

PRETTY OWL POETRY





PRETTY OWL
POETRY

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OUT LIKE A LION, OUT LIKE A LION

Jessica Lauffer

Witness a purple god fade
like a wilting orchid or
rain inside a subway car.
Music becomes a trigger
but sedated strength lies
in Brautigan sounds
percolating fish lips
watchtower machines
and watermelon taste.

I never knew how I might get here
a swamp of burning books
lovesick in the brain's auditorium.

The in-between was
caught:

hot fantasy squatting lush
a nearly perfect sphere of hot plasma
breathing and holding the rainfall smog
we wanted a barbeque but the meat never came
we watched our petite god dance for us
we opened all the doors to feel it
the firework blasts and all.

EXPERIMENTATION BY HALVES

Krista Cox

In the half-hiding light behind the back row,
I half-heard words about falsettos that were something short
of false. Mostly I watched the vibration
of her neck, wondered if I started down the length of it
now, would my tongue feel the hum
of her vocal chords? Could I travel from chin
to collarbone in this lifetime? Is this allowed
or have I made a museum of her, a receptacle
for my indiscriminate desires? I remember: she plays cello
and buys more flowers than she can plant. But still—the tilt
of her hip. How tiny her mouth is on mine, in mine, like left unchecked
I will swallow her, resign myself to the binary, accept my half
as man and accept insertion as completion.
Is this wrong again? All I know is
a three-day sandpaper shadow against a deep-seated need
for commitment. I've never stood without a lack
to lean on. I've never loved anything
that was more than half of a whole.

TALKING POINTS

Wheeler Light

Charles Mingus wrote better than you. Wrote himself as God talking to God. Mingus wrote the Bible—played the bass, too. Trane, too, spoke better than you. Did heroin for ten years, detoxed in a cave for three days then emerged. He said unto the world, “I WILL DELIVER GOD’S MESSAGE THROUGH MY HORN.” Mingus played the trombone first as a kid, then the cello before learning how to read music, then the double bass. It’s all about finding a voice that fits in your hands.

Every good skateboarder played baseball first, or soccer, and they’re better than me at both. Brian Anderson was gay his entire life before deciding he was a good enough skateboarder to not be hated for being gay.

Dave Brubeck was white his entire life and was in Miles’ band anyway—that is, until Miles decided he couldn’t really be in the band with the direction the band was going. Then Brubeck played Disney tunes. Then Miles was too tame for Ornette Coleman. Davis then copied Coleman while doing something entirely different. That’s how *Bitch’s Brew* came into existence. That’s how new skateboard tricks get invented.

I’ve been meaning to talk about this one photo of this kid having a religious experience laying on the stage while Coltrane played. That kid is me in a past life, but still me now talking about this history, lineage of things I’ve been or accidentally still am: white jazz/queer skateboarder. It’s important to defy your traditions, but only if it’s by accident. If you’re defying your identity on purpose, it’s something different but I’m not sure what.

I talk on the phone with Tim Wheeler for the first time in five years and we don’t have much to talk about. I’ve seen his penis too many times to not think about it on the phone, but I never saw it in a sexual way. I saw it in a boarding school way where every boy sees every boy’s penis. In a hide and seek way. What do people hide? Their identities.

Keith Jarrett was an incredible pianist until he was pretending to be black in black and white photos. He was Jewish and had an afro and he wanted more black people to come to his shows, and they did until they realized what he was doing. The controversy didn’t diminish his talent. He has chronic fatigue syndrome now. He’s stopped playing music. Towards the end of his career he stopped doing versions of *Over the Rainbow* and started doing spontaneous compositions, or hour long classical improvisations—kind of like Ethan Iverson. Keith and Ethan, two jazz pianists who prefer classical music.

On his blog, Ethan interviews musicians. The popular interview of Robert Glasper, who used to play jazz but now mostly plays live R&B backing tracks, in which Ethan asks, “So, a lot of people are wondering why you’ve stopped improvising in your music?” Robert responds,

“Women don’t want to hear solos. Solos don’t make them want to fuck.” It was controversial for him to say but apparently why he was playing music at the time.

Some equate music to sex. Others, a religious experience. Some equate music to writing, but that’s not true. Mingus wrote better than you. Me and Tim Wheeler used to skateboard, play pool, and shower together, but never in a sexual way.

Skateboarders are never naked together in a sexual way, kind of like how writers are never naked together in a sexual way—just in a poetic way where they’re sharing their life stories. Musicians are never naked together on stage in a sexual way—Trane improvising with Miles and Philly and Paul and Dave, everyone naked not in a sexual way. That boy having a religious experience on a stage, not in a sexual way. Some equate sex to a religious experience, but I’m not sure about that. It all depends on your religion.

EXCERPTS FROM *Blue Means Snow*

Wheeler Light

Stop me if you've heard this one.

Two lovers were turned into trees. They reached toward the sky and intertwined. Until last week, you could visit the trees and see what love looked like.

Someone burned the trees down. The ashes were poured into the same urn. You can now mourn the trees where they used to grow.

Your ex calls while we're in bed. You answer. You say he's grown a lot. You say you have too. Somewhere, two trees stop growing.

*

Ex: *n*: Axe. A tree. A beautiful tree. A tree to climb. A tree to set on fire. A tree to mourn. Branches of memory to fall out of. Memory to fall into. A memory to live inside of. A memory to climb. A tree forever. It hopes to be remembered as such. It hopes to be remembered as natural, as a poem. It wants to remember. Really, a tree has no memory.

I'm going to show you the poem tomorrow. I'm not sure what you will make of it, if it will make sense. All my friends I've accidentally turned against you love it for what it isn't: accurate journals of separation. I'm not sure what you will make of it, all its lies and half-truths. No truths. How it treats love as an object and not coincidence. How I treat love as an object and not coincidence. I suppose here is the part where I'm supposed to be honest. Instead, I'm going to write another poem in place of this poem that would in effect say *I want this*. After which, you might say so too. The replacement will be a love song, a snow-storm, a snow blind, a half lie that moves you. *It didn't go how I thought it would* you will say. *Me neither*. For the first time, we understand each other before you tell me to go

*

Go: *v/n*: Ready set. Command. Like *stay* but different. Con-textual. Also part of the process. Out in the rain. Dance. Be yourself. Embrace yourself. Fuck yourself. Be by yourself. Learn yourself. Look in the mirror. See what's left in the fridge. See what's left in the mirror. If there's anything there, write the poem. Going, going. Write the poem before you're gone.

We hike the Mesa Trail to write renga. *A hokku is the opening verse.* I don't really know much about haiku. I hold you and we don't get much writing done.

Basho wore a monk's robe so that he could travel between feudal states to teach poetry. His companion was a spy but he didn't seem to notice. His companion was a very good poet who could have gotten Basho executed. Kerplunk.

You write a poem while I don't look but I find it under your shirt later. It's a good poem but we don't write together. I write hokku alone for the renga we never start.

*

Start: *v/n*: -ing line. Falling in love again, the extrovert starts running and the introvert starts thinking. Both are necessary—to the love, that is. The extrovert and introvert—to each other. Start going out more. Staying in more. Cooking dinner for people you love more. Finishing your sentences. It's almost like we can finish each other's sentences.

I'm involved in this poem to the point at which it's unhealthy, which is another metaphor in this poem. I tell you *I'm involved in this poem to the point at which it's unhealthy*. You haven't responded yet but I think you know what it means. The other day you asked me what I need and I thought the answer was this poem, but now I don't know how to finish it. I want to finish this poem, I want to know what it would take to finish this poem without hurting either of us. I want to finish this poem, but I don't think you should be here for it. I don't think you can be, or know how. Consistency is what I need, a routine. Repetition. This poem is my new roommate. We're splitting the lease. My suffering pays the bills. I tell you *My suffering pays the bills*. You say *Let me help*.

*

Bills: *n*: Writing as career: a joke. A necessity. Consistent. Always there. Something to come home to, to share a home with. Emotional labor. Labor. Newborn. Hospital bills. Life isn't free. Love isn't easy. It's an order. Tip your server. Take care of your parents. Whatever they did to you, you'll pay for it forever.

DIVINE

Ranee Zaporski

Purse carrying carved coral shaped like sirens
goddess prayer hands, mirror figures of porcelain yellowed
wedding veil to hide from the ozone layer
the pills and needles, Saint Nicholas with insulin
invisible pattern woven from warnings
crumpled up bills are hanging orchids
on a funeral pall. The house is in mourning
teeth moldering minerals of ceremony
voice a marvelous dreaming sea skin
addiction slithered beneath art as shield.
Crisp black notes. Divine vowels ascending.
The street lampposts start leaning forward
curious mothers at the birth of wanting

JAN 24 1937
M. Borries

Is it right for a man to dream so much
of babies?

I put one up to my chest.

The little mouth rooting
all the way through my shirt.

A ring of milk and I wasn't surprised.

I only looked down. I only looked
at its face and down through

to my own hands to the ground

so green

you clawing out of hole

dug for you

so green and the wind

was so strong.

FEB 9 1937
M. Borries

Remember?

The roses grew strong the year

Audie was born.

They made the path

to the pigs too sweet for me.

They pestered me

even as you pruned them.

This year bare and heavy

they are all but power.

I see your hands

on her hands. My hands

on my own. I found

the dipper from

the water pan I threw

when you passed

in the field next to nothing special.

APRIL 5 1937
M. Borries

Spring has come early.

I looked for the violets

every day in their

usual place and they

came overnight.

Many things brought on

suddenly

after the flood

in all the sun.

The purple even

washes up to the side

of the barn in

a solid wave.

I think of Easter. I long for stories

of passage.

A hidden egg,

a found one.

A little hand reaching

forever into a dark, cool

bush.

O IN RED
Judy Halebsky

Named in diaries, written into stories
persimmon trees are older than their traces in the fossil record

O as a connective, a river, a border

at 22, my grandfather had already fought a war
and would never again find anything as thrilling

O a type of star, a type of blood, a mark of absence

under the freeway what I thought was a concrete mural
a pattern of long grasses
is actually a kind of fossil—a death assemblage
a snapshot of what lived together in one place at one time

O for surprise, O for lament

the man in solitary confinement is thrilled to get his picture taken
he writes to his lawyer, *Now the world knows I'm alive*

COMMUNION

Kimberly Grabowski Strayer

Loving anything the way child-me loved
cracking open the stem of a milkweed
was bound to end in despair.

This intimacy of loss, I believed in it—
in faith—but I didn't believe in God.

If the book meant to tell our history
accurately, it would
remind us we are all murderers.

I will tell you this—
I could have been a mother.

I could have been many things—
blood clots the size of lemons.

Maybe what I chose
was undoing, Penelope unraveling the loom
and unraveling

into morning, like a madwoman,
until no longer attractive
and at last free.

I have never believed
in a white dress.

When I received my first Communion,
I was instructed to slip the lace

gloves from my fingers
to make direct contact with His body.

And since, I have never settled
for anything less,
an unprotected closeness.

My mistake did not even develop
fingerprints before I chose
the taking-care,

chose multiplicity
of futures, like the priest wiping the lip
of the chalice with a white cloth

over and over again, as though hope alone
could cleanse it.

I am ready to confess:
I know what the cloth doesn't clean.

The golden, filigreed box
where the Eucharist lives,

the wafers
in a wooden cupboard
in the storage room,

nothing more than groceries
because a man had not spoken holy words
in their direction—

I remember only
feeling hungry.

COMMANDED
Elizabeth Ehrlich

It is the hour of prayer

Fish-blood dawn
stripes the horizon

I trudge to meeting
blowing on my hands

alone in it

Not because runners
round the park in fleece
or cars pursue
the opposite direction

or even my disheveled bed

Allurements do not
measure what I mean

Ten souls gather
each a strand of fringe

share one flask of words
for every mouth and pain



IN PURSUIT OF BIANCHI BOYS

Ben Kline

The words took off again, after finals, the first of May's hot days.

The words flew to LaGuardia, bought one ways to Fire Island, snorted lines with Instaboys on the ferry. Someone had the Pettibone remix of "Pleasure Principle" blasting from a sound stick, giving a beat of nostalgia origins to imperfect outcomes. Spray from the sea gave everyone a photoshoot glow.

The words knew not what they sought, only what they wanted to feel, to make that really real, somehow. Living makes memory, they said. Let's leave imagination to the bored at home.

The words rolled down the dunes in pursuit of Bianchi boys of neveryear, for yesteryear rests placid and imaginary, stacks of polaroid myth and largely forgotten dead. The dancers staying at the house next door spent late mornings after exercise staging acrobatic selfies, huddling for an hour in edit. Beauty, one said, is an orgy effort that smells like lube, weed and cheap gin.

The words shared their stories, emailing run-on paragraphs in Helvetica with too many *italics* and thumb-related spelling errors.

The words fucked for plot. Such a cast of characters twisting into slutty nooners by the pool, lingering like a chemical aroma among the pines. Much bark in the grass.

The words went upstairs with two Boston guys who, tired of P-town, showed up that night at the barbeque, in matching mesh trunks highlighting their elephantine blessings at the mini rave on the deck. Heels to Jesus, the words created a mountainside scene, burning bushes, shouting dialogue in tongues over the high tide lullaby.

Somehow, the words managed to record everything breathtakingly, establishing authority without perspective or regret, despite being out from under influence. They stewarded an oral history, too many voicemails with a sleazy bass backing track, letters to old lovers for the digital age.

The words returned, eight packs intact, immortal as youth ever chased.

THE ALMOND TREE

Karen Lethlean

I've seen these grey skink lizards before. There are more now since we don't have the cat. When the sun is out, those tiny reptiles dash about, warming their blood by jumping and fighting. I sit on the step and watch the lizards. Legs warmed by the sun, make it hard to move away. The door open behind me lets in a breeze of sausage and onion smells from last night's dinner. Mum would be cross, "Letting flies in, again Wendy girl." Later she'd be flitting about like a hunter armed with a fly swat. Never seen her that way trying to catch those lizards.

I watched my fingers pick at the embroidery on my shirt cuffs. Sure as eggs, mum would yell at me to stop: "You will wreck that shirt girlie." Mum isn't here anymore.

When I say she isn't here, I don't mean she'd just popped down to the shops for a pound of butter. Or gone for a drive in Pops car, that wouldn't happen, petrol is too scarce. Nope. My mother left—has to be three months ago now.

Had to be that long ago because that gnarled old almond tree that grows across the road had bare branches then. Now the flowers and leaves are starting to thicken. Will it bear nuts this year? I don't know.

A mother shouldn't just up and leave her kids, right? Some days when I get home from school I can't find her anywhere. I can't help scratching at my eczema. "Till death do they part, in sickness and in health," aren't they the words?

Dad's not even sick. He's just dad.

If he knew I was just sitting here, when the twins are probably wrecking the woodpile or throwing rocks on the shed roof again, Dad'll be cross too. Go on about doing my chores. He's started using those words trying to sound American with all the Yankie troops in town. Soft drinks are now sodas, the shops, he calls, down town. I noticed those lizards make a tiny yipping bark.

One night, not so long ago, I saw him strap mum's hands to one side of the bed frame. She was making a noise fit to wake the dead, thrashing too. When Mum stopped, I saw an evil twinkle in her eye as the unmistakable smell of her wetting herself spread outward.

"Penny for your thoughts, Wendy?"

Usually Mr. Richardson takes his little Jack Russell, Queenie, across the road. That way she can explore the leavings of other animals that have visited the almond tree. She's way too regal to actually pee on the tree herself. Acts like King George's servant was holding the other end of the lead. "She does like to have a good sniff to keep up with 'doggie' gossip." Old Richo says.

Talk is that once Mr. Richardson attacked a kid on a bicycle with a knife. Police and cars in the street that day. Neither Mr. Richardson nor the lanky boy got killed.

“Lots of hot air about zip.” Dad said.

“Silvia Richardson had a jealous husband...”

“The kid was her son, she never told her husband. He turned up one day...”

“Even though he was no more than a teenager, you could tell he was no good...”

For want of words that will fill up silent air. “Did you know that lizards actually bark?” I say. What gets caught in the back of my throat are questions about my mother. No way can those hooks that trap my throat-stuck words be loosened, even slightly.

“Sometimes the smallest creatures, or people, have the strongest wills,” Richardson says. He points down to Queenie, whose stunted limbs shake in an effort to keep still. “So small yet brave enough to stand up to the largest rat. Don’t let her soft, sweet eyes fool you, Queenie is a killer!”

Richo begins to snuffle, racking up a cough that sounds like it is coming from his navel somewhere. His fat fingers fish for a handkerchief always kept in one of his billowing pockets. Any minute now he will use this scummy piece of material to catch his spit. This is an unmistakable noise in our street, along with a wheeze while Mr. Richardson shuffles along, kept company by the scrape of Queenie’s nails. With this expected trail of noises, I wondered how he got so close to my door before I saw him. Usually he just waves from way down the street, and one of the twins will sing out, “Hallo, Mr. Riich-hard-son...” with that twang that you know is turning his name into some sort of a joke.

“If you got so much time to sit about, girlie, you ought to read more. Books would give you a fun world. Reading will teach your mind to be free.”

“Dad says books are a waste of time.”

“Your father doesn’t have life’s rule book. Take those lizards, if they feel threatened, or even on the brink of being taken by a predator, say that mean cat you used to own, those little fellows can drop off their tail and run their stumpy bodies away.”

“So then the predator gets a snack, but not the whole lizard.”

“They’ll do the same thing if you tried to catch them. That self-amputation causes enough distraction so they get away with their lives. Might be a stumpy version but those critters can grow another tail.”

I am thinking, pity there isn’t a place to go and just pick out another mother. I’ve not long become aware of a range of darkness that could infect women’s lives. Men have more freedom; they could go to work all day, express themselves strongly. Meeting People and Doing Things, like attacking a kid with knives.

Growing another mother, what a great fantasy. If it were that easy, there’d be no need for so many potions, pills or that silly doctor who sent Mum off to a hospital for a few days.

If she could have just dropped off her “tail” mum may have gotten away. But am I the tail she could leave behind. Can my mother just grow different marriage and children?

“Knew that, Mr. Richardson, about the lizard’s tails. If you are trying to make me feel better, it’s not really working.”

“Just chatting, girlie, didn’t mean nothing by it.”

“So tell me, are they called lizards or skinks?”

“I would say lizards, but not everyone calls things by the same names.”

When mum arrived back, that first time, after longer than the doctor’s “just a few days,” she seemed to have no spark left. Floated about the house like a kind of ghost. Arms didn’t seem as strong. I heard Mum talking to her sister, “All I wanted was to give the kids a big hug, hold my husband’s hand. To get a few words scribbled on note paper, even a shopping list would’ve been enough. Never felt so alone.”

Mum stared out the windows. Not even pulling back the curtains as she peeped out. I suppose parting the lace, even a corner meant anyone passing might see. Now my Mum watched in the hope a strand of life might blow past. Seen how she tried to hold onto something shining or twirling along on a breeze. Clouds swirled in messages, coded so only mum could understand. She might also have glimpsed little lizards or the cat running about. If as lonely as she’d been telling aunty, Mum should have got out there and talked to people. Strangers would be curious as to why mum looked out windows, so separate, yet spied on outside comings and goings. When she wasn’t watching, mum just wandered through rooms, doing nothing. Shuffling like her mind had fallen out, gone into the ground somewhere. She drifted around, grew paler, translucent and became like some underwater creature invisible among floating weeds. I never saw her go outside, not even to take in breezy sunshine. Nope, mum just watched.

“She’s crazy,” the neighbors whispered. They called it a nervous breakdown. Seemed to me that this was a blanket term applied to lots of things. Breakdowns affected cars, and what did nerves have to do with it?

The kids in the neighborhood went on with crossed eyes, flopping out their tongues, and twirling index fingers in large elliptical orbits around their ears. They were yelling out cruel things they’d heard before like, Looney Bin kid, Funny Farm Mum, Nut House family. Now they add, “The men in the white coats took her away.” “Your old lady lives in a padded room.” “If she wants to write home, they’ll give her crayons.” “Oh no! Don’t give her scissors!” I don’t know who to believe, if my teacher wasn’t so busy writing times tables on the chalk board she might have told them off.

I asked Father John, once. That time I saw him at school. He spoke in serious, low tones. The only big word I can remember was, “melancholia.” Sounded like something to do with chilled watermelons, melon-cold-ia, that is how I remembered the word. Eating such fruit, juices running down your arms, in a field of cornflowers and golden hay. Beware of tacky residue, buzzing flies and watch out because the ants might find me. I quickly got the signal that these images were nothing like the thing, but instead melancholia was dreadful and I never, ever should talk of it. Read once that people used to be burnt at the stake for having those cold melons. Or at the say-so of church officials, they were tied with rope and thrown overboard. If they sank they’d be pulled back to safety, if they floated those women were witches and were executed. Priests keep too many secrets, one day they are all going to spill out, wriggling like lizard’s tails.

Dad expected me to help with dinner more and more. One night when mum came into my room for a good night kiss, her hair, hanging near my face smelt like sick. Maybe that’s a bit cruel, but used to be sort of a hot afternoon in a grass paddock.

Maybe I was watching her too closely, but I think the only glimpse of my old mum was when the cat got sick. That time she cleaned up Ginger's vomit broke through whatever mask Mum had been wearing. She cried and cried. Not able to stop herself. Dad kept trying to pat her arm. As if he wanted her to hold the tears inside, but then before we knew it, he got cross and rang the doctor.

Ginger wasn't that old, even I could remember the orange ball of a fluffy kitten. Then we found the poor thing nearly dead. Yellowish tongue hanging sideways. Milky eyes, where those slit pupils kept vanishing up inside Ginger's head. Dad said, "Someone's fed the moggie a bait." Who would do that? Poison a cat that helped keep mice out of their sheds. Frightened the lizards, before mum squealed over the harmless reptiles.

Even though he had plenty to say about Ginger, Dad wasn't saying anything about where mum had gone, and why.

"Never heard you calling that cat mean," I tell Richo. "When it used to kill mice and keep birds away from your favourite, that almond tree. Or made sure lizards stayed away from that precious grape vine of yours." Sure, I was accusing Mr. Richardson, but it felt so good to be lashing out.

"Everything has its function, pity Ginger wasn't more of a pet, though. Would have been a good idea to have something soft to cuddle, am I right?" Richo reassures.

"Dad says animals should have a job to do."

"Being a companion is a job too."

That word "companion" flopped about in my head. If only I could get one of those. A friend, a confidant, chum or buddy; such a thing would fill the void.

Mr. Richardson looked wistfully at the almond tree, and I almost don't catch his words. "Your mum needed help, girlie. Sometimes people get sick."

I know he means well but Richo isn't making me feel any better. I'd rather no one knew, or talked about Mum. So I can hold her close in my heart, the way she used to be. A picture in my brain the same as imagining the almond tree blooming with flowers, when there are only bare, grey winter branches.

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Velicia Jerus Darquenne

1.

Marlowe pulls her Power Ranger panties down to her knees, squats, and repositions her feet even wider, attempting to avoid warm splashes of urine as she relieves herself. The crickets are chirping loud messages of love and territory and seasonally cool weather. Their noise in the evenings are deafening at times.

She bunches the crotch of her underwear in her fist and pulls them as far away from her knees as possible. The *shhhhhhh-shh-shhhhhhhhhhh* sounds of holding her bladder a couple hours too long washes over her with a chilling tingle, and she hangs her head in relief. Marlowe shakes dry like her brothers before unrolling the generic Save-A-Lot toilet paper and pulls her underwear and shorts back up to her waist.

When she walks back into the campfire light, with the toilet paper to toss in, she sees the crimson stain on white. She pulls her thigh up to see better, to see the smudges of blood smeared and dried.

“Mom! Jesus is coming!” Marlowe screams, choking on tears and tearing her shorts off.

2.

Marlowe’s mother told her about the great sacrifices of Mother Mary when she was five. Her mother’s crystal blue eyes must have been the water Jesus walked on because she knew him like a best friend. She saw God everywhere she went, in everything she did. She even saw him in Marlowe, and said “The Lord is with you.” The same words Gabriel said to Mary: *The Lord is with you.*

When she asked where babies came from, her mother replied: *God, silly.*

Marlowe’s five-year-old stomach knotted, and she wondered if that was Jesus, if the tiny baby hands were grabbing at her insides. When she got home, she lifted her shirt up to inspect her belly in front of a mirror. Turning side to side, she sucked air in like her older sister, Tauni, does after dinner. When she bent over, she tried to remember if that fat roll was there yesterday.

When Marlowe asked how long pregnancy lasts, Tauni replied: *I’m not sure. Only God really knows.*

Marlowe laid in bed, eyes on the ceiling and hands on her belly, concentrating for Baby Jesus’ movements. She was no doubt going to be the next Mother Marlowe.

3.

Marlowe sits on her bed, holding a purple plastic device. Her mother stands in front of her. Mother’s eyes are serious, but Marlowe tries to avoid them. Her hands look older than Marlowe had ever noticed; wrinkled, stained yellow, and each finger has a ring or two. Marlowe avoids what is in her own hands, too.

Her momma had explained away Mother Mary and Baby Jesus, but not pregnancy. Marlowe’s illusion and fear of immaculate conception washed from her mind, but now a new human-man-fear is flooding her.

“Pregnancy only happens with a man, and some men will take you when you don’t want them to,” her mother said from experience.

A fear of becoming the whore Marlowe was told she would become settles in her diaphragm. The whore she was destined to become because of her mother. A whore like the school kids called her, like her dad’s girlfriend called her, like she doesn’t want to be.

“Mar-Mar, you’ve got to learn to do it. You got to learn to please yourself before any man can please you.” The mothering voice is tender, soft despite years of cigarette use.

Marlowe nods, letting her eyes fall onto the six or so inches of smooth purple rocket. Her mom showed her where it goes and where the switch was located. Mother wants to teach her that independence from a man starts with sexual freedom, but Marlowe also knows she is not ready to be sexual or independent.

“After your first bleed, men will be able to smell you,” is how Mother explained it. “Like all the male dogs in the neighborhood, they can smell a bitch for miles. They will start howling now that you’re in heat.” Fear settles in Marlowe’s stomach again, the same type of fear she felt for Mother Mary.

Marlowe thinks of their pit-bull, Rumbles, who died a couple years back. She was blue-grey with a white barrel chest. Male dogs howled and broke chains to visit her, and apparently, some of them succeeded. She swelled up big with sagging milk-tit for the thirteen tiny pups she delivered on Christmas. Before Marlowe could visit again on Easter, all the pups were given away to “good homes.”

Marlowe wonders if this is the same talk Tauni got. She wonders if this is the same talk every twelve-year-old girl got. She wonders if this is why her mother gave up her children. She wonders if all mothers must give up their children, either to better homes or as sacrifices for their sins.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Kristen Egan is a mixed media artist specializing in sculpture and illustration. Her work explores concepts like evolution, predator/prey relationships, and the nature of dreams. She often references elements from mythology and folklore. Merging gourds, antler, bone, and horsehair with paper-clay, resin, and acrylics, her goal is to blend tribal aesthetics with a modern understanding of our place in the universe. Kristen has a BFA in Art & Design from the SUNY College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Her artwork, and a list of current gallery representation, can be viewed online at www.kristenegan.com.

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Karen Lethlean is a retired English teacher who just finished 15 years of teaching students in their last two years of secondary education. Her fiction has appeared in the *Barbaric Yawp* and *Ken*Again*. Black, Red and Yellow was runner up in Wild Word's 2015 Summer solstice writing competition. Walk on the Wild Side appears on the South Coast Writers Centre website. Bum Joke was commended for #22 Best of Times com-

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