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## Pretty Weeds

Sarah Pobuda

DePaul University, [spobuda@depaul.edu](mailto:spobuda@depaul.edu)

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Pretty Weeds

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

June, 2022

BY

Sarah Pobuda

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences  
DePaul University  
Chicago, Illinois

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And finally, to all my friends, teachers, and supporters thank you so much for your belief in me and for your time spent reading my poems, talking to me about them and being an integral part of my journey over the last two years. I am so proud of this collection, but as I said before, I couldn't have done it without you.

## Baptism

There is an almost spiritual intimacy  
to the hairdresser cupping my ear  
with her palm before absolving  
my cornsilk hair in warm water. I emerge  
with scrubbed scalp and dry body,  
impurity swirling in the basin.

Can priests see original sin in the basin?  
The shell-shaped bowl disrupts the intimacy  
between God's hand and the new body—  
His word flooding the infant's tiny ear.  
She cradles my neck as I emerge,  
like the lift of a Father's absolving.

My own fingers are not so absolving,  
as I wash my hair in a pre-war basin.  
There is no hot water here. I emerge,  
soaked down the collar. Without intimacy  
my host mother swipes soap from my ear,  
and says nothing of my shivering body.

I float down the salon aisle, body  
cloaked like a priest's in absolving  
shapelessness. My hairdresser's ear  
a confessional, she departs the basin,  
and we meet at her altar, the intimacy  
binding me as her scissors emerge.

Through cigarette haze, they emerge  
from their pew, rocking a swaddled body.  
I feel like an intruder to the intimacy  
of seeing their child's absolving. As  
the Father scoops water from the basin,  
my host mother translates in my ear.

My mother-in-law's laugh reaches my ear,  
she dusts off his neck as they emerge.  
His scalp has only ever been in her basin,  
though I know him best in his manly body.  
To have your mother do your absolving,  
I cannot imagine the intimacy.

She brushes intimacy behind my ear,  
and with the gratitude of absolving, I emerge

like a celestial body from the universe's basin.

## Used & Rare Bookstore

On a May afternoon in DC, heat drains me of breath and blood, and I zombie crawl towards the gloriously sputtering A/C unit of the nearest used bookstore. Book is to archive as skeleton is to graveyard, bone peeking through frayed vermilion buckram. Exhumed volumes in neat rows, genres partitioned by thick cherry shelves like sidewalks between Methodists and Catholics. Those fragile as pharaohs entombed in locked glass cabinets, adorned with glinting gold Roman numerals and hefty hand-written price tag amulets. Fingertips ache to stretch first editions' and caress their pale chalky creases, delicate as inner elbow. Unmarred other than freckles of ink, faint as distant stars next to the celestial bodies of text; the signature of antiquated printing, before the hand became impeccably mechanized. On a trolley, heaps of unknown soldiers collect dust. Self-published novels with stickers three layers deep, designating their worthlessness to the graying shop keeper. As if entering a reunion of unfamiliar relatives, all patrons here share the same roving eyes. Gaunt tongued sycophants devout to the ancient ritual of purchasing most sacred indulgences. Just to be in the presence of knowledge is profound. Quiet as flower petals sinking from headstone to grass, pages turn through silence.

## Learn Me Slowly

On an April morning, we amble through Lincoln Park,  
bundled, save for our clasped hands, bruised with cold.  
This spring is laden with petrichor and declarations  
which turn us froggy in throat and clammy skin.  
But swallow, for now, those questions which my  
eyes answer. Should you set them adrift across  
the steps between us like paper boats, I fear they  
may dissolve and leave ink stains upon my palms.  
I beg of you, learn me slowly. Not all at once, here,  
tucked in osiers of a twisted willow, heavenly as  
this moment may be. Or else we might dry too soon,  
as the raindrops freckling your sleeves. Instead,  
my darling, study me as foreign language. Gather  
the cognates between your heart and mine: turrets,  
ornate libraries, spiced tea and fiddle lilt. Map the  
path your tongue follows in pronouncing my name  
and trace it over and over with new inflections. Marry  
syllables into sentences, into paragraphs and so on until  
your translation is capable of nuance. Slowly as trees  
grow, so love does not plummet through barren  
branches. Burrow the roots between your ribs now  
and harvest in autumn, when our leaves have unfurled  
and burn golden. Ducking under the eaves of the  
skyscraper I nest in, I watch you depart down Sheridan.  
I could not ask you in, not yet. Again, I think upon  
your back, learn me so slowly that you never finish,  
never tire of what's between covers. So that we  
may keep shaking off an end like rain from our shirts.

## Cows

In late July we're windows down to Dekalb, corn on either side of a dirt road like my blonde hair parted down the middle, cows freckling the distant pastures. Spines tugged down by the weight of barrel bellies, blotched like black holes in the fur of the universe. They're grazing but their esophagi, cramped full on a Monday morning, careen to a halt just behind their lungs. I envy their natural unswallowing, their throats uncorroded by the basin of acid flushing the meadow through the drains of their intestines. They do not cough, nor rest their heads upon cold toilet seats, knees imprinted with right angles from the grout. Their farmers encourage while they suck down, for a second time, the grass sweetened by the fermentation of sunlight on dewdrops like summer wine. And for dessert, the second cutting of hay so green it would raise hives on my arms. How I would like to elbow my way in for more than my fair share of chocolate cake only to have a second chance to taste it again. To be idolized, as Hesat, for the swelling and curvature in the outermost space above my hips. Awarded a blue ribbon for my ability to constantly regurgitate and yet retain my well-bred plumpness, even. Look at the cows, I say, as we pass by. Look how pretty.

## Elegy

Here, atop my pillow lie the dribbles of my consciousness each night before sleep. I hear lines of poems and try to capture them like rubbing charcoal over headstones. In moonlight, I trace the etchings of one clever phrase after another, trying to memorize their grit, before sleep sands them away. Were I to buy a rose for each, my purged coin purse would rattle like a half-decomposed body in a coffin, so one collective bouquet will suffice, which I put nearby and forget to water. I will not forget you; I promise, before shoveling grocery lists and bus schedules upon them. In the morning, more petals stain my sheets like nosebleeds from the concentration of recall. Their most distinguishing features have decomposed to skeletons or common themes. I keep a pen and sticky notes on my bedside table to sketch the bare bones with the intention of filling in the details later. I wake to scribbles stacked atop each other and I cannot Frankenstein them back to anything salvageable. Each day I wander, a shellshocked undertaker with words like phantom limbs ping-ponging in my mind like a tingling sensation in your fingertips from the coarseness of the engraving.

## I Sometimes Feel as Backless as a Dollhouse

Back when my hand was smaller, I was a thoughtlessly omnipotent optimist. I sank my consciousness into a paper-brick dollhouse with silk ivy adorning the white bower. Hand painted grass and card-stock roofing that my mother retiled with tacky glue. My grandmother bought me the smallest vase with blue thistles for the end table in my sitting room and I coveted its fragility. Too much a purist, I preferred it vacant rather than use dolls too large or in the wrong dress for the delicate Victorian furniture. Without plastic interference, I instead placed my future self upon the maroon velvet settee, at the age I am now, married to a faceless gentleman who spoke like my father and most likely wore a kilt on Fridays. We had six children and no taxes. On Sundays, we would visit the idyllic landscape just outside our lattice paned windows, gnarled charcoal cliffs of the Outer Hebrides and watch them crumble like chalk under our feet. I had lifetimes in the wallpaper. But this was before. Before my grandparents died and my father's voice was chiseled with a quiet mourning that was nearly unbearable. Before I learned how much money it takes to buy that quietude and how little a poem earns. A kilt-wearing man with ambitions like mine is harder to find than I thought. When I pass by the dollhouse in my parents' basement, I find myself longing for the empty perfection of the provincial facade. My old self used to fit soundly in the silence of playing alone.



Ash Wednesday

On Ash Wednesday, I go in search.

Cloistered on the corner of Deming and Orchard, amongst slender red-brick showstoppers with French doors and wrought iron balconies, gated courtyards and tidy gutters, the mammoth Saint Clement squats. Architectural fusion, symbol of the city. Byzantine-Italian Romanesque Revival two blocks from a bar claiming fame for their Korean tacos. Adorned with an oxidized zucchetto, the monolith pounds its heavy fist against the neighborhood in papal authority.

I haven't been to church in a good long while.

I slink up the pale concrete steps, past a sign declaring ashes available from 6:30AM-9PM, to open arched doors. A retiree in athleisure with wine red lipstick worn down to an outline croons at me, lifting her blackened thumb. *Ohhhh*. She swipes my forehead twice and reminds me I am dust, and to dust I shall return.

I don't know whether to say thank you or Amen.

Behind her, the nave is dimly humming with candlelight and a handful of prayers. I step into the back pew, drop the kneeler to the floor, and gaze. Every nook, molding and dome are ornately painted in pastels depicting angels or enshrined figures. Layered on top are busy patterned borders, a dizzying eyecatcher of biblical proportions. Though most are strangers, I recognize Mary's blue habit, Anjali mudra with vacant eyes.

The other congregants bow dutifully.

And I wonder what they are praying for. Across the aisle, an elderly man struggles to his knees. Is he thanking God for his ability to still rise? The septum-ringer with headphones slung around his neck who bobs between pews, is he saying hello to his grandparents? We are all smudged with black, today we are all equally clean. I came for my father, but I find that I have little to say to God beyond our continued bargain. Should he take care of my loved ones, I will not ask anything of him for myself. On my way out I pass the Asher again. She's cooing at a baby, *what a beautiful blessing*, she says.

The city sees her mark upon me.

My religion feels naked as a crucifix. For a moment, I desire to scrub my fingers across it, to smudge the evidence or return to the limestone fort till dark. But more trickle out behind me, to their dwindling Wednesdays and I am not alone in my observance, nor alone in being observed. Just down the street, a man whispers his own sermon to a light post, some spirit rocking him back and forth in a discorded rhythm.

It's sunny for March.

## Crosswording

The morning after I was rendered temporarily infertile by a speculum and a T-shaped copper sperm bouncer, pain floated me to the ceiling like gulping helium. Dizzy and inflated, I could do nothing to distract myself except a Sunday in the New York Times. Flattened to my bed, mid-morning sun converting my room into a convection oven, I daubed away the strain of cramps and indiscernible hints from my forehead— a list of edible offerings, a country south of Sudan, an alien invader in the uterus alerting a drone strike of white blood cells. I'd read the pamphlets, consulted close friends, scoured the blogs and articles, but still, I was unprepared. Hands shaking, I refocused on the puzzle. Incorrect letters overlapped in their rigid squares with abyss on three sides. Stuttering over foreign letter combinations, I smashed A against E like opposing battery ends. Bound to the unforgiving stiffness of my mattress, I resisted the temptation to Google answers. Is it normal to have a trauma response to an IUD? Shopaholic's indulgence five letters? In and out of Xanax-coaxed sleep, by moonrise, I'd only resolved half of the daily riddles. The pen bled through to the linens. I began cutting deals with deities for relief and for gaping blanks to be filled with miraculous strokes of genius. What's a ten-letter word for Give Up and Go to the Hospital? Nine months after, the paper resurfaced in my nightstand drawer. Just when I'd become used to this scarecrow in me— I chocked it up to the patriarchy, rather than my lack of tolerance. Clear headed, I finished the puzzle in two minutes flat, but sometimes my hand still shakes when I feel the intruder.

## Those Things I Do Not Understand

*If I spoke prose, you'd all find out*

*I don't know what I talk about.*

-Jeremy Hillary Boob, PhD

Airplanes, arcing along their graph of altitude at a speed twenty times that of your little Accord's capability but so smooth your ginger ale doesn't explode with bubbles like wrenching open the washing machine door mid-cycle. Bucket-loads of Ocean Spray sugar suds tsunamiiing through the economy cabin, that would surely make the evening news. The anchor is a dud but the correspondents have begun to sparkle with their bleached teeth. But I digress, the depth of the ocean is terrifying. We allegedly don't know what's down there! Dinosaur skeletons and plate tectonics mashed together like a mosaic of dark ages. Evolution may have reared its ugly head and what were once eyeless microbes are now elephant-sized eels in cahoots with the electric companies and they say who's lights flicker like slimy Santas. Folding a fitted bedsheet is impossible and I refuse to watch any fast-forwarded tutorials. I end up flinging the wad in the linen closet anyways. You know what grinds my gears? Groundhog's Day. I'm from the grey February Midwest so that grubby furball who munches my gladioluses could buck up any day now and face his shadow like a man. Gap-toothed high rises whistling with hellish gusts, and at that same height, helicopters rocking like deformed bumblebees, the Jeeps of the sky. Ice cream goes down just fine, but I haven't tolerated a sip of milk since high school. In the event my intolerance increases, please see to it that I am forced to attend a training, justice and inclusivity, something that will get me woke to lactose again. I'm only joking. The difference between jam and jelly is as lost on me as effect vs. affect. No, no, keep it to yourself, I'm well beyond caring. That's kindergarten and I'm still tonguing the last kernel of wisdom from between my molars. It's something to chew on though. Mama's laundry smells like commercial quality but when I do it lint clings to my wool sweaters like litter on the sidewalk after the snow melts. That's just the way of mothers isn't it? To mix the batter with no flour flying out, remove the stains you've scrubbed at and bleached, make the flowers grow. Mine can sew too; my buttons never felt more secure. Naval ships are sometimes longer than a nautical mile, but they stay afloat. I cut out nighttime snacking and I still sink like a boot in Nairobi sand. I've never cried cutting an onion but I do get overwhelmed knowing how many books I'll never get to crack open and waft the odor of dusty paper into my flared nostrils. I try to avoid being too political, the news is so depressing isn't it? I'd like to have learned this stuff but the poems needed writing and the pot needed smoking and my plausible deniability will dissolve quicker than sugar in tea when they find out that I've been pleading the fifth, quiet as a church mouse so they don't untack my diplomas from the drywall because Miranda read the rights to Susan who read them to a round robin before I heard them and religious experiences are only real if you have someone to tell other than the red desert sun, so, as you can see, the big game of telephone superseded all, and I still desire to become sovereign of all the little liars like me who stack books on their shelves before switching on the TV to unwind. It's a trifle really, like those disgusting desserts, who thought up that stomach-turner? I'm a master of distraction, a regular Houdini tricking you. Now that you see my faults

unfortunately, the magic is gone. I know so few things and yet I'm still under the umbrella of those most educated beings. I'll show you how it's done now. I've developed a voluble vocabulary that I revere most invaluable. I covet provoking words to amplify my verse and so velvet is the line that you'd never guess I use a thesaurus all the time!

Well, knowing isn't all it's cracked up to be. I was disappointed to weeping when I saw the whale's hump was hollow as the bird's bone, was hollow as the horses' skull and I wished x-rays hadn't been invented then. Museums like my mind are more fun when hands on, the exhibit is clever but full of knee-knockers checking their watches for the show to start. I'm one yearn away from taking my yellow-haired head back to the cornfield where I came from, yonder past the city lights, and settling down by the pond again. If I were to re-zygote, start back from the sky, I bet I'd be good at math this time. Maybe I'd get how zero times anything makes zero. But I still wouldn't know all the things I didn't know.

## The Lord's Prayer

We went to church every Sunday. Perched atop orange carpeted kneelers, Father Chris lengthened the Lord's prayer, the one I whispered every night under my blue and yellow quilt, interjecting his priestly version. Give us our daily bread indeed, my stomach grumbled, knowing my communion wafer would soon be stuck between my tongue and the roof of my mouth, melting like Styrofoam in a hot car. Please sir, may I have some more, I itched to say, rehearsing right hand under left while I waited behind my sister. I always tried to get in the priest's queue, what salvation could permed Betty, the once-a-week Eucharistic minister, offer me? No, no, I wanted the guy with the direct line. Perhaps I've had all this bad luck because I never really sipped the wine, I just pressed my tongue against the metallic lip of the chalice and came back to our pew tasting pennies. I forgive others' trespasses against me easier because I wasn't taught to forgive my own. Call it original sin or boredom, but my father didn't find it funny at all when at dinner I raised my glass of milk and performed the Words of Institution, or at Easter when my mother put the lamb cake on the table and I looked it in its blue frosting eye and told it that it took away the sins of the world before stabbing out a chunk of its butt with my fork. There's a joke that the best part of mass is when the priest tells his parishioners to go in peace. Mine was the donuts afterwards.

## Poet as Witch

In every thicket of spiny conifers and deciduous showstoppers, I world-build. I stack stones and rotund boulders into cottages, shrouded by thatched roofs. Constructed as mysteriously as the pyramids, my little fortresses are charmingly haphazard. In the kitchen, I string sprigs of herbs and other edible flora around the latticed windows, I scrub potatoes in the copper sink. The door-wall is adorned with garlic bulbs, their skins littering the entryway like rose petals. My shelves are stocked with jars of jams and pickled vegetables and spiny things. I do not claim to be more than modest, my only cauldron burbles with stew and potions alike. After nibbling on supper, my nose may grow beaky from the residue of dawn's transformation spell. I need no more than a slender bed, draped in linen, and a wooden rocking chair. A bowl, a spoon, a teacup. The rest is for the books. If I overcrowd my creaky floors with volumes again, I may just have to yank the house wider by a few more feet, until it is taut against the foundation, like a fitted sheet. The garden is woolly and raucous with bees; the ivy has begun to crawl, while the myrtle stretches its lanky toes under the gate. My hooded cloak hangs on a hook by the door, should I desire a voyage through the long-leaf pines to the burgeoning meadow. Perhaps I'll paint the wildflowers or wax poetic with the moths. I'll wait for my woodsman, on the river-rock bridge through the winding brook. I wouldn't want to be lonely. After all, I am no spinster. I am morning and he is evening, with his arrow posture and autumn skin, dusky eyes curious with wanderlust. He may bear a request for a tonic in exchange for the leather to clothe my next collection of verses. What next? To the lake to collect leeches and reeds? To the hearth to stoke the fire? What comes after nightfall? I never find out, as the arboretum closes after sunset. Here I am, a poet-witch, but all the passersby would see is a girl on a fallen log, staring at trees.



Mia Orlando  
American-Italian, 1997-

The Mask, 2019  
Acrylic on Canvas  
Kalamazoo, MI

### Warden of My Womb

Inside me, the witch of dunes waves from the wasteland with withered osiers. Draping herself among the chicken bones and tumbleweeds of shed fur, an instinct-born feral with a feline mane puffed up by the barren gusts that hollow her, humped and fetal. She is smeared with the blood of her sustenance, in sfumato like a ripened nectarine, her belly and bosom bloated around her absent seed, whose prophesied sprouting sways her woody spine like a winter-worn stem. Affixed to her oblong skull is a mask of gold, collected in droplets of sun that pool in her dimpled shoulders and knees. I coax her from her slumber each month, when the moon is near overflowing, my fingers strumming across my navel and streaking her sky. She hums a reedy fermata as the echo slides up the arc of her throat and into the cavern of my mouth. Soon, I tell her. Soon.

## Hop, Skip, Wed

I'm the type to hop, skip, wed.  
Infatuated with Windsor knots  
and quartets, I jete rose petals  
like peeling off blisters and fall  
ass-backwards when *the one*  
becomes a choice between two.

Never one for a slow court,  
I wind rings from paper clips,  
slip them into pockets and tap  
shoulders with an open palm  
for them to be given back  
wrapped in velvet words atop  
silk cushion pedestals. I *yes*  
dizzying twirls and pastel ribbons,  
wisteria raining and ephemeral  
glow of midnight tea candles.

I divorce from the fantasy  
before the bells toll. The cakes  
are always baked with salt,  
not sugar, and I only get one  
bite from serving the others first.

But the taste is washed  
down by champagne poured  
from a honeyed hand, like God  
pulling back the covers of the  
ocean, to reveal shells sparkling  
like diamonds. And then there  
he is, beckoning me as the  
march begins again. How can  
I help but leap the aisle?



## Eucharist

Father upraises the paper-thin moon,  
the tide of new blood floods the aisle.  
Mamas nod at their girls, lined up in white,  
cupping their hands, mouthing Amen.  
Each has practiced receiving His body.  
They ebb, tongues bittered with holiness.

The dress store reeked of holiness,  
ancient fluorescents casting a moon-  
like glow upon the racks. My body  
in silk, tulle, organza from each aisle.  
My rosary-rubbing grandmother's amen  
as I raised my arms through a sea of white.

I knelt, shrouded in gossamer white,  
my head bent with a heavy holiness.  
Our eyes met as we whispered Amen,  
before rising together, night and moon.  
Blue wildflower petals coated the aisle,  
our marital kiss tasted of blood and body.

Mama zips the ironed dress up my body,  
cap sleeves and satin buttons, folds of white.  
I parade to our car down an asphalt aisle,  
bobby pins securing a veil of holiness  
and Mary Janes gleaming like the moon.  
Daddy promises a bouquet after I say Amen.

My grandmother said it 'ah-men' not 'a-men,'  
a pronunciation nuns ruler-slapped into her body.  
Chants of Latin midnight mass rose with the moon,  
the priest, swathed in near-Easter white,  
moaned the hymns with a ghostly holiness  
while she waited like a little lamb in the aisle.

Organ chords and incense cloaked the aisle.  
Father spoke my new name like the amen  
to a commandment penned by His holiness,  
a lacework bond tatted across my body.  
It settles between my skin and the white  
dress like a shadow passing over the moon.

Like the path of the moon, I again walk the aisle,  
touch my grandmother's white hand with a final Amen,

she has departed her body to be with His holiness.

## Ode to Anatomically Correct Verbiage

The female body is rarely anatomical.  
Simplified through softened words  
in both function and appearance.

It is my *belly*, my *tummy*, the pale  
pink curve of conch shell their heads  
rest upon, soothed by tides of  
digestion. Not my abdomen,  
connotation too insect, too hard  
for the wet sand fingers squish.

Around the corner, the C's of  
hands press around my *waist*, two  
valleys shyly meeting. Concave, barren  
road of flesh between two bone  
cities. Manifest destiny in their eyes,  
lusting after that open patch of sky  
when I stand, elbows not quite meeting  
torso. A made-up word to measure all I do  
not have and all I could have less of.

And further up, my *boobs*, baby babble  
drooled out lazily as a grope under  
the duvet. Middle school cringe  
at the palindrome's crude, clumsy  
ogling, back and forth, back and  
forth. My *tits* are no more mature,  
hat backwards Bud Light thumbs  
up at their presence in any room,  
real party starters. Not my breasts,  
their pronunciation a constant reminder  
of natural purpose: a beginning blend  
of consonants pursing hungry lips,  
flowing vowels filling the mouth  
before hushing with a delicate suffix.

Back down to my *ass*, my *butt*, my  
*bottom*, my *behind*, as if I were  
ignorant to it. A donkey grazing near  
a fence that any passerby could approach  
and pet regardless of the property line.  
Not my gluteus maximus, anciently  
Latin, the title of some great and  
barbaric colosseum warrior. They want

prey animals, not predators who fight back.

And finally, around the front. It is my *pussy*, my *flower*, my *snatch*, rebranded in every culture as something even more colorful and poetic, adorned in metaphor, rendered in acrylic analogy with penis stroking in place of brush. My *vagina* they call my vulva, too uneducated to know the difference. Modern astronomers confuse labia minora and majora. My *clit* cannot even retain its full name, halved as the distance their thumbs travel from vulva to it, crash landing on the raisin of my urethra.

And they wonder why we are so protective of the nearly dead language of our bodies.

## At the Thorne Rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago

Noses pressed against the clear glass boxes in the museum basement, we shrink-ray ourselves down to alternate realities. Hand in hand we walk, cherry picking our most elaborate delusions from the miniature decor. It's a compatibility test. You like the lapis lazuli blue walls of the Virginia dining room, which would pair nicely with the sweeping staircase of the South Carolina entranceway. But, oh, don't get me started on the neoclassical mural that you want to plaster in our foyer. Are you joking? We're not *those* people. And anyways, depictions of palm trees and Grecian architecture wouldn't at all match the English latticed cottage windows in the cozy kitchen. Let's have a Dutch door there too, so I can watch the children play in the meadow while I make supper. They'll your pretty last name and short Irish nose but hopefully my good taste. You want to live on a lake? Fine. There can be a small lake next to the meadow on the edge of the forest. But now I'm going to have to make sure the children don't drown. Promises of swim lessons pool hot in my ears. Yeah, *right*. With what time? I yank you past the modern California living room before you've really looked, your knees will be up to your chest if you sit on a couch that low. Honestly, how would you survive without me? There's a sorry excuse for a library in the modern Parisian. It only has two bookshelves and no ladder. How many books do I need? As many as I want, this is MY—I mean, OUR dream. Obviously, the tiling in the New Mexico open concept is gorgeous, maybe in a bathroom. It reminds you of Old Town in San Diego, I was JUST about to say that! We're back on track, our reflections smiling back at us in approving compromise. We agree that the Rococo is too gaudy. The dark wood Massachusetts crown moldings you adore would be great in a den, just not throughout the entirety of the house, and you can live with that. You stare at an ornate ceiling a 16<sup>th</sup> century British manor, and I'm in love with the twinkling view from the high-rise in NYC. Maybe two homes would be best. Separate living is all the rage. The closing announcement chimes and we're ambling back towards the bus stop, scraping our pockets for quarters.

In a Log Cabin  
Coloma, Wisconsin

Shrouded from winter's burn by stout porch eaves, we begin again— to build a fire under innumerable pine eyes, black scorch marks judging our clumsy pyre. Remember when we booked this place before the leaves fell? Playing little log cabin in desolate February sounded so romantic then. But the teeth chattering has muted our conversations to grunts and gestures. I shove newspaper between snow-soaked sticks and gas station bundles, a bizarre anthropological sculpture of post-modern survivalism. Kneeling prayer-lipped before the wood stove, I jab a long spur into new flicker. The gnawed match curls fetal and puffs out. The smoke lounges atop the scent of curdled soup. He takes his turn, offering peeled bark, old pencil, a torn-out dedication to an unknown author's flame. And as though the stove's palette had been bored of logs, a small fire starts and stretches across the grate, appetite piqued. We clap and bow for each other as if we've saved an abandoned chipmunk with an eye dropper of milk or spoon-fed our first child solid food. We raised this necessity ourselves, just two Neanderthal city slickers delighted by our most primal achievements.

## He Who Can Sleep Anywhere

### 1. In the Field

Where I once galloped through the spindled limbs of reed canary grass, so heavily ornamented with sticky seed pods, sweat seeping from the mare's sloped spine into the denim covering my thighs, I now traverse the pale dune between his equine-distanced eyes with my fingertip. I wipe the dew drawn from his skin by the muggy late-summer afternoon like wet desert sand. He twitches in his sleep, restless as a tail flicking away deerflies. On all fours, head hung low, he's meandered under an oak to nap. He's been tilling since dawn, palms spliced into a map of blood streams that I rub ointment into as delicately as passing a thumb over a hoof's frog. I could never sleep in this heat, but he can sleep anywhere.

### 2. On a Plane

His head tilted back against the navy leather seat; my eyes are drawn from dusk shrouded window to traverse the lands of his ancestors in his slackened face. From this view, his bearded cheeks and jaw are steep as the shrubby mesas jutting over the Adriatic. Sea salt still freckles his short Irish nose, rounded like a grassy knoll which hollows out into the valley of his lips and slopes up again at his chin. His hair, dark as the stain of Black Forest chocolate airplane dessert in the corner of his mouth that I kiss clean. He is the world folded in on itself, entire continents converging in his features. Unable to sleep in our economical confines, I turn to the window again, searching for clues to my heritage in the geography we are passing. But night has arrived while I was looking the other way and I can only find my own reflection, strangely unfamiliar against the heightened blackness of an empty sky.

### 3. At Home

Each morning, he wakes second, muddled, arms flung out in the shock of consciousness. I see him first as he would've been as a toddler woken from an afternoon nap. Cheeks blotched with his internal humidity and honey eyes wide. And my heart aches to rub my thumb across the arc of his deep frown, so sad that the time for sleeping is yet again over. Sometimes he looks as though he might cry, and my instinct is to cradle him, but he is too heavy, too much bigger than I. And then, I see him as he is now, a man with calloused hands rubbing the haze from his scruffy face as he stretches. Then how our son will be, the same dimpled smile and yawn as he reaches for me.

## Where He Goes

Sometimes he tends the field until the fireflies flick their headlights on, zooming along their commutes in indigo sky.

He winds the tractor around the curved chin of the outfield, shaving the grass down to a stubble.

Chalk dust ground into the trails and callouses on his palms like snow across a rocky mountain ridge.

He wipes his hands on his pants and lobs a ball from his pocket into the air, thwacking it over second base to centerfield.

He can see it, like mental pinball, how it would boing from centerfield to shortstop, shortstop to third base,

his cleats perforating the cayenne dirt like rain as he gallops on, he can almost feel the bruise thundering onto his thigh from the safe slide into home.

Stadium lights blink into full moon brightness with a cicada-like buzz and it's just him and this Diamond, both glowing in the opalescent beam.

Even when he crosses the threshold, when the park is in the rearview, he's still there, hitting homeruns off the night and God.



## Sweet Tooth

We slurp from  
melted cones  
under a cat's  
claw moon,

eclipsed only  
by the neon  
bubble font—  
original to this  
vanilla town.

Here, sidewalks  
are weeded  
prepubescent,  
and my vacant  
belly swerves

with sugar like  
the lightless  
streets we  
crank around.  
Neapolitan blocks

with squat ranch  
homes and leggy  
bushes. Here,  
we play house,

with enough  
accessories  
that we aren't  
yet aware of all  
that we don't have.

But Monday, rather  
than the edge  
of the rug is our  
boundary. A water-  
tower and Metra-track

view cranes our  
necks so obtusely  
we're nearly looking  
through our own

legs for the answer

to the calendar's  
nagging, what's  
next? Whether  
broke or bald  
or barren, we'll

have everything  
if we have a  
little gas money  
and a sweet tooth.

## Ode to Shaving

So early that moon and sun still share purpled sky, he's up, heavy eyed in bathroom humidity, steady handed dragging the blade. Under showerhead torrents or dry vanity light, he tends each row from throat to temple. Curved silver tiller raking buckwheat from hilly chin, seeds settling onto white sink plains and washed away by floods in his scooped hands. Weekly, the conscientious farmer harvests ripe hairs just before they're too sharp for the delicate upper lip of his wife, like corn leaves prick bare-armed midnight summer maze runners. He got Daddy's jaw, angled and smooth as a barn roof. Even in the off season, he snowplows through lather though stubble weeds sprout from goosebumps by dinner time. Some prefer new technology, clawed machinery that buzzes a row ten times quicker than the one-on-one he uses. But he doesn't mind the honest work.

slow farming

just before supper, he roughly harvests armloads of vegetables into a wooden orange crate,  
warped by monsoons.

each root slips from the warmed loam like new births: slow tugs at the skulls of carrots and  
radishes yielding to stringy feet.

he jiggles garlic doorknobs loose of their soil, twirls the bulbous garlands around his knuckles,  
chucking pale shreds of paper skin down the aisles.

he sighs like late August currents—swaying the crowds of hip-high buckwheat blooms gathering  
the blush of an afternoon sky on their white fingertips.

the last tides of sunlight, yellow as cornsilk, flood each of his eyes into distinctive hues, one a  
glimmering peat-bottomed pond, the other a jar of macadamia honey.

on the kitchen counter, he nips the dried snout off each clove, then finely chops with a stainless  
blade that pendulates like the worn underbelly of a ship through the whitecapped ocean.

handfuls of ivory slivers smear invisibly into his palms, seeping frothily in a cast iron pan,  
pungent sacrifice bleeding into oil.

he serves a bouquet of his labors, russet yams and sage chicken breast kneaded with his nicked  
fists and adorned with the blackened pearls, fragrantly roasted and shucked by his hands.

## Swimming

1.

I wanted to be silent as pulling my head underwater,  
though my thirst was worsened the more I drank.  
How do you keep from breathing when submerged?  
I never learned to float.

I used to swim in circles, watching my hair flow  
around me. How it looked dry, each strand visible, until  
I'd surface. Then it clung like leaves in a drainpipe,  
trickling rain down my back.

2.

Return to seven when there was softness to my  
stomach and tongue. Mom didn't let us wear two-pieces  
until middle school but I pined for minimal fabric  
like the skinny-legged girls tanning.

I didn't know the expanse between frills of spandex  
would be so long, my eye roving down myself  
in the dressing room mirror like a highway cutting  
through pale desert. Rock formations bulged

over the waistband. There was so much more of me  
than I'd thought when I'd been covered shoulder to  
crotch in polka dots. I didn't want me to be in the swimsuit,  
I wanted to be the skinny-legged tanning girls.

3.

I locked lips with the faucet, chugging a buoyant blanket  
to tuck over my dinner. I slid down the bathroom wall like  
shower humidity, waiting long enough for the waves  
to settle into a light slumber,

only to overboard every half-digested morsel into the toilet,  
retching shushed behind the waterfall of taps running full blast.  
Four years on the stomach acid slip'n'slide didn't erode  
my thighs or hips, just my gums and my esophageal lining.

4.

I was too drunk to know the address of the house

party on Lovell, when he put another beer in my palm. Glass the same shade brown as his eyes. I was grateful for the cold roundness of the bottle lip, like a Lake Huron skipping

stone on my tongue biting through lingering bile. It bounced with each syllable of his name as I sipped the doughy lager, fecund as lake water. Once, twice, before sinking into some irretrievable depth where it couldn't be forgotten.

5.

Return to night, on my back, flesh caved to my spine with gravity. I was jealous of him, skinny-legged, jagged boned. He said no to me wearing his sweatpants after sex. I might stretch them out beyond recognition.

As he slept restlessly in summer heat, arms backstroked above his head, feet paddling off the sheets, I studied his frame, his opaque shadow. In darkness, we were equals, both invisible, yet heavy enough to stand out.

6.

Dishwater up to my elbows, I rinsed out his cans and bottles before hauling them in black garbage bags to the store, each crunching in the compactor's stomach. Rain-drenched air reeked like the dollar bills I forked over to buy him more.

He dove and surfaced from the refrigerator, again and again, I said I'd quit drinking to cut calories, something he'd believe. I'd become afraid of disorienting thickness that clogged my muscles, my brain, like paddling through oil.

7.

We were better in water, when he could twirl my weightless body around the lap pool in his sixty-story building with no effort, the ripples blurring me. Neck deep, I was small enough to fit inside him.

Once he played too rough and I became a fountain, spurting from my ears and nose and mouth. The chlorine water felt like blood, warm and slimy. The cry trembled from my stinging throat.

Too tired from clawing with no resistance, like

dreams where you sprint and go nowhere, I sprawled  
on the tile edge, air ballooning my stomach. He sneered  
at my inability to find near-drowning funny.

8.

Return to hypothermia, to no gills, I got too high  
and jumped in the lake one autumn, when color  
was just beginning to burn Michigan treetops like the lit  
end of a joint. I was terrified

of the nothingness below me. I reached for him,  
my nude body moony against the black water. He  
stepped back, *save yourself* in his eyes. Only the thud  
of me clambering onto the boat.

9.

I listened, knees reaching from the bathwater  
like the humps of a mythical sea monster, a washcloth  
over his delicate face, as he told me he impregnated  
That Girl freshmen year of college

and never told his girlfriend. She had wanted to keep it.  
Thank God she miscarried, he said. The rose petals bled  
in the water and my teeth chattered with nausea  
for her pain. I pulled my head under, screaming silently.

10.

I wanted to be silent like forgetting is, the body forgets  
it was wet once swathed in a towel. But I still clank against  
the sides of myself like his half-drunk bottle of whiskey  
down the garbage chute. And so, I cannot be.

Return to me, my body without him, relearning the softness  
of skin under cool shower, opening my mouth to drink until my  
stomach rounds, a gourd swishing with every movement.  
And my lungs, freely floating atop.

## Your Plants

You tended to your plants in a careless, shallow manner. They made the place seem airy, you said, though the galley kitchen was claustrophobic, our hips bumping like the drawer into the stove. But they all wilted. Even the viney kind that white-knuckle the legs of their stands and stretch to the next plant over, as if their intention was an arm-around-the-shoulder pose, before throttling the delicate big-leafers. You starved them at first. Dry as your eyes, their dirt clung to my fingers for dear life as I prodded their pots. I snuck to the sink and filled the only clean cup while you clacked away on your controller. When you went to pee, I timed the flow of water in soil to your stream. We played life-bringer, death-bringer for weeks until the open windows let the frost in three nights in a row and there was nothing to be done. I'll get new ones, you said, and threw them in the dumpster, still a hint of green in their veins. You left me as well. As you were picking out replacements, I thought of your plants. Shivering in my lonely bed, my pillows still reeking of you like root rot. How they must've prayed to the irresponsible master of their fates for salvation. You were somewhere on a bender. Maybe they hoped for me. Sometimes, I wake up breathless and hacking from nightmares that my throat is cinched by stems thorned with your fingernails and my lungs are clogged with arid dirt the color of your eyes.



## Feuilleton

It's early morning in a coffee house and I'm scanning the headlines of mutual acquaintance gossip when I read that he is traveling through my streets. He is a blurry ex-pat now, his new façade foreign to me; clean shaven and with shorter hair. When we were still in love, two autumns ago, we would *parler* bilingual, but I've since lost some of my French, as idle tongues do. Vocabulary and grammatical rules dissolved like powdered sugar; those moments with him I have swallowed quickly or rinsed out with stronger stuff. Has he recently sat at this rickety brown table, practicing with the menu instead of me? Alchemized sublingual lingerers gleam, saccharine under humid traces of black tea in my mouth—January at midnight, an unexpected greeting kiss in the lobby of the jazz era building, his *miel* steeping in my navel, sheets reeking in the corner. For a moment, I eavesdrop on the conversation of the couple behind me, but they're fluently chirping love languages and I'm drawn back to thoughts of him. Sex was a cognate, a guttural substitute for words he refused to pronounce. Then the bitter aftertaste, his hands-in-pockets *flaneur*. Overtime, he assimilated into those most cliché cultural identifiers, the mistresses and dark roast for breakfast and *sangfroid*. Snow bursts in with a customer and for a moment I expect it to be him. But it is not, and I turn, looking out the window once more. Some of those footprints are probably his, I think. The tread is familiar, like a word I used to know.

## Intimate Cinema

We're not in paradise,  
we're just confused city  
kids. *This* is not some  
beach washed romance,  
you're no Lancaster  
by the cliffs. Sure, I'm salty-  
tongued but in a way  
you wish you could shake  
out of your ears. My big scene,  
the heart-wrenching confession,  
is drowned out not by  
crashing waves but an  
inbound brown line train.  
*What?* you ask. *Nothing.*  
Look how close we came  
to our moment. It was left  
there, on the platform, taped  
to a fence pole, and fluttering  
among the Lost Dog postings.  
There are awkward pauses between  
your ramblings that should've  
been edited out. But we're  
adlibbing, unscripted, and  
in desperate need of a B  
camera to angle out the gap  
between us. To make the now  
disappointed viewers at home  
sharply inhale, thinking, *this is it!*  
as the orchestra comes to a crescendo.  
But, like I said, *this* is no intimate  
cinema. My station comes  
first, and we say goodnight.  
I amble home, alone, cursing  
up to the constellations  
of apartment lights. At least  
we had from here to Diversey.

## Stranger Blues

Rotund pigeons twitch like bouncers outside the club downtown, a little past their bedtimes, and mine too. I'm in a line of fellow underdressed couch-cushion grifters waiting to imbibe hot honey oozing from the headliner's calloused fingers. You come out of nowhere—black turtlenecked line jumper, blonde as electric moonlight, ready to be someone's muse. *What's going on?* you ask, too cool to crane towards the neon sign. *Jazz show*, I say into your last light of day eyes. Nobody complains about you cutting, casual aristocrat searching for something worthy of a Saturday. *Mind if I stick with you?*

At our velvet swathed table, votive flame shimmying in its glass cage, you foot tap to the melodic plunking, waxing poetic between numbers. I'm lost to you, to the black curtain, to the way you applaud with your palms and not your whole hand, banging them like cymbals. Everyone follows your time, even me, though I fall offbeat over and over. We stay till the lights come up and the vest and tie waiters with slicked back hair collect our crystal glasses. You're in no rush as we amble to the street. *The whole city is jazz*, you say and I hear it now, tires snaring over puddles, vibrato of broken streetlamps, innumerable conversations of passersby tatted over and under each other, each voice different and yet the instrument so recognizable to our ears.

Leftover rhythm still swaying your straight neck, your head bobbles as you philosophize. A taxi screeches to stop for you, the driver's thick forearm beckoning your easy gait. In goodbye, you say to me, *'preciate it* and wave, before disappearing into the darkness like a last note fading into silence.

## There Is Everything You've Known

battered toast and jam beside the teacup as early morning splinters like an eggshell and the yolk slips sunny side up onto the wide blue plate, oaks and maples wriggling their coatings of snow from their limbs as you mold the bite of your zipper together and entwine your boot laces like a latticed crust, the stroll and hop over the slippery spot where the teal salt wasn't scattered like shattered sea glass, book pages worn soft as cotton and dogeared like your grandfather's hands, the mirror image hop in the other direction after God has nibbled up the last hour of day, when the myriad ochre windows of the city flicker on like prayer candles in a church, a warm bowl nestled in the crook of your thighs, the crunch of a lock springing,

and then there is more,

raising your chin to meet the oceanic eyes that Neruda must've been describing, searching for you beneath hedged brows, honey gold cowlick smoothed like the grass of an abature, the half-moons of his bottom lip and chin, warding the tidal grin of his celestial visage, the cello timbre of his hello reverberating through your bones as if you had rocked your fingers against his vocal cords and produced a vibrato, the clinking of bottleneck to glass as he gently sips your offering like communion, his palm's embrace of your cheek like sunlight spreading over your skin, the scent of his collar bone, soap and cotton melting into spring soil, pillows scrunched and sheets wrinkled like the surf under a gale, naked except for his rings, pulse so heavy in sleep you can nearly see its silhouette against the velvet darkness, carving a cameo of meaning from abstraction.

## Morning After

Just before the birds tune up  
I'm still tumbling through sweat-stricken  
sheets half-lucid in reveries  
of us back to chest; our delicate  
architecture overlapping. My  
elegant arsonist, flicking matches  
into my weak knees, I drag soot stains  
on the carpet while crawling beneath  
our smokey scent. I pigeon perch on the  
fire escape, studying the balconies  
and moving us into each dark window.  
In the limestone twelve story  
you sleep later, undisturbed. We can  
afford good insulation. There you are  
sprawled, with reading hair, and I  
press the damper pedal while I play,  
so as not to wake you. How charming,  
our degrees spanning up the wall  
like some elitist growth chart. How delightful,  
the merging of two book collections. I  
think we could build from empty lot, brick  
and plaster and concrete. Shop for  
Tiffany lamps on Saturdays and  
domesticate in good time. But maybe you'd  
hate the whitewash and my taste.  
I tend to adorn Corinthian and you're  
a champion of the proletariat. Sometimes  
I fear you'll tire of crumbling art  
deco, rusted pipes and the quiet,  
settled foundation. A craving for modernity  
plaguing you restless. And where will we be then?  
It's too early to think of such things. I exhale,  
remind myself that right now,  
we're just touring. As quarter-past-six  
cracks the shell of dawn and morning lands  
sunny side up, I slink back to my bed  
in hopes of sleep. But you still linger  
on the pillowcases. I fiddle with the ring  
you left on my nightstand, slipping you on  
and off me. Funny how perfectly it fits.



Mia Orlando  
American-Italian, 1997-

Autumn, 2021  
Digital Art  
Chicago, IL

### Alphabet Soup

Arranging noodles into curses is raucous fun for all ages.  
But if you want your bark to blister worse than your broth,  
    you've got to practice your reading aloud.  
Can lids sharper than your tongue have been piercing my ears long before  
    your cracker jacks echoed like bombs in my molars.  
Don't you think for a moment that the dog won't slurp  
    that threat and doo-doo it in the backyard.  
Expiration dates are merely suggestions except when the odor perforates the steel and  
    emanates from here to Timbuctoo.  
Forget to turn the stove off after and you'll have a fire that'll really bring the house down.  
Gastrointestinal specialists have sifted the instigator from your coffee

grounds, a confession of gluttonous infidelity at the dinner table will gut you faster than a little gluten.

Hike up those cheaters on your beak if your ladle-full starts looking like hieroglyphics.  
Ice cream can't ionize the red hot lies running from my nostrils as reality wriggles its way in.  
Just kidding? the jingle-jangle from your jester hat is like silverware scraping the good china.  
Karma will make a meal of you, if it can digest the knives in your pockets.

Language is in the ear of the belistener but licking the bowl clean  
sounds like a vacuum sucking up liquid in any dialect.

Motor mouths tend to munch like machines, mincing words to maximize room for thirds. Nickels  
and dimes clang in the piggy bank for nuclear war-proof rations  
that will have you saying ha-ha at the newswoman announcing nationwide shortages.

Occupational hazards include, but are not limited to: heart burn, diarrhea  
and overwhelming nostalgia.

Provided in your box is artificial sweetener that you can pour over  
popped-up memories to make them more palatable.

Quibble with my spoon as it comes up empty handed; I've got f-c-k, but I can't find u.  
Relish in your repugnant creation, you replaced my sugar with salt and claimed  
you improved the recipe.

Spelling is irrelevant when you scarf down all the consonants  
before you serve anyone else.

Trade agreements are kaput after you resorted to takebacksies  
and reached your fist into my bowl.

Unlucky dump of your leftovers in the sink, they read "ugly" back at me.  
Vowels transform my vow into a vendetta, what subtle violence poison is.  
White vinegar washes the writing off the wall in the aftermath of your wittle tantwum.  
'X' is axed like a chromosome; this mess is one half yours and one half mine.

Yellowbellied like Tupperware stained by tomato juice, you're a bloated  
yolk yowling as the corner of my toast nears.

Zombie moans floating around, you and your zuppa can't hurt me anymore,  
today I gave you spaghetti-o's.

## Ode to the Crack in my Ceiling

Crooked creek with ten tributaries.  
snuffed out by the endless drought  
of white plaster. Spiny vine,  
barren until June, when beads  
of building sweat hang  
like ripened grapes from  
the creeping fingertips. Peeled-  
back skin from a too-small-shoe  
blister. Two-foot fissure,  
a shrunken dead-ringer for  
the jagged division between  
Casa Grande and Tucson.  
More limber each morning,  
pointy toes stretch towards  
cobwebbed crown molding.  
Locate the gaping structural  
vulnerability, on the corner of  
life and heart lines. This ceiling  
will be married four times.  
Neuron map with loose dendrites,  
one axon implodes into  
a supermassive black hole, an  
architectural manifestation  
of persistent depressive disorder.  
Gash of God, postpartum,  
eternally dilated and sore. Unsightly  
wrinkle, permanently pressed  
into the starched sheetrock.  
Half-open, blackened iris evil eye,  
glowering with deep-set  
crow's feet. Picked wider by  
fingernail and gravity, the ancient  
laceration nags spackling.



## Soup City

On the first day tolerable temperatures bless February, Chicago city dwellers shove lids off twelfth story shoeboxes, rolling ankles, wrists, necks, wind shuddering snow from twigs. Folds of rain drape sky in gray velvet. Everything is submerged by early melt. Valleyed parks polka-dotted with summer picnickers now brown, still water ponds. Bare-legged trees wade sidewalk streams. Yellow grass soused to marshland sponges ooze underfoot. Too early for birdsong, but geese gaggles' black rubber boots march muddy harbor docks. Slick snowdrifts mount curbs, popsicles half-thawed by blue salt sprinkles dribble between sewer grate fingers. Soaked loafers leap bottomless puddles, groans accompanying splashes. Lake Michigan, an overflowing bathtub, floods miles of cement with sickly green waves. Fur-lined hoods bob on backs, palms and throats exhumed from beneath wool. Dogs tug leashes, ears piqued to spring's first whispers on quick gusts. A sprinkle taps roamers' shoulders, a reminder of impending storm. They return to stacked high rises, sliding shut frosting windows. Ephemeral warmth wanes as moon yawns awake. By morning, all that was water is ice and cotton snow clumps, silencing the city once more.

## Ode to My Grandfather

My grandfather was an alley cat. Head of the carousel cavalry, glittering mounts of repurposed rummage sale treasures. Green Depression glass glint in his eye.

He designed the primer for outlandish bombardiers who float like rubber ducks in the high surf. For loquacious misspellers snipping up grammar books to Frankenstein noun into verb.

A threadbare blanket cape tucked into a clerical collar, tumbled stones bejeweling his boney fingers. Let's all turn to page twelve, read upside down and backwards.

He was inventor, masquerader, master of some. King with all spades in his winning hand, but he'd risk the pot to Evel Knievel himself past the moon and beyond.

The blank page on manners was in its maiden voyage to an antiquated epoch when a zippo disintegrated it, mid-atmosphere. What a shame, he laughed.

Coconut shell helmet fortune teller in despair at an empty coffee cup, what a damn disturbing turn of events. But doesn't it make a lovely vase for a bouquet of cheap pens?

Calamitous crustacean with a shoe-brush mustache skipping stones across wet concrete and pogo sticking the jack hammer. His advice in a jam? Lick the evidence from your fingers

and whistle attune they can't help but barbershop. Then slather everything in peanut butter. Modern Shakespeare chicken scrawling invented cluckings with a rooster plume

in his hat. He was Butch Cassidy with a Bogart cadence, and I was lucky enough to be his Sundance grandkid. On the last page, an epitaph, "don't let them get you down."

## Hell Cat

I'm fairly suspicious that my cat may be the reincarnated soul of Jimmy Hoffa. Nobody but an ex-con could brandish his tail like a switchblade. Reincarnated jailbreaker, he stoops by the kitchen door, one fang glinting over his bottom lip like a toothpick, stubby paws yanking on the door handle. He's too smart for his own good, we all say of him, as we hammer a nail into the door wall and loop a rubber band around it. He holds eye contact while he chews through it. He's got an ear scalloped by street fights and the shifty chartreuse eyes of someone searching out trouble. Buff tabby tomcat stalking as cocky as his undomesticated cousins to the sunspot on the windowsill. He doesn't flinch at a parade of sirens, just yawns and exposes his belly. Come and get me, he says. He's in alliance with the dog too, the muscle of his gang, chomping the Labrador's ears when he steps out of line. Grins as he tail-wags over to my sister's cat, who catches his mice but shrieks and hisses her subordination. He stretches like cracking knuckles and you can almost hear him puffing around a cigar, *oh, you think you're tough, huh?* He's all about the familia. Headbutting me for a scratch under his chin, chirping his *where the hell you been?* when I come home late. He'd rather shiv a challenger with his dewclaw than see anyone step to his mama. He lurks in his roosts, on top of the bookcase, above the fridge, on the barstool. Even though I sometimes feel guilty that I'm condescending to hold this king of crime captive with tuna-flavored treats and fuzzy mice, I'd never let him out. He clearly didn't make it the first time.

## Mother of God

In St. Daniel's Church, morning sun encircled the altar like a nimbus. The priest, in his ivory robes embroidered with gold thread, extended his arms as he sang Hosanna in the Highest, mirroring the crucifix mounted between panes of stained glass behind him. And Mary, ever watchful in her ruby dress, cast flat eyes upon the congregation bleating back their thanks. My mother looked just as bored as Jesus's, though the two women dutifully kept their attention on the Father reciting his homily. Nestled with my head on my mother's arm, I thought Mary must smell as heavenly: vanilla and bergamot and starchy pink blush she rubbed with a scratchy brush onto her sharp cheekbones before tugging up skin-colored hosiery and buckling un-scuffed shoes. I thought Jesus must have favored sleeping with Mary's satin nightgown over some cotton rectangle, too. Neither my mother nor Mary were baptized Catholic, and though she never complained, my stomach churned with the panic of her absence every time we left her behind in the pew as we went for communion. A family friend offered once, to baptize her, but I couldn't imagine where these back alley christenings took place. In a river, all clothed in white? Do they offer you a towel for your hair after? Perhaps you must air-dry to truly soak in His holiness. Maybe in our bathtub, during her Sunday night baths, with a book, and on rare occasion, a glass of Nassau Royale. My mother's soul has never been in jeopardy. She, like Mary, is one to pray to.

## Dementia

### I.

This is how it begins—at the kitchen table, rusted-out mid-sentence,  
staining the churning water umber. Each sail from mind

to mouth seems slower than the previous,  
slow enough to lose some parts along the way.

You're home, but for how much longer if you let them witness  
the tremor of your neurons as you compose the grocery list.

Inky oil bleeds towards the suffix, straight through  
the tablecloth, you've been pressing on the thought for too long.

The beginning you're sure of, but you'll have to cast  
your floodlights around where you can't touch to find the other

syllables. There are signs to the left and right, overgrown  
with lichens and graffiti. You could guess, or sound it out,

but the babble grinds you like seaweed through a propellor.  
You try craning your neck at a diagonal glint, a pelican diving

headfirst for a fish, but then it's gone again, stranding you in a -C.  
The dock men were expecting you; your tardiness has not gone

unnoticed. You want to tell them not to let this happen, to put  
the wheel in someone younger's grip, but forgetting is quieter

than being underwater. Here they come now, lassoing you with a hint,  
heaving your hippocampus through black fog like a tugboat.

Then it's as obvious as that last letter, as a lighthouse. Sundays  
are always the hardest, we'll start over with a new pen and a fresh cup

of joe in the morning. You'll be back in the crow's nest soon. There's  
a word for this, you think it starts with an -L but you can't seem to remember.

## II.

Under the ochre glow of a fan chandelier, you're in a brutal standoff between a hospital bill and your checkbook.

A prepaid envelope with an address outside your city limits perforates your spine with suspicion. You don't recall going

to the cardiologist in August. As a girl, your Mary Jane's clinked you up to the blackboard like pennies slipping from your pockets.

The nuns who converted you right-handed slapped the algebra with a ruler. Start in the one's column, then work your way over.

Your buttonholes overflowed with blood from your nose when your nerves spun the equation upside down. Now the boxes

are stacked up above the lines like desks in a classroom, waiting for you to usher the digits to their rightful places. Your daughter is quiet

in the chair next to you, but you know she has the answers, like those boys who didn't need their fingers to count. Do you need help? she says,

and you think you should've cheated by tattooing this stuff on your palm. No, you say, and squint down at what you know you knew. Start in the one's column...

### III.

Once you were a speech pathologist who taught children in an orphanage  
in Kansas how to speak. Now you mutely nod or shake your head

at the strangers at your assigned table. You're all children again, living  
somewhere new while you wait for winged parents to collect you from

your beds. You've ticked counterclockwise, skin like satin draped over your  
condensed bones, hair finer than a spider web. When we visit you,

your words come like rain dripping from a drainpipe. Small spurts of your idioms,  
*that'll be good*, you say when I tell you I'm applying to your alma mater.

You call my sister by our mother's name, they look so alike, and she cries  
the whole way home. Once you were divorced, but every foul word has

been erased like rubbing soap over permanent marker written on your palm.  
You hold my grandfather's hand again like high school crushes do. One

of the last words I ever hear you say is his name. You never forget your daughter  
either, who sits in your bed with you until you sleep. And as a small

blessing, some still-firing neurons have gathered up an armload of your early  
memories and they play like home movies on a reel in the empty theatres

of your eyes before you go. You remember that big yellow house in Stratford.  
The boney knee of your grandfather under your legs as he bounced you, fragile

little thing that you were and told tales of your clan in the Hebrides. Your baby  
brother Donald, army crawling in front of you, though I hope you don't recall

his death in Vietnam anymore. Your father, puffing his cigarette, wood chisel  
in hand. And your mother, though she's been gone for over seventy years,

and the swans you fed together by the Avon River. They're all there with you,  
though you can't remember how to tell them you'll be home soon.

## Knotted

There is an intimacy to the Celtic tradition of knots. On rings, strands of silver winding my fingers like heather through the grasses. A people, bound to a formidable ground, like metal to bone. Their past, armoring the highlands with the indigo spirit of thorns. Pink salmon and wild brown trout braiding the currents in migration. Tartans, knitting clans with borrowed colors from the tawny chest of a stag and shaggy autumn mosses. The thickets of thistles staining vernal crags like the blood of those slain, hoofed and footed alike. Mountains roll under and over meadows like elbows linked in unyielding formation, rock shielding the soft soul of soil beneath. The lift and lilt of fiddle and pipe, chorded melodies weaving tones over one another like an iced sky through valley and peak. Snares rattle another tempest across the cliffs. Silken ropes fastening what comes after and what has been before from wrist to wrist. The beckoning of wind through your muscles, like swallowing loch stones. The enduring marriage of land to home.



## It's Dangerous to be Pretty

It never sat right with me that the prettiest  
tweeters had the butcher-knife beaks,

while the nesters are relegated to crownless,  
brown heads and hacking up worms.

Shimmying their crested chests, the males  
rubberneck even the plain Jane.

Fluorescent masks of onyx and crimson mohawks  
signature the well-groomed feathers.

Perhaps the female camouflage is less for roosting  
in nurseries of twigs and discarded hair,

and more to avoid a line-up on the telephone  
wire, all dog-whistling when she flits by.

Skittering, like a heartbeat, back to her branch when  
wings flap up beside her.

Come to think of it, I couldn't mimic the cry of a cardinal,  
but I know one when I see it.

## Chicago Gothic

Tight-pant sycophants  
sucking on the sanguine  
cheeks of the tear-  
stained; just starving  
empaths. Soaked

in envy of small-town  
news, fill the tub with thrift-  
store shoes and bong water.  
Vagabond globe trotters  
tie dying lo-fi into blues.

Broke borrowers blinding  
the scene with opalescent  
teeth, on the straight and  
narrow it's a harrowing  
existence to be so pretty;

These birds know how to  
peck back the kitty callers  
with their beaks. They're for  
more than chompin' worms.

They stone the killers, don't need  
any movie-theater make-outs  
when getting home is a thriller. Pay  
no mind to the screams, to sticky  
puddles oozing like streams  
in the sidewalk cracks, can you believe  
they already have broken backs?

Before they're mothers, too young  
to be born yet; it's genetic,  
all this strife, how the hand  
trembles as they sniff off the knife.  
The universe truth: you can't  
outrun life. Ghosts in the trainyard,

higher than the holy host, communing  
waifs, their manifestos chafe  
like El seats in July, conditioned  
missionaries just spreading the word  
of The Guy. It's absurd to sick  
dangerous children on this playground

of glass, steel beams seem to swing  
like swords as the architectures clash.

Post-college, hordes of turkey  
chasers pace a pilgrimage to the left.  
But where's the roost for the chicks  
who hatched here? It's not housing  
theft if you pay in honest sin, although

anything can be yours if you absolve  
through religion, the menace of your  
penance, clear it up with Windex,  
gargle and spit. You only lost if you quit.  
Who can buy a two-flat? Who can jump  
the Sandman when the mouth's dry

as a desert? It's just the weather,  
the hurricane in their veins,  
the mainlined cocaine making  
everything seem so small.  
Rooftop gargoyles reeking of potential  
and essential oils dripping from their  
wrists like acid rain, you don't hear about  
that so much anymore, you only see it  
corroding the drains. Night dilates them

lupine, so cosmopolitan of them to pick  
up the notes of crisis in the wine. Let's  
just sit as an exercise, let's just sit until  
the lights flick on like floating embers  
and haze the sky like smoke. Silhouettes,  
en masse, too many to be remembered.

## Accident

You're whizzing along country highways  
hugged by cornfields. Static fangs  
the crumpled-tinfoil sky, heat lightning

screeching like faulty brakes.  
At first you think it's thunder, but only  
manmade catastrophes crunch like that.

The instinctual *oh, shit* reverberates  
through your chest, right leg tensing  
you to a slow. You've never seen a two-

ton truck creased into an origami cup faster  
than God's fingers could fold. There's no God  
present to witness this, just you.

The downpour of oil shimmers each shard  
of windshield into gemstones, blood seeping  
puddles like watercolored petals of a black pansy.

Arm stretches to your phone, but shock  
has slapped away which three-digits are for help.  
Instead, you rubberneck like a tornado chaser,

a left side mirror and a right shoe slapping  
onto the middle lane like cows that end up twenty  
football fields from their rightful pastures.

Behind you, other cars are queuing. You're almost home,  
you tell yourself as the air turns sick with clogging  
petrichor. Someone else will call. They have to,

because you can't. There's chicken in the sink,  
and the baby to bathe. You yank your seatbelt tighter  
for good measure as the sirens begin to moan.

## Legend of the Massacre at Glencoe

Between the crags and rushing creeks,  
a highwayman treads, steadfast  
with lightfoot. His transatlantic hitchhike  
has brought him to Glencoe against the  
warnings of a thickly brogued shepherd.  
He doesna ken the legend of thirty  
MacDonald clansmen and women  
slain for their refusal to surrender  
fealty to Englishmen preening atop  
their stolen throne. It is said that  
they call out in the night for mercy,  
gripping their grudges against the British  
like palm against a longsword's blade.  
But he must brave this haunt or succumb  
to the purple-black moonlight, friction  
of the frigid air rubbing his fingers  
raw beneath lukewarm mittens.  
Honeysuckle and aged oak tug his  
backpack, but the stony hands of his hunger  
wring his stomach like wet washcloths.  
He yearns for stale oatmeal crowding  
the roof of his mouth. The firelight  
of a bothy, one valley over, hooks him  
by the collar like the sharp toe of a crescent  
moon. The very same which guided  
him from the sanity of a lighthouse  
beam, towards the violent whitecaps. Those  
malignant hallucinations echo again.  
A distant howl, lone piper upwind. Eerie  
cries rise from the bluegrass, float  
in from the confines of the rocky  
peaks. The highland gusts still  
in the wails of ancestored bloodshed.  
Our wayward traveler hurries on,  
keeping a watchword eye.

## Hail Mary

We pass lewd anti-abortion billboard advertisements on our way to the Detroit Symphony Christmas concert, where the featured performance is Ave Maria. Pricked by the omnipotent hand of conservative lawmakers, I feel a new sense of protectiveness over the fourteen-year-old body of Mary. Blessed art thou amongst women, but the glory goes to the Father. Where was he when the diapers needed changing or the thorns needed plucking out? His great orchestration began with Mary, like a cello nestled between his knees, the buxom and sultry voiced vessel. Without her he would look the fool, hugging the air. The counterargument: without his plucking she would be hollow, forgotten, never revered. Ah, but the womb beneath a cello's F-hole remains barren life-long, and were it stopped up with fruit, her voice couldn't fill a bedroom, let alone a concert hall. Where does this mean for Mary's choices? If your God came to you with an almighty task, a blessing, disguised in labor, c/would you deny him? I settle into my velvet seat, deciding perhaps she welcomed the angel, that I should not choose outrage for her. But something still irks me, that when I dial the innkeeper, the host, the customer service representative, if I desire more than nothing to come of it, I must call in the 6'2 bass to stand behind me and ask again, in a deeper tone. So, what the hell was Joseph doing that he couldn't get them a room? In pregnancy books, they say your husband should be your advocate, the one to firmly tell the doctor you'd rather squat, as Mary likely did behind a bush, than turtle it out. Did the wise men bringith an epidural? Was the angel a dissociative hallucination from the pain? When Jesus was born, did she hear shrill violins in his cry, or did she thank God that she didn't bleed out? How kind of him. We rise to clap for the bowing first chair musician, but I can't take my eyes off the instrument.



Mia Orlando  
American-Italian, 1997-

November, 2020  
Digital Art  
Chicago, IL

### The Girl and Her City

Two days before we broke up, he taught me to ride the L and neither of us wore gloves. We were glad for the metal poles warmed by the hands of those who got off at the last stop. I was still green to the city, so he picked the diner in the neighborhood I now haunt. It took a year of gathered courage to shuffle by the window, but I still haven't gone in. I still feel the rubbery eggs on the roof of my mouth. The white mug of black coffee in his hand, untouched oatmeal congealing as he pretended to skim the newspaper rather than speak to me. In the two years since, he has faded jaundiced like a bruised afternoon sky. On colder days, the abandonment still wets my eyes like an early winter gust, but I tenant the city like a poltergeist, daring him to return. The fourth-story cheese grater walk-ups, sidewalk cracks tugged together like his ever-frowning brows, even the pigeon shit; everything here is mine now.

## Tonight's Headlines:

Aerospace atheists praying their airplanes stay afloat in the push-pinned atmosphere as their brakes take their finals bows, bombing those third-world planets too bereft for better gases to coat their clouds, crinkled as an old sponge collecting bacteria on the crumby kitchen counter, douse it in dawn, downy and drano and daub away the chem trail dripping down your philtrum eely limpness in your contrapposto spine, ribs envelope knees like elbow pasta and lick toes, fetal football tumbling ass over teakettle to the final frontier, right off the edge of the deflated globe, grasp a guerilla border and gorilla glue it to the geographical region celebrated for its homogeny, the happiest citizens on this hot rock massaging their pillaging from history like the isosceles tip of an ice cream cone dissolving under tongue, impeach your sugarcoated I-teeth, juxtapose the jack-in-the-box shock of jousting your bum gums with a toothpick before narcotic kaleidoscopes cut the throats of your keenest intellects, effectively killing your darlings on the luxury trip of a lifetime, lurching like you're on the zero-gravity ride at the county fair, leeches mashing the speed button murdered a mournful youth last month, fated to Major Tom's nightmare, ground control was napping off the bender when her neck boomeranged, no one ostriches their melon into concrete on purpose, but the obelisk in her honor is ostentatious for parking lot standards, purgatory with shopping carts adrift and a plastic bag tumbleweeding at Quikmart, there's a sale on quahog clams today but their quality is questionable, e-coli is rampant in lettuce too, or maybe cabbage, some roughage riddled with wriggling parasites surveyable only under a microscope lens but the snakes sicken your stomach like six's story of a tiger tranquilized by a dart, except the dart was a bullet and it was a trigger-happy sheriff who unloaded like a supernova ulcer bleeding black into the universe and pouring down on us in vermillion, vestiges of a vital cosmic vein blown out so violently the omnipotent see stars waving from their white marble balconettes in Hollywood, the who's who are just who? to the xeroxed species that we may call God, a xenagogue with goslings on a rock, imprinted to his yellow strokes of sun in a night-bound sky, a young sunset growing lonely as an overripe lemon zested over the ocean, rainbows of oil shimmering like a reflection of an indifferent zeitgeist.



## Offbeat

When I started taking piano lessons at five years old, I spent more time watching the metronome in its 1970s lacquered wood casing, jerk back and forth like a little windshield wiper, than I did the elegant fingers of my teacher as she modeled proper keystrokes. This speedometer, the deputy to the frizzy-haired sheriff perched beside me on the bench, caught me every time I began to disregard the time signature, without fail. I silently prayed for the battery to give out so I could play at my own tempo. Sometimes I longed to grab the pendulum, just to feel the omnipotence of ceasing the perpetual. Now, my father's mechanical metronome lies just beneath the small scar on his chest, a double-time march of his blood cells like staccato notes thumping along a staff. But the staff sergeant, the bass clef curled in on itself like an ear, has dropped its colon: isn't it strange how quickly the muscles get out of tune without the constant supervision of two little dots? When he called to tell me the news of his diagnosis, he said at any time God could just flick his pendulum and set him off to a rhythm incompatible with living. His heart used to run too slow but now there is scarring like vines creeping in through his latticed veins that make him tick too fast, his pulse jolting or stumbling like a rhythmically challenged child who hasn't practiced enough. I find myself keeping time with the pacemaker under his skin as he talks to me, like I used to with the metronome, straining to make sure I hear it still.

## Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

My mother never let me poke the dead fish at the beach—  
but led me up to kiss the cheek of my grandfather at his  
funeral. I recall both vividly though twelve years have passed;  
flesh in grayscale against white sand and velvet. We had  
to leave the beach early that year because he was saying  
his last prayers. *Don't touch it, you could get some sort  
of disease*, she said, as my bare feet tiptoed around  
the corpse. What a lucky fish, to have the whole beach  
attend its open-casket funeral. And then, a month later,  
*he'll look like he's sleeping*, she whispered, as she pushed  
me towards the casket. He slept through his own wake.  
Just barely ten and still unfamiliar with how to Hail Mary,  
though I don't complain, knowing some see folded hands  
much earlier. I kept the football from the Michigan State  
themed floral arrangement, but the leather retained the musk  
of air freshener over formaldehyde, like the stench of fish  
on fingers or supermarket ice. But the fish was nameless,  
has no tombstone wreathed at Christmas and Father's Day.  
I remember it though, perhaps even better than I do my  
grandfather's face. To be honest, I think it got the long end  
of the stick; rather than fluorescent hospital lights, it got to die  
looking up at a blue and never-ending sky, in another half  
of the world, it only just learned had been there all along.

## Paper Bag Ghost

Rowdy poltergeist,  
exhumed from his early  
grave. Floating mesmerized  
towards the magnetism  
of a neon haze. Discount  
ghoul gliding through the grocery,  
his foggy frame disguised  
by the chill of the freezer section.  
Swallowing bruised sale peaches  
which careen through  
an empty ribcage, bursting  
sticky on speckled linoleum.  
Sheetless, he sports a brown paper  
bag with two black holes  
and a sharpie frown. He  
shreds magazines, rattles  
the two-liters to shitstorms,  
busts open the guts of gourds  
and pumpkins. With a lovelorn ooh,  
he spots Sandy, a chestnut one-man-carousel.  
Mounting the mechanical horse,  
he springs the paint-chipped mare  
from her rusty-coiled underbelly.  
Together, they soar along the streets,  
showering quarters from his steed's saddlebag.  
He howls madly, never having felt so alive.

## Last Call

Papa, I remember you salty as oysters and garlic, freshly shucked from a nap and knees cracking like castanets. Melting in Florida, the parade of pop-art font and circumstance flooding from the TV, you griped into inside-out swim-shorts, pockets flapping like prolapsed gills. Your sentences were littered with foreign language and nonsense, eggs *mas-suave*, homework *exactamundo*. You microwaved coffee bitter black, big-spooned your espresso ice cream and didn't mind it being tainted by the reeking relished, mustarded, ketchupped, onioned hotdogs you stacked in the freezer because they were *free*. You chicken-scratched scenes from Costa Rica over the forbidden part of the postcard. Cursing Jim Leyland, that no-good sonofabitch, for smoking in the dugout, hands behind your Tigers-capped head, elbows wide, ankle crossed over your knee. But you kind of resembled one another with your bushy moustaches and pointy joints. Take a Corona Lite if you've got one and fruit juice if you don't. Strutting the pool patio to schmooze the blue-haired paparazzi on your white sand walk of fame. You, with barking dog syndrome, you with the moat around your heart. Calling with a trumpet imitation before nine, you'd recite Don McNeill from memory. How I long for it now, your sing-song voice. *Good morning breakfast clubbers, good morning to yah. We got up bright and early just to howdy-do yah, last call for breakfast!*