



Black Bough: Issue 4

*Divine
Darkness*

Dan Foy

“Love gave the wound which while I breathe will bleed”

‘Astrophil and Stella II’, Sir Philip Sidney (1582)



Rae Howells
Guest Reader



Matthew M. C. Smith
Editor



Mark Antony Owen
Guest Reader



Richard Waring
Guest Reader

Words from the editor:

Rae, Mark, Richard - thank you for everything.

Fallen pilgrims

Our destination was darkness.

We heard voices, made out shadows.

We took gifts of words from fallen pilgrims.

Word-fragments; images are treasure.

Each mind was a threshold.

Though far away, there is light. Our journey ends.”

Matthew M.C. Smith - November 2019

Photos and artwork

Cover photograph by David Fry

Picture 1 by Ankh Spice

Picture 2 by Jeffrey Yamaguchi

Picture 3, 4 and 5 by Anne Casey

Pictures 6, 7 and 8 by Claire Loader

Photo in epilogue by James Young

Photos before epilogue by K. Weber

Beautiful artwork throughout by Adwaita Das

Prologue: Eight portraits



A Spire



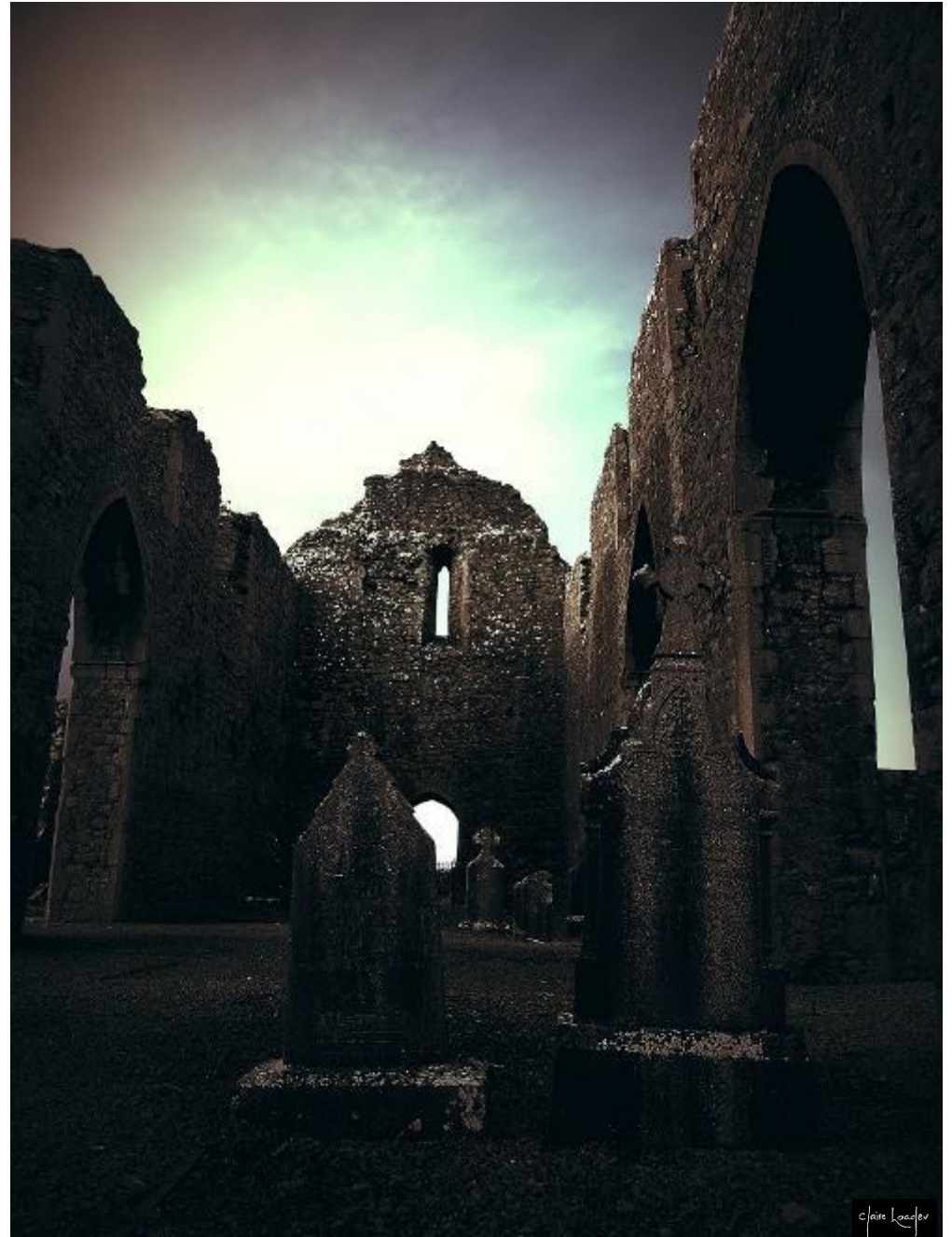
By the Youngster







Claire Kealey



I - Torture



Kindness

I put you in the torture machine—
and I'm the one who let you out.

Street of the Future

Portal to the past
where I will

have replaced
everything

in our life
with everything

in my life.

Greed

The eyes of the one-legged pigeon
find mine—*look away, look away:*

I won't look away.

Tara Skurtu

marital terms and conditions

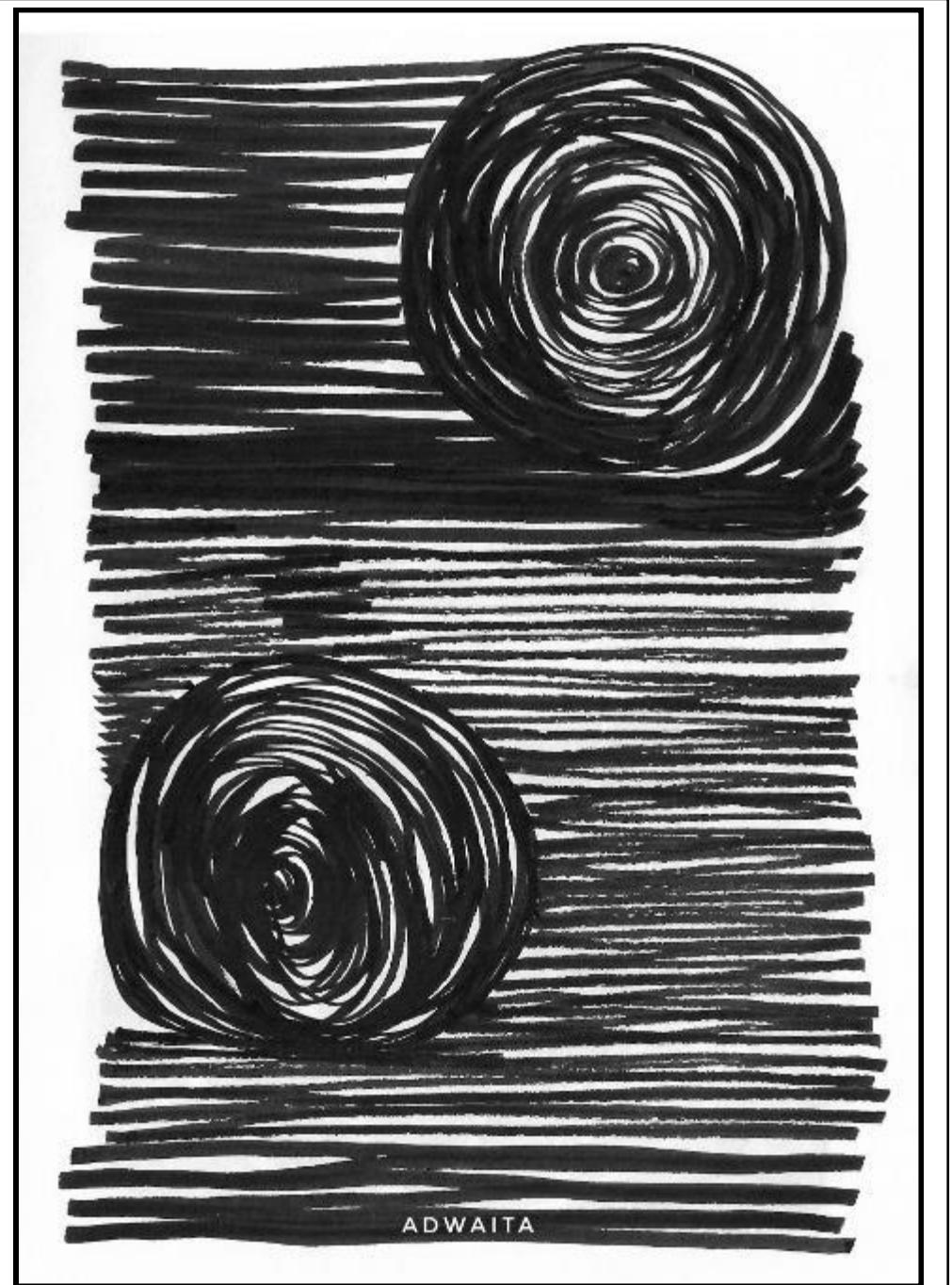
promise me
please
if one of us ever leaves
it will be me

Cecile Bol

Bouquet

when nightfall comes
I'll take in my hands
a vase of dead flowers
October's wedding
turning into laughter

Agnieszka Filipek



Apex

we grow dizzy
 where our spines touch
soft black flickering in the shades of eyes
clenching our clothes; fricatives in flesh

 tonight is our apex

 we lose ourselves lumbering
to undo each other
 knowing we are not friends
and never will be
 and never were

Briony Collins

Unspeakable

see her hands swell so
we massage KY jelly
to remove worn rings

chrysanthemums fade
in the relatives' lounge, but
we share no words

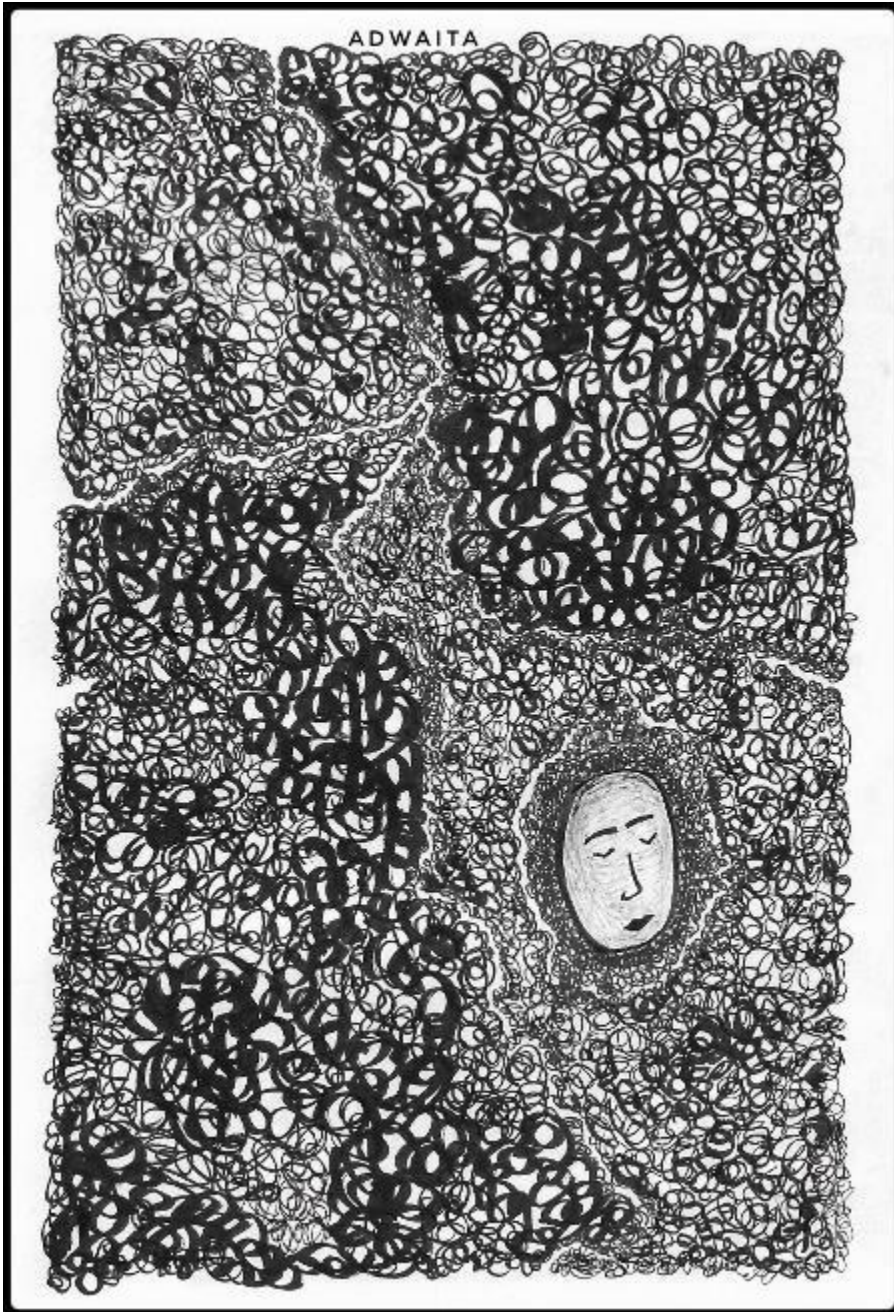
each considering
our own
mortality

Elizabeth Wilson Davies

Van Gogh's Church at Auvers

No crescent moon, no stars to watch tonight;
my brush strokes swirl impasto thick,
as cobalt blue with acid green take flight.
My mind's a mine-field of despair
'mid screams suppressed as crows fly by o'er fields of stook.
A tower tall, so powerful – alight
gives strength to all the world but me
as mine is set in aspic.
No crescent moon, no stars to watch tonight,
as cobalt blues with acid greens take flight.

Glenda Davies



Tidal

Tide of blunt force
pain recedes

So simple
this territory of remission

What to ask of the preternatural light
at shore an icon

of driftwood
This is how

I float
towards my mother

Robert Frede Kenter

Fallback (throwback)

Clifftop rocks, sharpened by southerlies
bruise my brave, bared winterings-over

A pretty wind insists my hair to kitestings, toes scatter
small scree, bouncing lust for the fall

into the farbelow bay – once caldera, now again
eager cradle, rocking full of soft blanket-blue

call to the void, you said, but I hear only gulls, urging *oh, go, go*
one more step and gravity loosens her fist

I unravel - apeswing, quickening shrew, nothing
but open gills falling back to the breathing water

Ankh Spice

A little drop is all it takes

You do not have to have been
Torn free of your clothes to be stripped.
A drop of destruction fizzles in your lemonade.
Feels a little odd but you kill it with thrill of
The Irish Sea's waves tingling on your tongue,
And the stamping roar of Dublin beneath you.
It wasn't even St. Patrick's Day.
Maybe if it had been,
I would've been able to invent a pathetic reason when
I woke up painted with blood and vomit.

Holly Peckitt

Laundry

One day left for stylish melancholy
For bandanas and overalls
Humiliation will visit in last year's blazer
Pressed with orchids

James Garza

Nargissi Koftay

Mother earth, sliced neatly down the middle
Wobbles under the fierce fracturing jabs
Of my fork. I aim first for the riddle
Posed by her fused powder-core. With sharp stabs

I hollow out her heart, leaving the white
Horizon between crust and chasm bereft.
Then in slow nibbles I rob her of light,
Crumble her loam on the crumbs of my theft;

And then bite by bite swallow it up too,
Crowning its doom before starting anew.

Hibah Shabkhez

Impossible to Audit Sadness

Welcome rain
On funeral day
Deepened the misery
And nullified attempts
To estimate tears.

Joe Cushman

Magpie

We greet the magpie taking refuge from the lip
of roof outside. Tail wrangled, ruffled crown,
she watches rain that falls in ropes to ground.

Night Terror

I'd left her dreaming
where she drapes her nets to dry

the cobbles under my heel
with the sea breeze streaking
rivulets along my cheeks

Hilary Watson

X-ray

Across a moon
white as a bleached bone,
a wisp of black cloud,
like a shadow on an x-ray.

Porch Light

Five years on,
their porch light burns
through each night.

Just in case.

Wardrobe

Nothing left in your wardrobe,
but the breath of mothballs,
wooden bones of hangers.

Stephen Bone

Mountain Lake

I am finally ready to wade in -
without pause, or I would be lost again.
I feel the water submerge me,
feel the panic as lungs and heart unnerve me.

But soon I breathe, feel the water
filling my lungs, my hair,
feel it cleaning me out - I gasp it in like air.

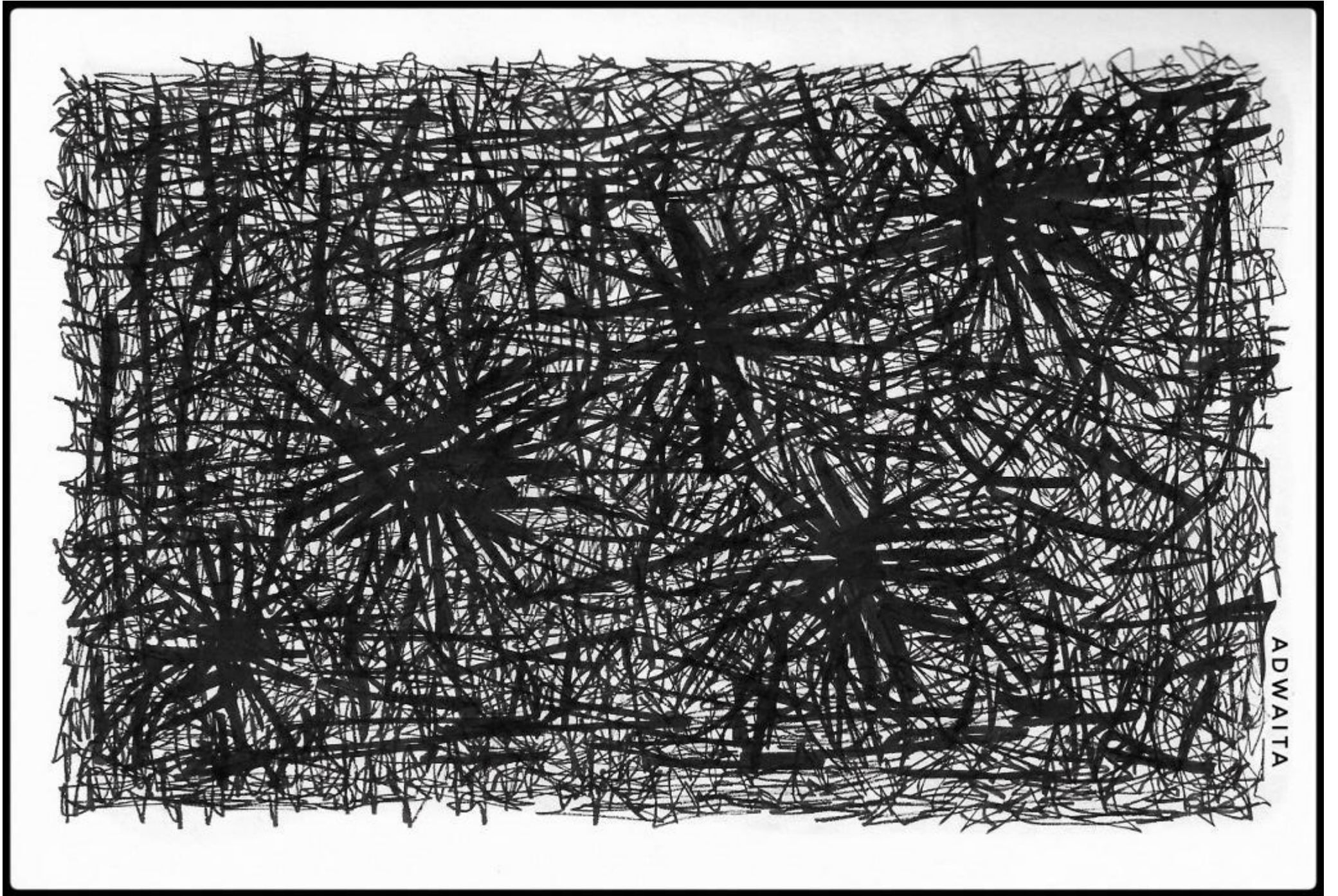
When I leave, though my grief runs
off me in sheets,
its hold still strangles.

Eabhan Ní Shuilleabháin

Gulls

A tumble of black-backed gulls
Tears the white tension
from the morning sky,
Reverberation of feathers
Trembling over the waters,
Gossamer to waiting waves,
Upward soar, to wingtip curve
On spiral current,
Ellipsis in the wide blue.

Rebecca Lowe



II - Bleed

Diptych for a Missing Person

i

The village is taken from us darling
We sit in our mapless home listening

Her car a hollow promise at the rec
 the tyres letting out

In this house its odd cartography
of loss we're dredging all the rivers

Light fails In the morning
we'll perform another sweep

ii

Bitter day-break Walk the brook
where they found her last week

A cobalt smear as of oil spilled
ekes from the rivervein's clay wall

Water-snag fidgets under reeds
infers a something throttled

The air ticks hardening
Like the water its surface twitches

Luke Palmer

Full Moon

A feather, a bone
in the shape of a star

suspended from the moon's
last mooring

The shadow of a crow
follows dusk to midnight -

a blur in the wolf's dreaming.

Deborah Purdy

Desert Child

She could say Saguaro before she was two,
her breath warm on moon-lily milk,
fat fingers drawing a hawk moth down.

The sandman scatters red dust at Mojave,
crossing bells a comfort and she sleeps.

Jimsonweed blooms in the belly of midnight,
an atomic flash of neon wipes the desert clean.

Lynn Valentine

downside

got hammock-sick, tree-
addled, sidewinded
by low-slung fruit.

was stomach-less
on an upswing
until i down-turned, face-

planted in the dust
of crabgrass, hell-bent
on standing line-straight

but, instead, life-spiraled.

K Weber

Deserving

We took swing dance lessons and moved
that couch for Greg Louganis.

You proposed to me in the apartment
where I spent the night on the toilet.

Thanks for listening to all the screams
of various women in my blood.

I entered a contest in February
but you came in first.

Safety Shot

We kiss like snooker balls
and cannon away in separate directions
to sink cleanly into corner pockets
at opposite ends of the room.
We rest, as you hug the cushion tighter still.

Mat Riches

Last Rites and Orders

The end of service; beer towels are hang ceremoniously over taps;
They are like tall priests in long gowns, leading a silent prayer
At joy's grave.

David Rudd-Mitchell

images

wait until you see yourself in
spring lake reflections // in luminous heavy looking glass
in spiralling winds on plains in april

as months shift
like blackbirds preparing broods in colour
you will see yourself in teardrops // autumnal mists
over russet meadows
in spider-web-december snowflakes

in the first tomorrow you'll ever remember

Paul Robert Mullen

Gathering
for Ding Ling

This storm has disturbed the blossoms -
petals swirl on the wind, scatter far away
from home, branches lonely in their barrenness.

When morning comes, I will shoulder
my rake, gather all those lost petals into
a mound in my yard to become my poetry.

Lisa Stice

Author's note: * Ding Ling (1904-1986; China): poet (several collections including *Zai bei'an Zhong, Shui* and *Yebu*), fiction writer (several including *Meng Ke, Wo zai Xia cun de shibou* and *Du Wanxiang*), and revolutionary

(Be)longing

Hands drifting through wild hair,
shaking out a stray curl that has caught a leaf.

Hands drifting to trunk of birch,
thumb against whorl of knot, lift of bark.

Hands drifting to earth underfoot,
fingers deep into moss and lichen, grasping.

Hands drifting to grey of rock, loose shale,
palm feeling warmth of sun's passage.

Hands drifting to sky, fingers spread wide,
head thrown back, eyes clear. Open now.

Kim Fabner

split

i cultivate small infections. pick
my nails ragged, the crescent
of my thumb peeling its twin
like fruit.

in the morning: my
skin hot, split
tight over swelling.
see, even i can grow, can make
something happen.

Manūs

when you tell me that you love me in the loud dark bar,
it rings like a shot. feels like a thumb in the bullet hole:
the salt rim of your margarita stinging
every cut on the way down.

of course i can only think of this in terms of fucking and fighting,
the functions of your hands and how they twist inside my chest
until something comes loose.

call it tenderness the way parts of me are peeling open
under your thumb;
call the rime of my blood under your nail proof.

Eve Elizabeth Moriarty

Gravity

It is a kind of madness to face autumn
the curl of her leaves into fists

the gravity of it
of knowing what's to come
once her skirts have settled

how bare feet will fare under her kisses
the drench of her love

and then winter's whiskered face
gawping through the doorway
she flounced out of

Rae Howells

sickle moon
the reaper carves
into dawn

ocean fog
the breathlessness
to disappear

Fractled

Christening

Mother is a swimming pool of voices,
the wet limbs of children.
You stare
through mothers reflected
in training pool windows:
flickering, mutable,
your see-through face among them.

You wait for a child.
Your name rises from water.

The Audience

Before I go back to myself,
kiss me. Right here, in this cinema.
Let it be nitrate.
Let it burn underwater.
Let all the actors talk themselves
into a neat ending. We'll applaud.

Kiss me before I slip
back into something uncomfortable.
Don't you prefer the dark?

Maria Taylor

Digitalis

After the thunderstorms
in late July,
a lone foxglove quivers
its pale purple velvet
and white fur amongst pools
of sky and snail-silvered leaves.
A foot-high dance of slender bells,
how I long to disappear
inside your freckled blossom,
your poisoned fairy purse.

Early Autumn

The greens of the sycamore trees
are curling like fingers. It seems
like only yesterday they started to leaf.
Today, three generations
of my family have gathered.
I watch the theatre of creases
around their eyes when they smile,
toddlers dancing about our feet. Waves
of my husband's hair surge silver
in the afternoon sun.

Lucy Whitehead

God

under the sun that makes the river run hot –
he suffers
naked desires

days spent
watching women walk under speechless green trees –
flooding him with violent rapture – a criminal lust –

he looks like god – cut from rock – golden
& they cannot tell him *no*

Alan Parry

Father

tries to fill his loss with words, feels
he has no tongue, cannot resist
the creeping speech of stone: cain digs
shallow holes with his hands. cannot fight
the real. no-one in particular
is near

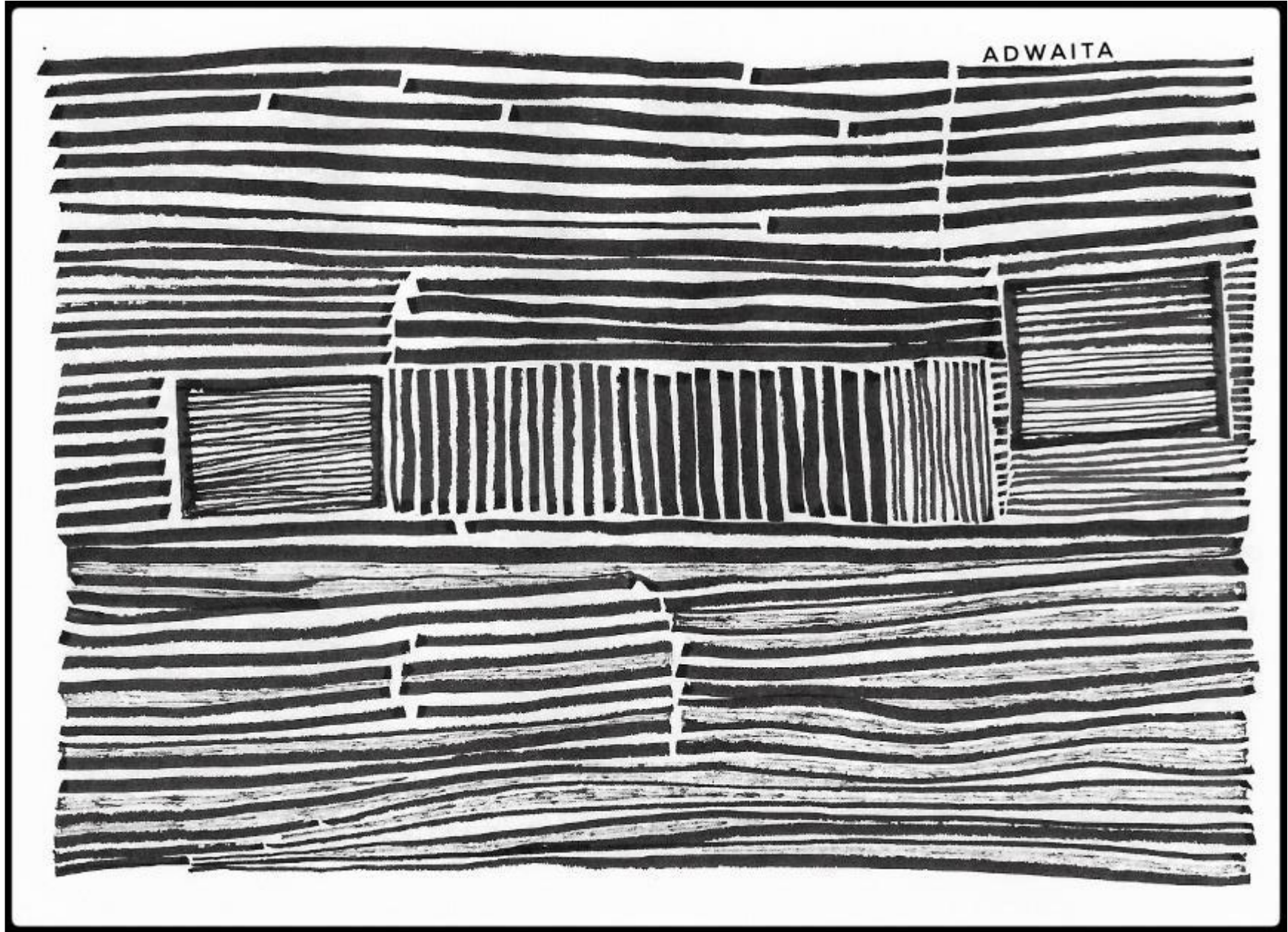
across fixed distance, tree arms
stop & open, lean to speak with Wind, hear
nothing, hold nothing, call shivering green
to red ravens

Warren Czapa

Strangers on the 11.44 to Birmingham New Street

Nylon covered thighs				two branches reaching
press against each other		newspapers overlapping		for the same patch
with unfamiliar heat,				of golden sunlight.

Elizabeth Kemball



Snapshot

Forty years on
yellowed edges
frame the boy, as was back then,
frozen mid-jump
in flight forever,
locked out of time – a still life perfection.

Maxine Rose Munro

This poem is written in Ljóðaháttur, a Norse poetic metre involving stress and alliteration.

In the doorway of the old BHS

A bright spark blazing on addictive genes.
Reflected in his eyes effigy smiles
of a stunted soldier fighting
centiles - shaking hands with
the man he
might have
been.

Helen Ross

Polyurethane

A bike left out all winter - saddle erupts into florets of mould.
Uncreamed skin in full sun peels like paint from damp, damned walls.
Asbestos blooms in abandoned building sites. Yellow spray-foam insulation billows from
still-standing ragged walls in tufts. Proliferating custard clouds, inflatable scar tissue that spores to
touch. Vivid bubbles, cast (in) stone.
Metal struts warp and wilt. One unstable structure inside another.

The ground, what might. What might be the ground.

Lydia Unsworth

Leaving Carterhaugh

Tam Lin went back when Janet died,
bent his knee
to his old, cold queen.

She kept her promise:
thrust her nails like thorns into his eyes,
replaced them with two of wood,
which may splinter
but never bleed
or weep.

Jennifer A. McGowan

Folktale note: Janet of Carterhaugh rescues Tam Lin from the Queen of Fairies. The Queen cries that if she'd known he'd betray her, she would've replaced his eyes with wood.

How Long

since they stopped looking immortal?
My mother dying in her bed.
My father with his face like a wet sheet.
The paramedics dropped her and she opened
her knees on the ambulance steps. My mother
bleeding through the stroke ward and my father
forgetting to hold her hand.

Kym Deyn

Innocent Cruelty XIII

A fire-
fly flashing,

spinning
in a
frayed web.

Innocent Cruelty XVII

The postman in a storm.
Rain-
water on a love
letter's question mark.

Innocent Cruelty XXI

Moonlight muffled
in winter
cloud.

Pasture silenced
in whispering snow.

Benjamin Cutler

III - Stripped



doctored time

Transitional whip of sunrise
Some of us prefer darkness
Its stiffer sound, tranquil beast
Flowering for kingdom come
The crickets run out at dawn
Deer settle past their forage

How are we to begin again
Stripped by this first light

Steven Hartung

Kaboom

bet you like trains, can tell by the way you heart-shaped-eyes stare at steam

(chugga times two, choo too) | | parked your red Dodge on eastside tracks | | waited

for ghost children to push you, or not | | either way, you are an oleander

underwater | | bet you pipe dream about the Pacific | | maybe it was too much

time spent on the Golden Gate Bridge repeating that line in sam sax's poem
that goes *I wonder what water smells like when it takes on the property of concrete* | | you kept
thinking when they say *come hell or high water* it means "no matter what" in Texas,
but KABOOM when you jump off a bridge | | to collide is to pirouette, spiral
outward & wait for the fog to come | | & when it does, it's short lived & tired
| | collapses on top, all impressed with what its done

Melanie Kristeen

Silence

Silence, slow my personal terrors
In a raw instant,
All truth is faced alone.

Listen, hear fading babel
A peculiar auricular quality.

Quiet monks, under photon crowns
Hymns unuttered, always seeking.

Light craves a darkness
Silence the wide horizon.

Face the void, undone.

David Fry

Surfers and Jumpers

From the top of the cliff they look like seals –
sleek, wet-suited bodies gleaming in grey waves

their cheeks resting on their boards as they loll –
waiting, lazily nonchalant, they rise and fall

rise and fall.

She's watching them from the top of the cliff
dreaming of updrafts, of gulls, she raises her arms

her pulse speaking to the throb of the tide
she seeks safer footing behind her – rise and fall

leap and fall.

Ellie Rees

Post-War Baptism

I emerge from

black blooms of smoke

carrying him on my back:
he dangles over my forehead,

shading shrapnel-peppered eyes,
which dart from dust to sky

these two wooden legs snap -
I collapse onto the river-bank;

a hook-hand shovels soil

into my mouth

Soraya Bakbakhi

Haiku

1.
The world would end now
Upon this ocean floor where
They found the first shell

2.
You smell like the road
Hot asphalt, damp kudzu and
Antebellum ghosts

3.
The dead buddleia
Makes herself a bereft home
For winged orphans

4.
With mouth turned skyward
She collects the rainwater
Algae green, and still.

Amanda Needham

Love in a red hot water bottle

The rubber has long perished,
its mouth slack-jawed, its teeth blunt.
Once it used to lie proud under the paisley quilt,
the knitted blanket, the flannelette sheet.
Every chill night, she would fill it carefully
burping it for bubbles, wrapping it in an old vest.
There, just on the right of teddy,
it would incubate pyjamas
and heat my night-time cave.

Jean James

My Fury is Ghost

My fury is ghost. It is eyes
gazing at fields and sky.
It is fingers still at this table.

Resurface...

you strike with storm-drain eyes -
flashing, smashing, cracking of nose-bone,
stamping, thrashing - brain, bag, blood.

My fury is ghost. A concussion of mercury.
We will stand once again, face-to-face,
setting a duel to end our worlds.

Matthew M.C. Smith

Two years

It's dark and she laughs, straight teeth bared
Light from the neon-lit ad campaign glints off their whiteness
While he repeatedly kicks the bus shelter so hard
The plexiglass rattles
But does not shatter
Perfect teeth displayed in laughter rhythm do not shatter on this night
If he has a reason, I don't know it
Give it two years
Maybe as many as five
She won't be laughing

Elizabeth McGeown

Emergence

As I circulate these streets
laid out like thread-sized veins
I see my shadow, once faint
turned to sea fret

Now dark, distinct
it is a silhouette
dancing like a spellbound child
in the lemon-yellow dawn

Jessica Wortley

Horse-fly (Brexit)

The English [call it] a Burrel-fly, Stowt, and Breese: and also of sticking and clinging, Cleg and Clinger (J. Rowland, Theater of Insects, 1658).

... of a sudden the flies were at him
with the wrong words.

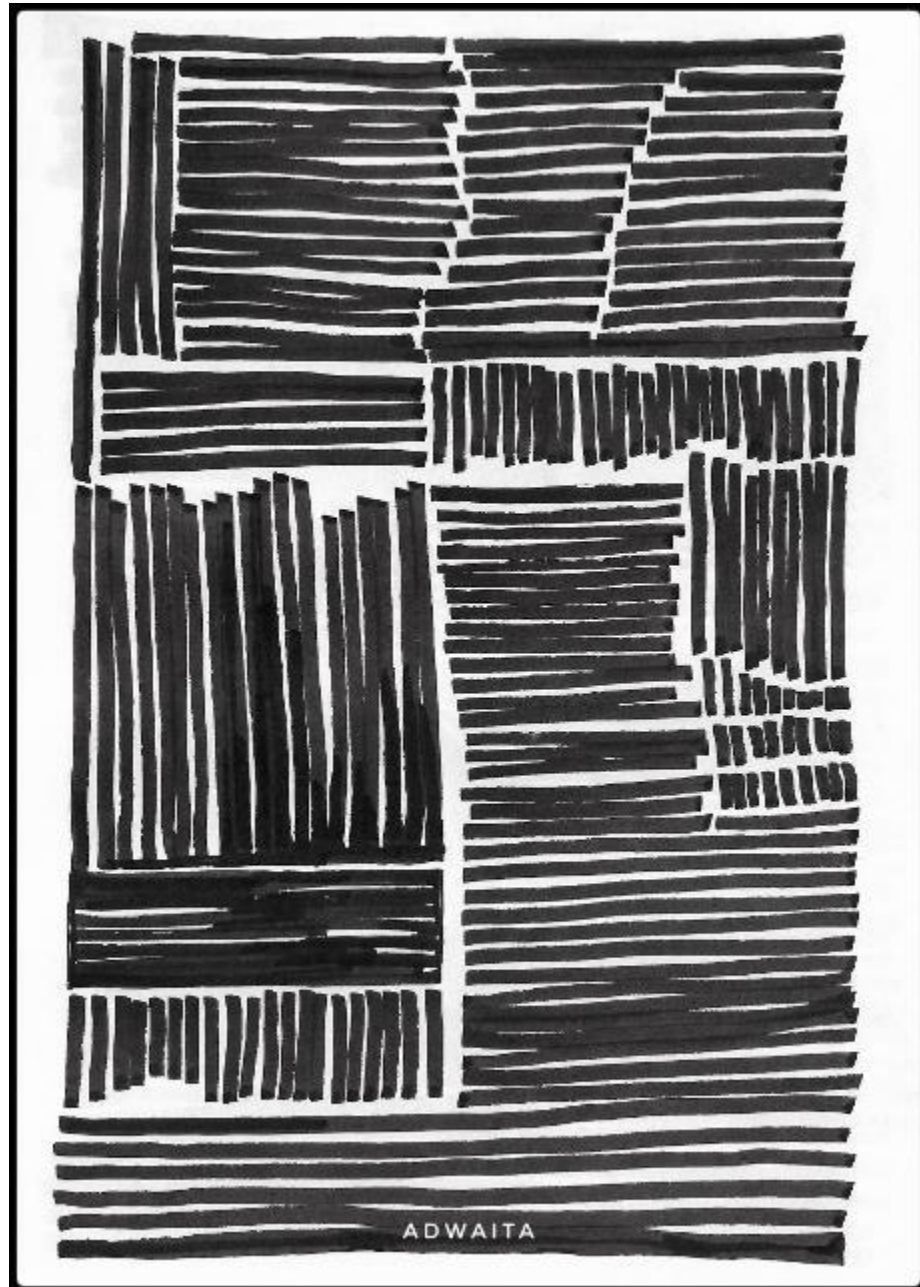
burly stouts and gad-flies was the right language:
concussion big with gad or spike.

nothing bit or was bitten
the males being feeble-mouthed.

cleg the clinger delving at turpitude
data-mine deep.

parasite-certain the flies nursed
and worded his hardening blood.

Anthony Howe



Q

I've been sucked inside a 1980s videogame.
Fasting forces the body to look like marble.
Measuring just a few centimetres across,
bubbles of despair develop within the body.

A

Stop trying to be sad all next century.
Squats, bro – chin to win.
Robot chefs supply us with glowing, pink eggs.
They've been sucked inside America, ghostly, unfeeling.

Matthew Haigh

Pruning

Orange-clad men, agile as squirrels, trim trees in our courtyard.
I remember pruning forsythia, lilac, rose of Sharon
in a house I left behind, punctuating plants' run-on sentences with full
stops
(Worrying I've taken too much—
or too little).
I think of the pruning now, inside my body: medicine's
chemical hard-hats, silent saws chopping healthy growth along with sick. Winter
is coming. Still, there is flowering—autumn crocus, marigold, the last
of the morning glories. Bulbs we plant now, waiting for spring.

Ellen Jaffe

Evil Ditches Entrench Pandemonium

Umami – a tsunami of tergiversate;
cantaloupe cat, butterfat balbutiated
n-n-nadir; quaff chalcantithite nepenthe.

Literal translation:

Evil Gutters Shelter Chaos

A meaty taste - a waterfall of changing loyalties;
a ginger cat, full of butter stammers
at their lowest point; drink bright blue poison to forget.

Welsh translation:

Gwteri drwg yn Cysgodi Anhrefn

Blas cigog, rhaeadr o deyrngarwch;
cath sinsir, llawn ataliadau menyn
ar eu pwynt isaf; yfed gwenwyn glas llachar er mwyn
anghofio.

Rhea Seren Phillips

Fishing the wind

out cast
into the whip sea
that colourless, borderless
word-snatch sea

out cast
into the timeless rip
the dishevelled swell, into
the heave and slack, out cast

on a bad day, catch futility
on a good day, chuck it back

Elaine Ruth White

Epilogue - Spine / Wire



ungrateful

master gives me a spine
an armature made
of wire

he weaves flesh around the core
and kisses me gently
to life

he whispers a soul into it
and plants eyes like bottles
in the skull

and i spend decades
tearing it
apart

Mela Blust

J. Young



List of Contributors

Artist

Adwaita Das is the author of *27 Stitches, Colours Of Shadow & Songs Of Sanity*. She has studied English literature & filmmaking & worked in theatre-news-advertising. Her art is for inner awareness & mental health. Darkness is not evil; fear is. Being mindful brings love, joy & peace. Instagram: @adwaita.das Twitter : @adwaita_one

Photography and poetry

David Fry has 4 poems published in *Black Bough*. He also has a poem published in *Re-side* Issue 2. He is still emerging. Twitter: @thnargg www.seekingthedarklight.co.uk

Ankh Spice is a sea-obsessed poet from Aotearoa (NZ), whose poetry appears in a number of international publications. He truly believes that narrative and kindness create change, and you'll find him doing his best to prove it @SeaGoatScreams on Twitter or @AnkhSpiceSeaGoatScreamsPoetry on Facebook

K Weber has 4 self-published poetry books available free in PDF & audio formats. These and her full writing and photography credits are available at <http://kweberandherwords.wordpress.com>

Photography

Anne Casey is the author of two poetry collections published by *Salmon Poetry*. Anne is an award-winning poet/writer and literary editor with a keen interest in nature photography. She has worked for over 30 years as a journalist, magazine editor, legal author & media communications director.

Claire Loader was born in New Zealand and spent several years in China before moving to County Galway, Ireland. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Crannóg, Dodging The Rain, The Bangor Literary Journal* and *Crossways*. Twitter: @msloader

Jeffrey Yamaguchi creates projects with words, photos, and video as art explorations, as well as through his work in the publishing industry. Twitter: @jeffryyamaguchi www.jeffreyyamaguchi.com

James Young lives in the Mumbles Gower and does most of his writing in his beach hut at Rotherslade.

Poetry

Soraya Bakhbaki lives in Cardiff, Wales, and is a keen fan of music and partial to a strong cocktail or a glass of red wine. Soraya is currently completing a collection of poetic works and a novel; she can be followed on Twitter: @sorayabakhbaki.

Mela Blust is a Pushcart Prize and three time 'Best of the Net' nominee. She has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Bitter Oleander, Rust + Moth, The Nassan Review* and more. Her debut poetry collection, *Skeleton Parade*, is available with *Apep Publications*. She is Head Publicist and Social Media Manager for *Animal Heart Press*, and a contributing editor for *Barren Magazine*. Twitter: @melablust

Cecile Bol is a Dutch writer. She is the co-leader of a local English poetry stanza. Her English work has appeared (or is due to appear) in *The Blue Nib, Impspired, Picaroon Poetry, The Lake* and anthologies from *The Frogmore Press* and *Earlyworks Press*. @cecilebol

Stephen Bone's latest pamphlet, *Plainsong*, was published by *Indigo Dreams* in 2018.

Briony Collins is a published poet and storyteller. She won the 2016 Exeter Novel Prize and was the 2018 Literature Wales Under 25s Bursary recipient. She is represented by DHH Literary Agency. Currently, she is in her last year of study at Bangor University. Twitter: @ri_collins Instagram @ri_collins96

Joe Cushnan was born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, but now lives in England. After retiring from a long retail management career, he devotes as much time as he can to writing. He has a portfolio of published features, reviews, poetry and fiction.

Benjamin Cutler is an award-winning poet and high school English teacher from the southern Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina. His poems have appeared in numerous publications, and he is the author of the collection *The Geese Who Might be Gods (Main Street Rag, 2019)*. Twitter: @Bookish_Bum

Warren Czapa has had poems published in *Closed Gates or Open Arms (Verve, 2019)*, *Magma, Poetry Bus* and online with *Burning House Press*. In 2018, he was longlisted for the Troubadour International Poetry Prize and was commended in the Verve Poetry competition on the theme of 'Community'.

Glenda Davies retired from nursing after 40 years in 1992. Glenda was widowed in 1995. She attended poetry classes & workshops with Dr Catriona Ryan, Peter Thabit Jones, Susan Richardson & others. She obtained a Diploma in Creative Writing from Swansea University in 1999. She is published in *Sagmag, Roundy House, Cruse* magazines

& *Moments in Time* Poetry Guild publication.

Kym Deyn is a poet, playwright and fortune teller. They are currently studying for a Creative writing MA at Newcastle University. You can find them on Twitter @shortestwitch

Kim Fahner has published five books of poems, including her latest, *These Wings* (Pedlar Press, 2019). She lives and writes in Sudbury, Ontario. Her author website is www.kimfahner.com

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