In addition to idiotic ephemeral in my brain, I've also been thinking of questions of community. I've never liked that word. It's nebulous and has too many *m*'s. What does it mean to be a community? What are the conditions necessary for one?

I am falling through a rabbit hole. Do communities need us, or do we need communities?

Earlier this week, a former contributor mailed me a copy of his new book unasked for. A delightful surprise all the way from Arizona. I read it in an afternoon.

I think, then, over the past few months we've helped build something. A small shelter that lets art be shared. A community is a place where you can share your bread.

After falling for what seemed like ages, Alice eats a small cake. And we all know what happens next.

May we all have bread. May we all be transformed—even if we don't know why.

NADIA ARIOLI

Pomegranate

by Susan Darlington

Pomegranate seeds are sown
down the centre of the road,
equidistant flashes of red
that sparkle like gemstones
in the car's chill headlights.

They impassively mark the distance
that's passed between here—
another seed comes into view—
and the there of your kitchen,
where we sat on stark wood chairs

with our knees barely touching,
our hands wrapped around
slowly cooling tea served
in white cups; their glaze
delicately mapped with cracks.

Fortune Telling

by Emma Demopoulos

Each question, I pick from my skin
And wish I never asked it
The answers passed to me like notes in a classroom
I stuff them in my pockets
They fill the empty space but do not heal the wounds
I think myself wise, spending the paper
Each folded note padding the pockets of other people's jeans
Pinched between two fingers I pluck the question
From the most delicate bit of skin

Will I always have a hand to hold?

On lined paper, soft from passing hands and trading pockets
There in tiny print made by fingers I don't know

Sometimes the things we don't know do hurt us.

Crumpled in the corner of my pocket, I let it stay
A reminder to stop asking

even after eden

by Sr. Lou Ella Hickman, IWBS

what did you feel when adam first made love to you
did you taste that painful word—*desire*—under his heaving
were you frightened as your belly grew round as fruit
when labor induced your screams
did your blood spill on the ground giving birth to cain
then, as you fed your son your body's milk
did you delight in the life you held in your hands ...
years later how did you learn of abel's murder
the death of your second child
desire born again of adam's heaving
did cain show you the scar of God's fateful promise
finally, what did you feel when you watched him go,
a marked and haunted man

Unworn

by Kerry Trautman

I yank four nighties from hangers—
 silky slips too cheap
 to be called negligees,
unworn since my twenties.
I realize they must have
 looked pretty on me once,
Like discovering you had been fed
 cake in your sleep.

So many seamstresses and
 hot machines' needling wisps of
 sorbet-colored nylon and black lace
 to fake my body into womanliness.
It couldn't have been just my skin
I had prettied up for men.

When the women of my family
all gifted me bridal shower lingerie
 they were instructing in
 the joy of flimsy beauty
the way a mother blows
 hours of backyard soap bubbles
 with her toddler, saying—
 through the float and vanish—
 that now is for wasting hours
 in pastel distraction.

Now, at forty-three,
I offer only opacity—
 the gift of coverage,
 of cloaking the truth of
 all of me.

What is lingerie but celebration?
What are red-embroidered roses—
what is a silk-cord strap made to
 slip off a shoulder—
what is marabou trimming—
what are seed pearls stitched
 along a plunging neckline—
what is nylon sheer as July haze—
but gift wrap for
 an offering of youthfulness?

That One Summer I Was Really into Sylvia Plath

by Rita Feinstein

I wasted away to a sprig of rosemary.
I grew as translucent as a nightgown.

I saw my own worthlessness in everything—
a receding tideline or hairline,
a late train, an early frost.

I broke every bone in the sky
and then reconstructed its skull,
the sun and moon its eyes,
the earth its burning brain.

I cut the kindling. I struck the match.
My bangs were a fringe of pine needles
and caught quickly. The fire fit
like an off-the-rack wedding dress.

My mouth was full of blackberries.
It was more sweetness than I could bear.

when the house settles it's an exhale

by Maliyah Brielle

my first home was 101 years old.
in the room my mother slept
a man began his ascent/descent
toward heaven/hell.

our home existed
as purgatory between whichever fate.

we knew his name but preferred to call him by
the moment our light switch lost purpose,
a sole pierced a floorboarded nail,
the thirst's assuring the well's drought.

when I was six the doctors said I had
elevated lead levels in my blood. I understood this
as two doctor visits a week—an ice cream cone
if I didn't cry through the needle.

but my mother explained it as
a spirit's ability to traverse through my body.

when holding the hand of one child, with the arms
of another around your shoulders and the third
breathing softly in your lap, a ghost
is an easier phenomenon to explain than poverty.

our family held our breath
to resist swallowing diagnosis. beneath our feet
the pipes cracked open—an offering of water
to ease denial down our throats.



Mike Knowles, *Bench*,
digital art, 2020.

Hieroglyphics Below

by Oak Morse

If you look closely,
many black men
have hieroglyphics
on their necks,
telling a story
of a razor blade
and a ghost &
in between those two,
a young man
whose skin is made
of black ashes.

When strands of
manhood
bud around
his jawline,
he turns
to himself
and lit TV,
smoothing
the surface
back like a stone.
Plastic razors
& cheap cream,
he scraps into
history, each

stroke slicing
too deep
like peeling
far into
a potato.

He tears into tissue,
an invisible
massacre
develops
below the mouth.
Fresh bristles rise,
pushing up &
against
his traumatized
pores, leaving
mounds of pain
in red, white & brown
in the area
that's supposed to
manifest the makings
of a man, but instead
is a scarred entry
into adulthood.

Matters into
his own fingers,
he spears off
those raging dunes
into the unknown
to undo what's
been done,
to undo what
he never asked for,
engraving
scars
into the surface.

An irreversible
tale dwells.
When he is
faced with his
image,
he sees
a ruin
and, behind,
the ghost
of the father
who was never
there to help him.

City Bike Map, New Orleans, Louisiana

by Agatha Beins

Multiple Choice

1. with what kind of glass does the street glitter?
 - a. windshield seafoam green
 - b. champagne flute shards
 - c. beer bottle, craft
 - d. beer bottle, domestic
 - e. grandmother's china
 - f. a mirror

2. with what have they filled the potholes?
 - a. gravel
 - b. air
 - c. water
 - d. pavement
 - e. a bright orange traffic cone
 - f. two bright orange traffic cones

3. what textile most resembles the road?
 - a. corduroy
 - b. cotton sheets, line dried, 400 thread count
 - c. a handkerchief, used
 - d. grandmother's quilt

- e. burlap
- f. Lycra stretched across someone's tight ass

Measurements

not north on Washington after 9 pm
nor on Josephine south of Saint Charles

note the nearest exits

the distance between sea level and the row houses' ground floor
the distance between seams in the road

the ones whose gaze would linger on your skin: count the seconds
the long oval of neutral space: how many steps, how many breaths, to cross

the scents: calculate where each lies—
is it heavy, deep fried, congealed at your ankles, sliced by each pedal's
rotation, written in calligraphy on a card in an English garden
is it a lilt or a waddle
where would it curve, would it curve like a manicure or a sigh

Hierarchy

coexist bumper stickers supersede the porch talk
an old man sitting on a porch stoop supersedes coexistence
trimmed shrubbery supersedes old men
purple, yellow, and green beads supersede shrubbery
uptown supersedes the colors of Mardi Gras
daylight supersedes uptown
food trucks supersede the sun
people walking dogs supersede all

Etymology

Martin Luther King Jr.

General Pershing
Chippewa
Terpsichore
Tchoupitoulas
Constantinople
Lopez
Loyola
Constance
Simon Bolivar
Fourth

Land Marks

look for the ghost bike, look white and
skeletal, look for its frame yoked to the street
sign with a thick, linked chain and a padlock's thick, curved shank,
look both ways before,
look, here

if you peel away a layer of house paint what was written in the X's quadrants?

where the bike lane ends
where the beads hang
where iron fences a window
where iron fences a balcony
where the trolley stops
where the man shouts across the street that he didn't go to the DMV
yesterday because he was too drunk
where this man is white
where the croissant is buttery
where some gather where others loiter,

is there a sign on the telephone pole at the intersection that says,
in purple handwritten capital letters, *love*?

About Acacias

by Melanie Han

Acacia trees are most commonly found in Africa's savannas. They stand alone, upright, tall, and leafy, casting shade on giraffes—an escape of noonday Serengeti heat. The darkness of the wood contrasts sharply against the wide, green leaves that photosynthesize eagerly in the brutal African sun; light courses through their stringy veins. Their branches have thorns, two inches long. When they shed, it is impossible to walk near them. The thorns pierce shoes like lions' teeth pierce the necks of baby gazelles. Weaver birds weave homes amongst the tops, avoiding thorns, making shelter where shelter shouldn't be made. After the rainy season, the trees produce small flowers, bright yellow like the papyrus warbler. When the flowers are fried, they taste of honey. That night, you really wanted those honey flowers, so I decided to brave the thorns. You didn't notice my speckled, red feet.

The Summer My Grandfather Dies I Plant a Pond

by Brianna Pike

1

The pond opens wide, swallowing the sky until clouds float over the surface among bits of birch bark and maple leaf.

My son's feet crackle loud across the gravel but quiet as he comes to a halt at the spongy edge and leans down to find his face in the water.

Earlier, not long before we arrived, my mother spoke from the front passenger seat, "Your grandfather doesn't let anyone swim in the pond anymore. There's no spring feeding it, so there's no fresh water. He doesn't know what's in there."

But I know what's there: birch bark, maple leaf, tiny blue forget-me-nots, gravel, sky, clouds, and my son's face quietly rippling apart.

2

I buy the interior liner for my pond. Thick black plastic turns water to night when filled. I settle on a half whiskey barrel to enclose the liner and it is so heavy I have to ask for help carrying it out to my car.

I am halfway home when I smell alcohol: sharp, fermented and a little bit sweet. When I open the hatch of my car and stick my face inside the rain-damp barrel, the scent intensifies.

My grandfather sometimes drank scotch: smooth, translucent amber in a short glass. Ice cubes clinking each time he lifted it to his lips. He'd sit in the family room, drink in hand, and look out the sliding doors, over the lawn to the pond.

I learned to swim in my grandfather's pond. I'd wade out, mud squelching between my toes before the bottom dropped off to deeper water.

My grandfather held me around the waist. His calloused fingertips pressed into the flimsy fabric of my swimsuit as I kicked furiously churning the murky water white.

Later, my cousin and I would jump off a stack of flat rocks, our joyful bodies breaking through calm water over and over and over again.

The first time I order plants for my pond, my order reads, Two dwarf cattails, one water lily and six snails.

But my mind is elsewhere. My mind is on my mother, planning my grandmother's funeral. My mind is on my grandfather, alone and quietly dying. My mind is on my pending journey north.

I forget to finalize the order.

My mother's cousin asks about the forget-me-nots that flank the edges of the pond.

It is the day before my grandmother's funeral and she wants to know if forget-me-nots are easy to grow. She wants to know if these tiny, delicate blue flowers with the yellow centers will grow in Maine. She wants to know if she can dig some up and take them home.

I wander into the kitchen to find my mother hovering over my grandfather's shoulder.

Forget-me-not.

He's been confused all day.

Forget-me-not.

He thinks today is my grandmother's funeral.

Forget-me-not.

He asks, "What day is it?"

Forget-me-not.

He asks, "What time is it?"

Forget-me-not.

He asks, "What is everyone doing?"

Forget-me-not.

He says, "I need to get ready."

Forget-me-not.

He says, "I need to go."

6

The pond used to be stocked with rainbow trout every summer. When I went to stay with my grandparents, I'd follow my grandfather out into the garage to his workshop and he'd say, "Let's feed the fish."

We'd throw handfuls of fish food: smooth, brown pebbles that rippled the smooth water. There would be a pause then a cacophony of slick, smooth bodies breaking the surface with such ferocious hunger you could barely make them out amongst all the splashing.

Now, the pond sits silent and still.

7

The second time I order plants for my pond, I've been home for one day: two dwarf cattails, one water lily, six snails and four forget-me-nots.

I place the order.

The next day, my grandfather dies.

8

I bury bare roots of cattails and forget-me-nots in soil and gravel.

I place plants in my night liner.

I add six snails.

I add ten goldfish.

My water lily sends off lily pads left and right.

My snails multiply.

The pond grows.

The clouds reflect on the surface.

The forget-me-nots push up, about to bloom.

My son drops food for the goldfish and they breach the surface, rippling our faces over the smooth, dark water.

Things That Are Supposed to Stop

by Valerie Frost

for David

*An object in motion will remain in motion unless
acted upon by an external and unbalanced force.*

—SIR ISAAC NEWTON, *Principia mathematica*

A car at a red octagon sign, spaced from pedestrian feet.
The gas pump when the handle clicks, signaling the tank is full.
A microwave at the sound of repeated beep.
A cassette tape after the film fully loops the opposite spool.
The pre-heating oven that reached the degree from Granny Stella's recipe.
My level of care for hearing Aunt Leah's "back in her day" story again.
A ballerina's spinning pirouettes once the music box's tune has ceased.
The Ferris wheel gondola when I've reached the top meridian—
The chorus of birds at 5 am outside my bedroom window
during wintertime.
The alarm clock beep I switch off, not snooze, so the bus commute
I don't miss.
The drip from the Keurig once my morning Caribou blend fills to
the brew line.
The toilet water rising after swirling to a who-knows-where septic abyss . . .
The flood of texts after what I find out later as bad news;
For, what I didn't expect to stop, was You.

Using All 5 Senses to Study a Coconut

by Mary M. Brown

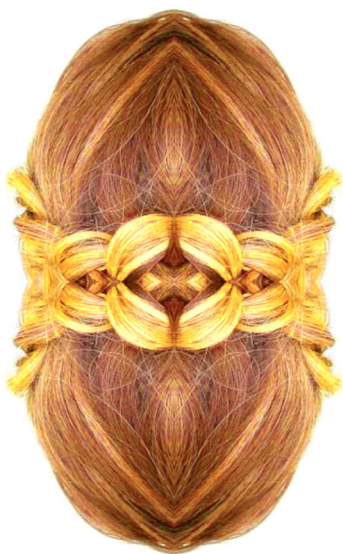
In grade 3 we're taking
notes on a coconut today,
observing, learning what
it means to know, and
what it doesn't mean.

We're taking in deep
whiffs of it, rubbing its
hair like we pet our
dogs, puzzling, listening
to see if the fuzzy thing
gurgles or mews, estimating
the size of its *circumference*
a term we learned last week
in math. One of us puts
a tongue to the rough husk,
grimaces, shoots the no-
nonsense teacher a look.

We are not to ask
questions like, *Where*
do coconuts grow? or
What's it look like on

the inside? We are told
we must rely on our own
senses, our own devices,
though it is the teacher
who finally taps the fluke
with a hammer, pries
open the shell, exposing
milk and meat.

One of us starts to cry
softly, falters, whispers
to me they heard it say,
*I'm not comfortable
with all this attention.*



Bill Wolak, *Strange Longings*,
digital collage, 2019.

The Water Witch's Great Grandniece Nonetheless Divines

by Shana Ross

She planted pennies near the roots of her trees
in every corner of her yard
for strength, for strength
even though the practice could not be verified
to hold truth, to help growth
not even under scientific scrutiny could we
prove it would do no harm.

Columbia lies supine
take the coins from her eyes and
hold them on your tongue like communion.

The land we live on is lush
our trees grow, the bits of metal
underneath irrelevant as superstition

we have good soil, plenty of water.

*Do you dream of water, asks my horoscope?
Pay attention to how it flows but beware.
I stress caution, caution: do not follow.*

My husband, as a child, visited relatives
who fed him bald, white potatoes from a can:
for *koach*, for *koach*, begged him
to eat more and there is the time
and place where he fainted in the heat
on the ball field, after a summer holding
candles up to quail eggs, measuring
growth of the embryonic birds in their shells
day by day by day turned data.

The coin in my mouth begins to bleed
a taste I know better than change.
Can we buy strength? What is strength?
Whatever we knew in the old country
we are made of this new dirt now;
I swallow red clay like prayers
dug up in daily portions with a silver demitasse
to root us and our children
deep to where the water sinks.

In the sea, what has sunk
will rise in time, will float
when it is no longer heavier than its surroundings.

Spiderland

by Lynn Finger

My parents set up the tent in a Christmas tree farm near
a six-lane highway
in southern California, we are near a grey overpass
sparse ponderosa
pines glint nearby in the smoldering gloom they get
the poles

aligned and stake the corners as the sun speared one last ray on the
dark rain clouds
and then there is a downpour the rain falls water tankers full
we take shelter
in the tent and I sit on the rough canvas flooring but it is
near an overpass

and the piercing engines of the semis shred the quiet around us, and
as the area floods
a carpet of spiders come running in their own wave, the fuzzy
wolf spiders and
orb weavers the dark tree spiders their front legs grabbing
forward onto the

canvas million-eyed aliens. I ask my parents why don't we go somewhere
dry without spiders
like a nearby hotel and they said no we're camping, and I sleep in
the wet canvas
tent with little spiders crawling around and over, dreams
borne off to spider
land where they use me as a carousel.

I'm Uh, an A

by Gabe Mamola

veral editions. Hymno
—C. S. LEWIS

1. The Carnivale of Aminals

Some toys love you more than others,
more than blocks or shapes,
or other hard things without eyes or faces,
who only tell you What can be made out of them,
be made out of us who enjoy it,
this human nature,
always assumed to be less bounded than we'd like our tribe to stay—

WHo is living,
what is dead,
in this house that Jack brought?
The heffalump that sings and plays peekaboo?
the terrycloth olliphaunts with the cruel eyes,
who tolerate my son's chewing on their noses,
But in their hearts,
I know they worship Morgoth the Destroyer?
The original elpahent whose photograph graces a page of the
Animals A-Z book
that my son has nearly finished eating?
Tell me!

Which is it?
I am growing concerned.

Come out you half-things,
you jank-dogs,
you gum-cats,
you kool-bats!

Come out you berds and beseasts,
you dang-beetles,
you clapper-aunts eating the Insul-foam out of my hot-tub cover!

Come out and say where some Real Animals are!
An who has let you mere eidola proliferate in their absence?

There are yoo many of tou—
I'd sacrifice the zoo of it all,
from Aslan to Zebra,
no tardigrades even remaining,
for a sign that you really existed at some point.

Even the calf's head in the Icon of the Trinity that hangs in my
living room looks
ridiculous—
a pokey meat-glob with baby-eyes0-0
And that's suppodes to be Jesus?
Explain this to me!

My son in his imago-plasto nursery,
and my house now that's full of unicorns,
When he learns that unicorns aren't real,
or that rabbits aren't rainbow sherbert colored,
will he disbelieve in True Beasts at all?
What may I even say to dissuade him?
"Oh, but the bisen is real,
The crocodile and the ankgaroo—

all reall—
or were—
or whatever—
Will the documentary footage convince him of the cheetah or
the rattlenakes?
The penguin?
The nautilus?
the shark?
the whelk?
the Whelk?
the WHELK????
Are these ever real now themselves?
Is my soul broken?
I'm afraid, rtuly afreared—
Wuf if Aminals eren't,
And the Deepfake of the World is at hand?
Can I show him the soft-tanned pelts my father has collected
and made,
(scavenging roadkill)
Beavers and focuses,
Coyotes and otthers==
Will these weird blankets convince that once their wore
living creatures?

Will museums work?

I would become ashamed! at language itself,
if no better phate awaits gorillas,
the horse,
the luna moth,
tuna fish.
Shall I point to the blue packaged lump of bluud from Trader Joe's,
and then to s small painted wooden token taken from his Farm Puzzle:
The Lamm!
That?
A lamb?
Where are its horns?

Where are its other eyes,
Where are the rest of its blood?

No,
you cannot step in the shit of a golden calph—

2. Tge Riddlke if the Sphynxs

All kinds of creatures with human faces,
populate both real and imaginary deserts,
carry both kinds of pestilence—
venom and disease,
Sphynxes and Seraphim,
harpies and,
I dont know,
hog-people?

On a sand island,
in waste,
under a date palm,
waits the tiny mouse w/ the emperor's eyes;
his cry—chip-chirp, chirp chirp,
and somewhere a snake shudders,
as though a mongoose had spat on it.\

The cobra cares no interest,
but eats many small mammals,
controls the rodent popultation remendously.

At no point of an exosystem does ectermination produce anything,
except both kinds of venom,
both poisson,
and Dis-ease.

Up the icon of Ununciation crawls a lady-bug,
She pauses buy the Virgin's arm,

while my son in his crib has learned to operate the mechanical whale,
Which pulsates green and teal when its tail is chewed upon.

What odd ocean burped up such a creature?

Take care, Lady Bird.

“You” alone cannot contain the animal-man,
his flab,
his poop,
his mind,
his wickedness,
His Lore—
He has deep wells of it,
spills the stuff onto the Deep of speech like oil,
coating every otter he can cat his hands on.

My son has finished eating his Book of Animals,
and is will on his way to devouring his Book of Saints

Tomorrow: the world; yesterday: tomorrow.

Only an animal soul will stop him.

You see, my son is very bad at ducks,
even small hard rubber ones,
with novelty hats.
His fingers reach like the paws of the Lovecraftian PSphinx,
But he only pushes them faurther away with each grab.

It's excruciation to watch,
but unlike Tantalus,
this torture has taught my son to slither.

He's getting better at it all the time.

Diagnosis

by Jane Andrews

It's like the time
you hit the dog on the highway
late at night, driving back
from the beach.

She turned her head
toward us,
eyes reflecting green
in the beams.

One lane coming,
one lane going,
through a marsh
of hidden peepers

and a shudder
passed through the car
into my chest.
Our daughter woke.

"What's going on?"
"Nothing."
We did not look at the road
behind us. Or at each other.

We never stopped moving.

Superstitions

by Monica Kim

Come look at this // my friend says. I just finished unpacking pots & pans & dishware & food in our kitchen / I follow her to the open window. Look down // she says. A clown figurine & a doll head greet me // Gifts from the previous tenants? // I ask. There was another clown figurine / on top of our pantry closet.

At night my mom would tell me // don't whistle. When I asked her why, she said // because it brings bad spirits // I imagined a girl who looked like me / pale as the moonlight with water dripping / from her nightgown, black hair matted in front of her / At church my mom would tell me // don't move your leg up & down like that. // Why? // I asked. She said // because it is disrespectful // but I imagined it had something to do with how we were all crammed into pews / the dead existed within these walls. Don't write in red ink // my mom would tell me. It brings bad luck / it's the color of blood.

Some buildings in South Korea don't have a fourth floor / the Chinese symbol for four means death / this brings bad luck /

Weird things start happening in our new home / the garbage disposal breaks, twice / the sound of crushed glass tunneling / my heating vent catches on fire before the sun comes up / our power winks out multiple times / darkness another roommate.

Before the school year began / my parents bought a small bottle of holy water / from the gift shop of L'Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal / my dad asked if I wanted the holy water / When I asked him why, he said // it will help you sleep at night / months later, I ask if he could bring the holy water when they visit me in a few weeks / I tell them about the clown figurines & the weird things happening in the home.

My parents yell // get rid of them now! // Get your friend's boyfriend to throw them away, my dad said // Why do you think only a boy can get rid of them? I asked him / silence greets me in return / weeks later I sprinkle holy water in our living room / the droplets of water lingering on fingertips / and yet—

The clown figurines are still there / tucked underneath the stairs.

Nature, Again

by Marie Scarles

- 7 a: humankind's original or natural condition
 b: a simplified mode of life resembling this condition

This language takes tautology as definition. Nature = a natural condition for mankind. [Sic] the whole statement. The language our land's laws rest on, empty.

When Europeans arrived, North America was “legally” empty. How so? A salvage race of men—*salvage, people of the sauvage, or forest*—didn't cultivate the land with their own labor, but merely “used the fruits.”

[Sic] the whole statement.

Settler's “providence” = the new world formed for settlement by a God, beneficent. Left alone (with Others) it was full of disorderly, useless wilderness. But how to [sic] it all, in thought, action, and language?

*

If only it were that easy to edit history, to edit it on the page. “What did literature ever do for you?” asks an article, and I think of a question posed by a different essay: Does literature's personal testimony leave you alone with your grief, or does it tie you to something wider, something larger, something other than you, pronoun, bound down and alone? All my letters are stretching their necks, trying to see. Their palms ache for your hands, for holding.

*

As if your life depended on it—

“I don’t like her strident tone,” a student told me after we read this essay by Adrienne Rich. “It seems like she just wants to tell you what to do.”

What to make of this statement? Rich tells us to write and read like our lives depend on our language. Must she make her voice softer on the page too? Perhaps I’ve spilled too many words already. Perhaps no one will listen unless I whisper.

*

The flowers whisper; the violet morning glories of summer, fat trumpets on their vines, have withered out. Had I not faced them daily from my desk at the window, from this position in the frame, would I have heard their song? “Poetry is a way of reading,” a poet told me.

I am learning how to hear what’s on the page, behind the words, behind the rage. To ask who lives on what land, and what binds the paper’s wood and fiber, and what hands hold ink and glue, lithium and plastic.

A theory, again: Poetry teaches you not how to speak, but how to listen.

Milkweed

by Melissa Jenks

Milkweed grows all behind my mother-in-law's house. As I grew up I thought the name sounded lovely—a plant grown from milk, poured in the shape of a pitcher. But she hates the stuff. Always bursting open and seeding her beds of roses and tulips.

When I'm at her house I go for walks, down a small path among pines, along the ditch dug for drainage, and about a mile farther, to where the woods open up into a field. There I can walk or lie in the sun—if the bugs aren't too bad—run my hands through the grass, take in the golden light. I always clean my body of ticks before I get back to the house, and if Eve knew I went all the way back there she'd have a conniption. As it is, she asks, "Did you come here to go for walks, or to see me?"

I want to say, *To go for walks*, but really I soothe her softly and we spend the rest of the day in cool darkness, playing cribbage and watching Hallmark movies. She keeps all of the blinds shut, all of the time, all the windows and doors cranked tightly down, so no light gets in. Light makes heat, she says. And yes, it is about five degrees cooler inside.

When I come in, back from my walk, it's like stepping into air-conditioning, although she'd never pay for air-conditioning, not this frugal Yankee. She'd rather live in a house as dark as a coffin. So in the field I feel free, coming home covered in dust and pollen and milkweed spores.

One day in the distance I saw something, a movement.

At first I thought it was an animal—maybe a big cat? Then I looked closer, came closer. I didn't have any fear, for some reason, although my

heart beat faster. I walked along my path, peering down crossed deer trails for any sign of movement.

Maybe it was just a deer, browsing here in the sunlit morning, beating another faint trail through grass. My heart calmed, and then I saw her, a barefoot girl in an eyelet dress, off towards the edge of pine. I'd never seen another girl—no, another person—here before.

"Hello?" I called.

She didn't answer, disappeared, running away into the fallen needles. I said something to my mother-in-law when I got back.

"I saw a child back in the woods. Does one of the neighbors have a daughter?"

Her grey head shook a no, doubtfully, but she's becoming forgetful.

"She seemed too young to be out by herself. Maybe someone's grandchild?"

That didn't seem right either. I thought through the neighbors. No one's the right age. Then I poured myself a drink and forgot about it.

The next day, there she was again.

This time she let me closer.

"Hello, little one," I called.

Her face was grubby and it looked like she'd been crying.

"Can I help you find someone?" I asked, but she didn't answer.

As I came closer, I stopped. She looked just like me. Clearly, I mean not like me now, with the extra twenty pounds around my ass I'm always trying to lose, acne scarring my face, my dulled hair. Me as I used to look.

It was like looking at a photograph of the past.

"Don't be afraid," I said and held out my hand.

That was too much for her, and again she ran, turning tail. Her bare feet flashed white before she disappeared.

"I saw that girl again," I said when I got back.

"What girl?" my mother-in-law answered.

"That child I told you about yesterday."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. She gets angry when I remind her she's forgetting.

"Never mind," I said. "Cribbage?"

Next day I was ready. I walked quietly, stealthy. I wore my sandals. I came to the edge of the grass, drenched in golden light, so bright it

almost hurt my eyes. With each silent step I stopped, carefully looking along each faint trace left by deer, in either direction towards forest.

Then I came to the flowers. If she's really anything like me, I thought—she'll want flowers. But the only ones I loved were milkweed with their slender stalks, pods opening, and billowing, fecund ova. I picked a bouquet of weeds, choosing only the prettiest, arraying them, and she was the one that surprised me as I focused, coming behind me and brushing my waist with fingertips. I held out the bouquet and she laughed as she took it. together we pulled pods apart, then blew dandelion fluff until it billowed against blue sky. I realized it was getting late.

"Can I take you back to your mom?" I asked.

She distended her lip, pouting.

"Let me help you, please," I said.

She got up from where we sat, hugging our knees against ourselves, and began to walk, then run, back to the forest.

"Wait," I said. "Wait."

She stopped and turned.

"Here." I held out the last blossom of milkweed, closed still, whole, and she took it, wrapped both fists around its milky stalk. Then she vanished into shadow, lifting each foot as delicate as a pony. When I came into the darkened house, late, confused, I mixed myself a drink.

I examined my own face in the mirror for a long time. The lines in my face, the marks of age. Did the girl in the woods look like me, or just my idea of myself? I looked like her, and I didn't.

In the hall, beside the mirror, hung a picture of Eve, looking more like the girl than I did. The film blurred by time. She held a flower out to the camera. An uncharacteristic act of ego for her to have hung it there, beside a photo collage of her nephews on the other side, her face younger, her hair a cropped helmet. They were all grown now. Plumbers.

Then I looked at my mother-in-law, there, in her chair. Both of us forgetting who we once were.

I went to the couch. Eve was eating soup from a TV tray, watching the news.

"How was your walk?" she asked.

"Fine," I said.

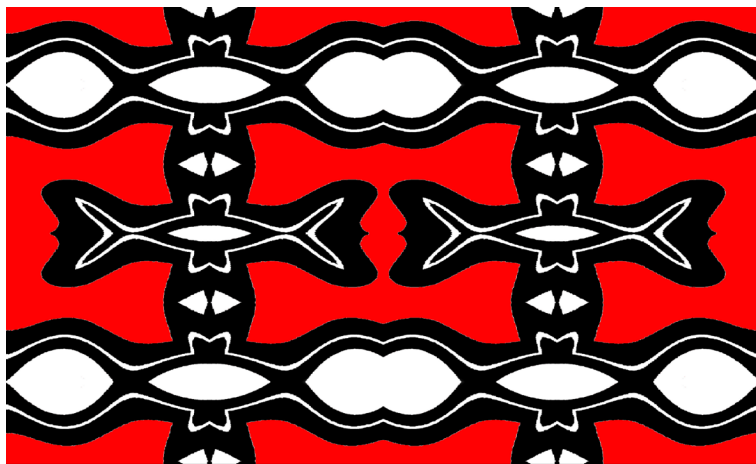
“Oh well,” she said. She said it even when nothing was wrong. Then her deep intake of breath, an exhale through the teeth, a pulling down of the lower corners of her mouth.

I saw the vase on her end table. Inside, a single stalk of milkweed, the seedpod closed tight as a fist.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked. “Where?”

She looked at it, eyes hazed by age.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I don’t remember.”



Edward Michael Supranowicz, *A Story to Tell 2*,
digital painting, 2019.

to go on living
by Samantha Duncan

This is a found poem taken from Flowers in the Attic by V.C. Andrews.

from the room cuts ache and spring me
until tears and wonderful newborn garden

who was I until pain began living
I flung twin aches to myself

the rubbing cried the heart for hurt he alive
cried worse there the oceans tore from moon down

the mother down a heard chance made footsteps
into swollen tears and red fists

that experienced many old eyes how I blood soft
beat back house of fragrances

coming of millions with my breezes come out horned stars
then flung my sweet all over

*there's a bird that lives in Africa,
the greater honeyguide*

by Kate LaDew

which leads people to the nests of wild bees
waiting while the hives are subdued with smoke, and the honey stolen,
leaving stray larvae and pupae and wax for the bird
sometimes the greater honeyguide trills at a human
and leads them to an abrupt precipice, below which a beehive lives
it's not that they've forgotten people can't fly, they never knew in
the first place,
and don't mean any harm, because, after all, it's how to get to the honey
and, thus far, no person has followed them down, taking the time to
look first
so it's quite a thing in 2020 to turn on a TV and see crowds of people
without wings
spreading their arms and jumping, because people who know they can't fly,
being people themselves, have asked them to and there's no
honey anywhere

What I Learned from an Encyclopedia

by Tiffany Jimenez

Instead of figuring out what you'd like best, you chose what you'd do out of a burgundy encyclopedia. Your father told you—and you'll never forget this—that you can become a genius just by reading every single one. He'd read an article about a child your age who'd done just that. Who was now a certifiable genius. And that child was thought to have been slow, he added, which you translated to mean, *just think what you can be!*

You tried to read every single book in the set. You thought to start from the beginning, but then tried to mix it up when you started falling asleep on the columned print. You stood on the page about cursive the longest. You loved the loops, the neatness; you were so entranced by the letters that you took a blue pen to the light brown paper and traced them. You showed your parents out of guilt, but they didn't mind. They complimented your ability to stay in the lines. That day you wrote your first story and you wrote it in cursive.

When you started school, you were eager to love it. But a jungle gym, lines of kids, all bigger than you—these weren't things explained in the encyclopedia. There's a photo of you at the end of the line. Your mother uses it to show people how tiny you were. In the photo, you're in disbelief at being left alone with these kids, these teachers, these strangers. Hadn't you been taught all of your life up to this point that strangers were bad?

You'd introduced yourself to someone once and you'd told them your full name, address and phone number. You told them precious information you'd memorized alongside your parents, who were so proud at how quickly you'd memorized it. All of those games of cards, of Memory, had

served you in this triumphant moment as you recited the information in perfect pitch. But you were wrong.

You were told not to tell anyone this information outside of an emergency. You watched *Dateline* and *20/20* to learn about what constituted an emergency. The strangers will know your name already. You must ask them for the password, one you and your parents had settled on privately, and if they do not give you the right password, you must scream, yell, and run. Run as fast as you can. Even if it means throwing your oversized backpack down to rid yourself of unnecessary weight. All that matters, they told you, is that you find your way home. Actually, they corrected, find the police or a fire station because you don't want the stranger to know where you live. You can tell the police or the fire station, they clarified, your full name, address, and phone number.

The next time you're introduced to someone, you'll say nothing.

You skip S and jump to W and are entranced by *writer*. You see photographs of desks and typewriters and you picture yourself sitting at a desk typing. You point to the section and say, "That's what I want to be," and your parents say that's wonderful, only smart people are writers. And you look back down at the row of burgundy encyclopedias and think, all I have to do is read each one of these.

You chose your future from the encyclopedia and you kept your promise. You added another career during elementary school, and you've kept that promise, too. But you never read all of the encyclopedias and it's bothering you now, over twenty-five years later. You got into an argument with your now husband about history. It was an exposé on the fact that you don't know as much as everyone thinks you know. You argue before your upcoming trip. A trip you've almost cancelled. A trip you'd told him you'd cancelled to see how he'd react, and then didn't cancel.

On your trip, no one around has a full-time job. You're the only one, but you refuse to admit it voluntarily until pressed. You speak in past tense about the time you worked three jobs as an undergrad, then two as a graduate student. What about now? they ask. You tell them you're a public servant and the conversation turns to health care. That's all they're interested in talking about because some of them haven't been seeing well for a few years but can't afford to go to the optometrist. You want to ask them how this affects their work. Not seeing properly. They're

artists. You're all attending an artists' residency. But you don't want them to misconstrue what you're asking them. You picture the C encyclopedia. What would you have learned in the *conversation* section? You could've used that information right about now.

When you go home, you will ask your mom for the burgundy set of encyclopedias. She'll tell you she's thrown them away. She threw them away a long time ago. When she senses your disappointment, she will explain that those encyclopedias were old, outdated. Nothing in them, she'll tell you, can't be found online. And you'll appreciate this for a moment until you realize that what you learned from the encyclopedia was contentment in random choices made. You're no longer content being "on" at work and "off" at home where you change into pajamas the moment you're inside. Where you watch reality TV, read one of the several books you're actively getting through, ask your husband when he's going to make dinner unless he's asleep beside you, the smell of bourbon, you think, until you take the next fifteen minutes looking for what you discover is instead gin, and you panic about what it will take to go back outside for food, for something, until you find yourself trying to sleep yourself. Stranger, that's who you are. And that's when you'll go online and search for an up-to-date set of encyclopedias, preferably a burgundy set, and see if you can afford it.

Ode

by Antoni Ooto

dying alive
slipping-slipping

aspen of Feather Hill,
uncertain marker

once flash and faro
your hapless crown yellowed

this resting place of ducks
that call and click gone

naked cage of ribs
another leaf slips

Perhaps, nature is right—
one lifetime is enough.

Monster Child

by Tufik Shayeb

roll it around in
your soft hand,
a small snail's shell

wondering, *Is it*
fragile, or
maybe brittle?

this shell
used to be slimy,
like some monster

all alien and wet
all antennae and no limbs
no eyes, no soul

a whole colony,
faced with extinction
in the hot sun

maybe you eat it
maybe you taste butter
and herb, and savor it
or

maybe you taste
too much salt,
like hot, streaming tears
and dirty beach tides

but now you run
through the short grass
of your backyard

catching sunlight
like rain in a cup
until it spills all over

asking,
What can you smash?

Bookshelves

by Chris Stewart

The afternoon we took my father's bookshelves
to the British Heart Foundation
was the afternoon I learnt something
about the lending library of one's forebearers.

His stooped and stoned spine bent
under the sliding weight of books
collecting his end as he effed and jeffed
trying to get his foot up on the curb.

Fuck sake! Pick it up your end! Your end!
You're like a fart in a trance.

Here were all his books on philosophy and sociology.
Bit pointless for a pipe fitter. A précis on phenomenology
isn't usually required from arc welders.

Still, after two weeks offshore this was how he spent his time
in books. Books we were giving to charity.

I couldn't help a churlish snark,
I thought these were supposed to be all the books I'd read one day.

“Well you’ve left it a bit fucking late,” he rasped
and his sandal slipped off the curb
and poured all that wasted time out onto the pavement
leaving me to pick up the Memories,
Thoughts and Reflections of Carl Gustav Jung,
Aldous Huxley and Sartre amongst others
I’d never heard of.

It’s me now that flies off the handle,
each dogeared remark ripped straight from him
sulking in the car. After I’d collected up his books
and donated his mother’s old mahogany bookcases
he said,

*It’s the bookcase that matters.
And we can’t take it with us.*

Using an Inclinometer to Design a Mountain Bike Trail

by J. MacBain-Stephens

The inclinometer is tied to him
literally hangs around his neck
we walk up and down in the woods
the sun gets lower and lower
behind the trees
he raises it to his eye
It's hard to keep steady
while measuring the grade of the earth
cold feet and fingers
while making a bike trail
in west Des Moines, Iowa,
crossing frozen creeks
the tree branches start to look like
upside-down spiders in the sky
webs spiking into gray clouds
stars brighter away from the city
we march up and down
talk about how fast a cyclist will
descend
climb
The inclinometer wavers
trembles

as we look through it

line it up with our mouth or nose

to see how the ground rises and falls

.5 here or a -8 there.

Our faces blend with the lines and dots

till new faces are made

emptying



the sky

into the mind

Alan Bern, *emptying*,
photo haiga, 2020.

Ghost, Animal, Dead Body

by Sarah Nichols

*after Providence, Rhode Island, 1976,
Francesca Woodman, photograph, 1976*

*Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it? I could be a ghost, an
animal or a dead body, not just this girl standing in the corner ...?*

—FRANCESCA WOODMAN

My shadow spills out of me—
hourly, sometimes, staining

the light, asking it, with its

doll arms and missing leg,

How did you grow?

It was my negative. I watch it, nude,
drawing a darkness around it, a

cloak against little feet in Mary Janes,
rounded calves, this woman's body

eating space.

It cannot carry me. It is only a map,

a future.

A Weekend with Aunt Jean

by Faith Paulsen

We fight over who gets to press *up*.
We fight over who gets to ring the bell.
Then Aunt Jean opens her door.
The scent plumes out—sweet-and-sour sauce,
cigarettes and soap.
Aunt Jean looks like Lucille Ball but rounder,
a white short-sleeve sweater over a floral dress,
full skirt, two strands of beads.
Aunt Jean is a career girl.
She works at Lever House,
which is a box of light gleaming
like the sun on Park Avenue.

We sit on hard sofas, eating cheese and crackers.
The IND subway runs behind her building.
Every time we feel its rumble,
rattling the floor and the dishes,
we all race to the window
to watch the train clatter by, so close
we can see the commuters' faces
blurring past us
and then gone.
Though the subway sounds
like it's roaring through her living room,
Jean never hears it. *Oh, was that the train?* she asks.

It's my turn to stay overnight
to have Aunt Jean all to myself.
She has saved her *McCall's* magazines just for me,
so I can cut out the paper doll that comes in each issue.
I get to put the quarter in the milk machine.
The pint carton plunks down into the chute.
We ride the subway to a Broadway matinee.
She's friends with one of the actors.
We meet him at the stage door,
a little scary with all his makeup on.
Once I trip on the sidewalk.
Her lipstick leaves a print on my skinned elbow.
We eat dumplings in Chinatown.
On the paper place mat, she draws Betty Boop
and the Flintstones.
She orders a Tom Collins,
teaches me how to use chopsticks.
We go to Schrafft's for ice cream,
and she orders an old-fashioned,
sucks a Chesterfield cigarette,
like the straw in an egg cream.

On Saturday night we stay up late
in our bathrobes.
Every little girl in every book she reads me
reminds her of me.
Her ashtray and highball glass
balance on the arm of her chair.
I hear her raggedy breath.
Her chin drops.
I get up, remove the cigarette from her lips, stub it out,
curl up in the chair beside her, breathing her scent.
In the rattling dishes, in the buzzing walls,
in my tummy, I can feel
the vibration. The train is coming.

Next morning, she opens
a new box of Entenmann's crumb cake.
She announces, *On Sunday*
we eat dessert for breakfast,
as if it's the eleventh commandment.
We talk about last Christmas,
when she took me to Lever House.
In the lobby, heaped with silver branches and tinkly bells,
there was a real, full-sized carousel playing carousel music.
I rode on a horse that sparkled like sugar.
Over my coffee cake I wonder if I dreamed it,
No, Honey, that was real, Jean says.



Mike Knowles, *Overgrown*,
digital art, 2020.

