



THE INKWELL
H A R B O U R

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Cover photography by Ulianna Makoveeva

REMNANTS OF VICTORIA

Prudence Ng

‘I do not feel a stranger...
as it is for the vivid colour and movement
of its densely packed life
and for the beauty of its scenery...’

- QUEEN ELIZABETH II, 1975.

Two, three years ago, you said,
‘The source of life will move in cycles’,
with the map of the whole world in your grasp
island away from the Harbour.
On your tongue, I said
that ‘Here, like now, there’s nothing special’,
compared to the meanders of yours
all belonging to the same source.

She changed. Far from what it belongs.
You would know. I never saw.

Near the rivers of foreign castles, I lie
with my tongue tied, with statues of strange saints,
the taste of white chalk clung with the winds of cold rain
once dwelled and rose from the Pacific.
You belong me, she says.
I can taste it all. Perhaps I can taste it all.

A time ago before I got to the sea
the drops of the green ferries
once trampled by Queens
drumming canons over burnt poppies
came back to your river, to my cup,
put onto my platter, a poster, a street, a shoulder, bus stop.
You claim her kaleidoscope lights. I paint her
bright yellow. Glory. Smoke of the Dead.

You named her first, how it slips from my tongue,
how the People amended it with their words.
The water fits both my cups nicely.
I emptied my story, gulped tea, cycles buried
under feigned glamour and Blood Stars, eating up my land.
How would I know when it comes back to me?
How shall I see what all they have seen?

This is cage, the People sing.
Dwelling old rulers, entering new harbours.
They are drifting. I'm just watching.
All that remains now is the rain. *Here, you lie*, she says.

I lie nowhere now. A glitch. A nobody,
pining away the century waters that ripped
apart two dreams.

Artwork by Cloé Bonnard



Seaglass

Amelie MacKay

Once, she was a girl with her hand in her mother's, hearing the mermaids sing. These days she combs the beach in her canvas overcoat with the wooden toggles loose. She walks with her eyes to the ground, and listens. The seagull's call is never without a sharper cry from land, and the rush of the sea is underscored by inane tunes from the merry-go-round. She hears most clearly the crunch of small pebbles underfoot as she walks along. She wishes that she could float, be silent.

Often on these walks she finds seaglass. It is easiest to find in the low, intense sun of dawn or dusk, glimmering alone amongst the dull pebbles.

Mermaid eggs have this quality, she thinks; they catch the light of the sun, their reflection seen by those who know how to look. But their texture is different. They are sticky and gelatinous, like frogspawn, with a firm, dark centre. They cling to the underside of rocks in clutches. That's a new one, she thinks, and makes note. Behind her, children scream as they run into the freezing water.

Seaglass forms where shards of glass fall into the ocean and, wrapped in the repetitive flow of the tide becomes smooth and beautiful again. Humans cast away their waste, and the water returns them to a rounded whole. The first mermaid was created in this way, when a woman entered the sea to drown herself, and was urged to live by her new form. The water made a sanctuary of the cold, and now mermaids only appear at night, in the comforting and chill darkness.

The girl puts her hands in her pockets as the wind picks up along the shore. The tide threatens inwards, along with the quickly descending sun. By its own motion, the beach clears. People escape to the safety of the fish-and-chip restaurants lining the seafront, or their small baths of saltless water. The girl keeps walking; she likes the coldness in her lungs when she breathes in. The evening light renders the pebbles golden, and small corners of seaglass make themselves known.

As she gathers, she imagines sinking to the bottom of the ocean without drowning. Drifting down, she would look up at the cloud of auburn hair above her, and watch as the blue glow of light rose further and further away. That dark is peaceful, consuming. In the absence of sight, the motion of the water is all there is to be felt. The tips of her fingers lose sensation as they grow colder. She hits something of a ground, but not completely: her feet touch a slimy hardness, limbs become entangled in thick seaweed, and her body struggles as her soul rises to the surface fast enough to rip her out of the daydream.

...

She returns home to the flat that used to be her mother's, now hers alone. It is a solitary place, barely removed from the outside, where the breeze draughts through the closed windows. She draws the curtains shut.

As a very small girl she would catch her mother bathing, long red hair spread around her in the water, the sound of the outside waves lulling her. The girl cannot shower in peace without the image of her mother appearing beneath her, or the hardened version of herself, sitting at the side of this very bathtub, soaping her mother's fragile and immobile body.

Elder mermaids lose their scales when they are dying. Their hair becomes not grey but silver, easily mistaken for jellyfish tendrils close to the shore. After a certain age they stop going to the surface, instead lurking below, hair shimmering. Their scales, too, have an iridescence that comes with maturity. But in all this beauty, their voices become silent. Dying mermaids stop their singing, and it is in silence that they turn to sea foam.

The girl washes her hair and wraps it in a towel, the tail hanging down to the small of her back. The living room would be too quiet, so she sits on a stool in the kitchen. It is warmer there; she listens to the washing machine churn. She eats in silence.

When she has finished, she takes her coat from the hook on the door and empties the pockets onto the counter. The seaglass falls in shades of white and blue, still damp and peppered with sand. She leaves them for the morning. In the bedroom, thin sheets make their own shallow pool. She falls asleep in her robe; she has forgotten that it was her mother's. When she remembers, her heart will blossom with that same pain that never seems to go away, but phases between muted and deafening: there is so much more of it in the cold. When she remembers, she will remove the robe from herself carefully, trying to forget the intricacies of her own body that follow the shape of that woman, gone into oblivion. She will not know which of the red hairs are hers.

And when she drifts off to sleep the mermaids will come, the young ones that climb out of the sea and make their way onto land with determined crawling.

They smile in the moonlight, teeth cloudy and blue. They love both the stones of the seashore and the concrete slabs along the front, the coldness and roughness of each against their bellies. They climb and climb, their arms alien and narrow, but strong enough to support their bodies. On the land they move like snakes, writhing up buildings, untethered. They break the glass, throw the curtains open. They slide quick and fast into the land of sleep.

When the girl awakes, her skin is green, from the tip of her longest fin to the crest of her forehead. A crown of hair bursts upon it, longer and falling in twisted chains. She crawls through the broken glass with the rest of them to the sea, bright like the surface of a mirror. Her fingers find root in the sand, and she is aware of her nakedness, the body changed beyond recognition except for the deep red hair covering it. She pulls herself along until she is bleeding between her scales and, dying the water crimson, she slips sideways into the cold, dark sea.





HARBOUR

The Flood

Sam Rodilosso

There's the flood, the flood in the news,
the flood on TV, and the flood in the poem.

The ice cream shop man is knee deep
in water with an electric pump humming.

A cigarette hangs in the corner of his mouth
like a difficult word. What is bad news before
it's broken? This poem will die when it runs out
of breaths to count, meaning meaning is a kind
of grieving. At the center of an old red fire hydrant,
a rusty lug nut holds back a city's worth of water.

Ocean is more like *air* than *pool* or *cup of water*;
it is a perimeter of formlessness. I believe
in a world unrestrained by language but I cannot find it.

Loose-Leaf Tea

Simran Kaur Johal

In my hands, a cup of tea. On my mind words like songs, and in this garden, the world is cinema. A butterfly taps, against this heart- a window pane to its wings. Stretched out the insect is a clock, telling the time in its flapping: summer then spring. Blow a wish into the wind and let a dandelion tell a lie about it coming true. It's okay to wake up and make a mistake, if there's a butterfly, a dandelion somewhere outside.

Everything is dying, a nice slow pace, and the thing I'm trying to figure out is— am I dying too? It might be nice, show up to work as an urn. But that's when I tend to figure I'm not dying at all. See, the thing with me is — I just never change. Maybe that means I'm relentlessly alive.

Summer at twenty; I'm the same silly I was at two. I have soft limbs and a big, big belly. My eyes are sometimes full, to the brim or spilling out. But I end up staring blank. I don't quite know the meanings yet, just that I always want to be this way, underneath everything. I like the angle: the belly of birds when they fly by, the look of clouds passing — the distance between me and all that is up, up and away.

There is still more of this wonder world to go and see. I visit during my afternoon naps— lazy limbs and sleepy smile. I'd like to say I've been. But here's the thing- I forgot to look. Emptiness in these wide watching eyes: a girl went to the Sistine Chapel and she forgot to point her head up. Something about missing out is cool right now, the idea that I could be there or there, but am so wickedly still here.

The September sun is tapping my shoulders and asking me to look back, before the cold begins, remember the heat and who you were while you walked in it. This summer was like any other, so I shrug that September sun off of my shoulders, lean back and remember it all. On a sticky afternoon in July I decided to be a little bit in love- not a lot- my bones were free and lazy. By the night- these bones- jumping and alive. Next day, he changed his mind and I could only laugh. I shouldn't have changed mine.

In an August shower, many burning, screaming injuries started to cool down. I finally washed my eyes and left them to soak in a puddle; they dried in the subsequent sun. Then I could see very clearly, what I never saw before — castles in thin air, mountains on quiet people's heads and rivers flowing through busy streets. There is always so much to see, barely anyone is looking.

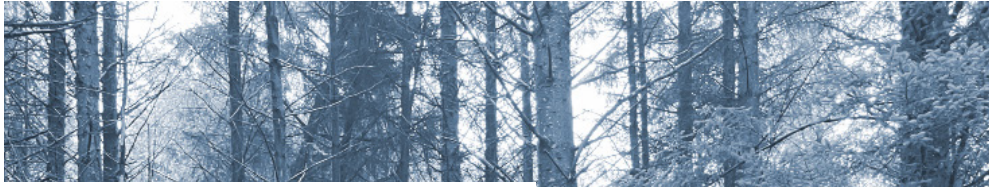
I like this world a lot, but this world wouldn't know it. Mostly I get angry, sticking out my tongue in every direction. It's hard to tell this place what I really feel, about the ease and comfort when sitting in its thick heat, but then the wild irritation of stinging sweat in a crowd.

If I admit I like it here and hate it here at the same time, does it somehow mean I can never win? I'll always be in a resignation, no fight or chance of victory. Just a slow summer's grin, meeting cups of tea, loose leaf, a little bit like me.



Artwork on pages 18, 19 & 41 by Ava Godfrey





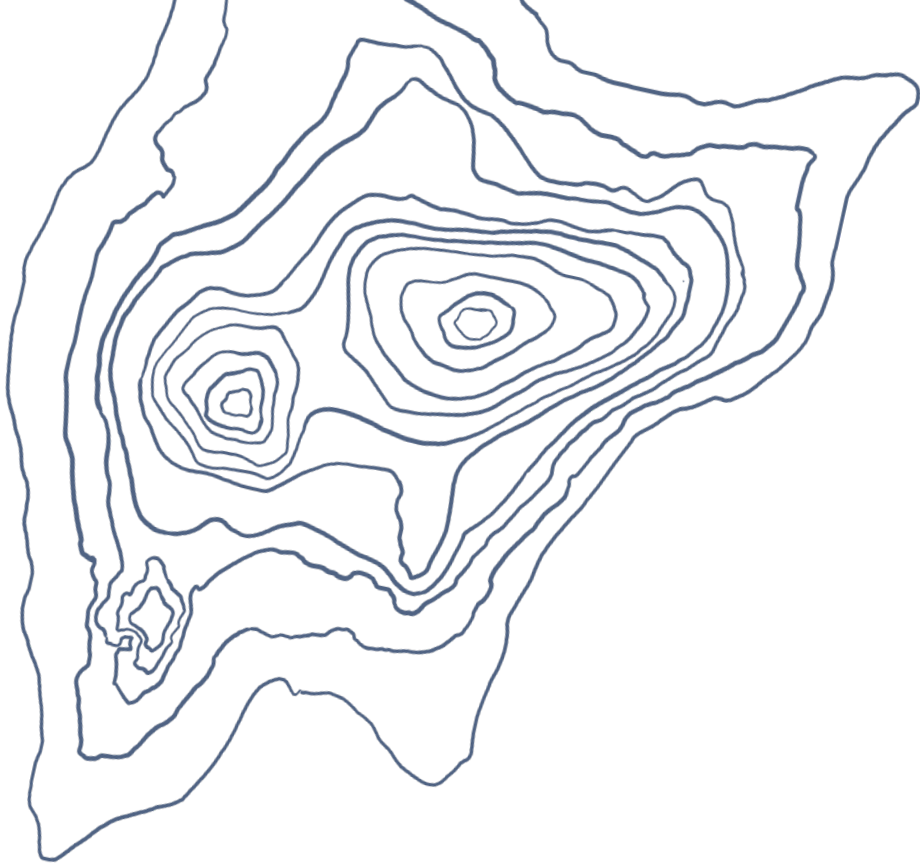
Heart Rot

Astrid Grahn-Farley

Photography by Siofra Rafferty



The path is mine to follow
The hollows of the Earth
Her every hill and fallow
Is mine by right of birth
Born free as the high-flying swallow
Why should I not know my worth
And roll like the god Apollo
On the wind that calls me forth
To worry the wavy green willow
The ashes piled in the hearth
Rattle the branches and bellow
Shake the bells in the church
The fields of barley and mallow
The trees of laburnum and birch
The cage of my dark-winged fellow
The one I left in the lurch
Who sways with the leaves turning yellow
In the shadow of a lantern-led search
We wade, well up from the shallows
We laugh with unholy mirth
There is no land here to hallow
Whether oak and ironwood growth
Were shaded shelter or gallows
When they fall they shall bury us both



Strokes of Loss

Ben Gordon

Hush, sweeping with the winds, on the Western end of the Pentland hills. I'm walking down an old beaten path, maintained by the treads of other hikers, runners, bikers. Deep, verdant hues mingle with yellow under dusk's coruscating skies. There is no rain today, though the earth is damp and the air feels finely poised. Coming to a halt only at the sight of grand birds which I cannot name, tearing through the crisp country air, I come across no one, worry about no one. Intermittently, tunes imposed upon me from the recesses of my mind emerge in the form of out-of-tune humming. Mostly though, I allow the breadth of silence to wrap its longing wings around me.

I recall, some months ago now, being sat on a train headed up the Eastern coast of the country, during that serene spell of the journey between Newcastle and Edinburgh, which without fail brings on a melancholy for some time unknown, a nostalgia for some lost place or moment. Staring aimlessly out of the window, watching as the borders between shore, sea and skyline faded, returned into sharp contrast and blurred once more. The languid choreography of a shifting landscape. About midway between two small North-Eastern towns, I returned my eyes to the window, fixated once more upon the world, and caught glimpses as boys battling on a football pitch turned to a kind community garden, vegetables flourishing in Summer's early evening light. Then a green, a farm perhaps. Luscious grass prop-

ping up empty space until, at the centre of this welcoming, vacuous land, a singular oak tree rose, breaking into the azure. As I began to submit to the warm seduction of sleep, frenetic thoughts settling slowly, I wondered – in that muddled state between slumber and consciousness – who planted the tree there, and why. Unsure whether the thought was comforting or disconcerting, I considered how human lives are so entangled in all we see around us. Every object, building, alleyway or tree holding some form of meaning to a life someplace else.

Walking into the early darkness, a combination of tranquillity and vulnerability leaves one at a peculiar vantage point – looking out upon distant hills, feeling at the mercy of one's surroundings yet simultaneously more at ease than you can remember feeling in weeks. Today, my body is weary and I listen to her workings, noticing how the weight in my legs challenges the spring in my step, aware of a general sense of fatigue setting in. Ambling back towards my small tent, home for the night, I stop at certain points: on the abrupt, rickety bridges, where small cracks in the fir allow shoots of light to sprout through; midway around the short loop I have walked, where there is an old youth centre – community garden still glimpsing green but the building decrepit, lost. And I am aware of a peculiar contradiction: amidst the plethora of life and creation, sullied, carved up wooden benches are interspersed haphazardly. Upon them there are memoirs to lifetimes passed by. Small strokes of loss across an ample canvas of existence.

It's hard to describe quite what I felt whilst reading these tender messages people left to mothers, brothers and grandmothers. All I can think to say is that, as I strolled aimlessly down paths lined with domineering trees, these small plaques added a weight to the walk, a weight to my thoughts. Like the feeling of a lover's reassuring palms on one's shoulders, this was a heaviness not discomfoting, but warm. I knew where this sensation was arising from, of course I did, but it still took a few moments, some more trudges through the earth, for me to realise why these benches and their adieus were resonating in my mind more firmly than usual. It was the presence, I am sure, of my grandma. My grandmother, who passed away almost a year ago to the day, while I was living abroad. Whose stone setting we were at not three weeks before.

Back at the tent, orange and blue skies spill into the reservoir, tinting

the water purple. The wind pushes subtle ripples towards the shore, the tiny waves like open mouths, uttering sounds indiscernible. A swan glides across her lake, dipping her body in, rear to the sky before coiling her head back, stretching out grandiosely. I eat a pretty miserable dinner, have a tea and prepare to sleep. Before I close my eyes, I look at the photo I took earlier in the day of a poem hanging from a tree:

‘All the noble
Sentiments of my heart.
All its most praiseworthy impulses – *I could give them*
Free rein, in the midst of
This solitary wood.’

I fall asleep, dream the soft sounds of ancient footsteps. Early Spring last year, on a bus headed to a rustic seaside hamlet in Chile. Just days after my grandma passing. Drifting gently, rocking back and forth between the shores of consciousness and the deep sea of sleep. As we rumble towards the eternal Chilean coastline, I find myself slipping deftly to someplace else, until suddenly I am next to grandma lying in bed. She lays there, perched on a cushion and I can't quite place how old she is but she seems healthy as she watches over me. Something lays in the air of this small familiar room which we are in, some warmth and a weight which to this day I have not been able to place. The image was so sharp, far less hazy than a usual dream. I have never formed a concrete belief in the spiritual, but I am sure that this dream was some sort of farewell. A farewell to grandma and her endearing, cheeky smile. To her love and deep care, her generosity and curiosity.

The discomfort and cold wriggles its way loose of my body, and I rise to the rhythms of my surroundings. When I step out of the tent, into the morning, a man is already out fishing at the reservoir, just a few metres away. I let the crispness of the air filter through my body, warm my hands with a small cup of instant coffee. Briefly chatting with the fisherman, who often comes here from the nearby village, I'm aware of the gentle force in the gaps

of silence between our words. The following hours pass slowly, packing the tent and waiting for the sun to wipe the frost away. Pausing for lunch on the walk over towards Flotterstone, just a few miles away, I jot down in my notebook a few thoughts on the difficulties I have had processing grandma's death. How to truly understand someone is gone until you are in the places you associate them with? Arriving back in the UK, seeing my family, attending the stone-setting, left me feeling more connected, but I've still found it hard at times to understand what it means to miss someone who was so important to my life, but not necessarily present on a quotidian level. Before I head off towards the bus-stop, I write that I am grateful to be feeling her presence so viscerally on this short trip.

Arriving back in the city, on the outskirts of the neighbourhoods I know well, I spot a bench looking out upon a small park. Withered, yet etched firmly into the hardened earth. I amble over, glance at the small plaque, smile curtly and take a seat. Out in the park, children scurry around their parents, an old couple hobbles down the pathway. I wait for some minutes, not feeling quite ready to leave the tranquil of this weekend, not quite ready to return to the incessant routines of everyday life. Tomorrow I'll call my dad, I think, talk to him about grandma. Until then, I'll try to observe as my thoughts flutter around her, brought on contingently by a stray reminder amidst the blur of stimuli around us. For now, I'll miss grandma this way.



Outside, we Heard a Seabird Moan

Iga Suszyńska

at least that's how it sounded,
a rough scribble
rounded at the mouth.
It made us laugh; wild currents -
in the bed you made me.
It could have been hurt or pleasure.
A perverse interlude
between wreck and debris.

You laughed, and it kills me still -
I forgot where I was.
Slammed face first in your docks
and lodged like an apple seed,
a spine stuck between covers,
bound duvets and waves.
Noise and sunlight
lost mid-window pane.



You knew the whole time.
You laid my pillows for puncture;
and watched me make tea.
I'm allergic to geese feathers and camomile -
you softened the blow but
I swell in peace.

Inside, a seabird heard you laugh.
It could have been hurt
or pleasure - trying to
press canoes from your collarbone.
I never got past the harbour, the bed.
A moan drowned out,
worn like broken silence.



Fasgadh an Rathaid

Elissa Hunter Dorans

Dh'amhairc sinn, fad às, agus iad a' nochdadh ri taobh an rathaid,
balgan-buachair concrait, a' fàs aon ma seach
air an tarraing bhon aon mhollair.
Bha iad nan seann-aghaidhean de cheàrnan, de lùban,
air am breith a' feitheamh
airson cloinne a thighinn son falach 'nan chuinnleanan;
cruachan mònach mòr ann an cloich.

Thuirte Calum rium gur iad seann deasgaichean-sgrìobhaidh
nan Ciuthach a bha ann uair.
Bho na pinn aca thàinig na mith-sgeulan meirgeach
agus cinn-naidheachd a tha fhathast ri thighinn.

Cha mhòr nach do chreid mi e cuideachd, ach -

Tha mi air fàs suas gu ìre, 's mi a' coimhead air,
am fasgadh cruaidh seo a' fagail eàrra air ar fearann
ach dh'fhàs mi ga ghràdhachadh, on taobh a-staigh
fhad 's a bhithinn a' feitheamh ri bhith air mo thoirt air falbh.

Grànnda, ach mòrail;

tha e air fàs aithnichte, blàth, dhomh.

Bidh mi ga ionndrainn nuair a thèid a chaitheamh leis an fhearann.
An deidh sin is 'na dhèidh, feumaidh sinn a plaide cheithir-cheàrnach,
an seo aig àite-breith fuar nan gaothan breacag.

Tha na malaidhean làidir ud, malaidhean fasnach,
air fàs liath, coltach rium-fhìn.

Ann an aithghearrach bidh m' aodann air a shèideadh ro mhòr,
cruaidhichte, eadar dhà lunn anns na creagaibh;
ach tha mi an dòchas, bho Phàrras,
gun coimhead mi orra, 's iad nan seasamh gun ghluasad
a' dìon nan caorach,
a' miogadaich anns gach ceithir cairteal.

Agus o Na Diathan, na cathraichean àrda;

bidh sinn gam faicinn mar bhalgan-buachair a-rithist
ann an iongantas agus amaideachd de leanabachd.

Oir tha 'toirt a chreidsinn' na thiodhlac anns na rathaidean uaigneach ud
a tha air an tarraing le teud na clàrsaich agus drabhsanach.

A' coimhead shìos bho mhullach peantaichte nan speur,
aig an aon àm a h-uile latha,

bidh sinn a' leantainn dannsa a' bhus mheatailt chuibhlichte sin
fhad 's a bhios e a' ceangal nam puingean a tha a' ruith thairis air an eilean;
reul-bhadan ùra tron fheur.



The Road's Shelter

(‘Fasgadh an Rathaid’ translated from Gaelic into English)

We watched from afar as they appeared by the road-side,
concrete mushrooms, sprouting one by one
and hatched from a single mould.

They were ancient faces
of angles and curves, born waiting
for the children to hide in their nostrils;
great peat-stacks cast in stone.

Calum told me they were the old writing desks
of the Giants that once were.

From their pens sprung the rusty folktales
and news headlines yet to come true.

I almost believed him too, but -

I have grown up watching them,
this austere shelter scarring our land
yet I grew to love it, from the inside
as I wait to be carried away.
Though it burns my eyes,
it has become known - warm - to me,
I'll miss it when it's consumed by the land.
After all, we need its four-cornered blanket
here at the cold birthplace of the pancake winds.

These strong brows of shelter
have too become grey with mine.
Someday soon my face shall be blown large,
solidified, half-submerged in the crags;
but I hope from paradise
to watch them stand unmoving;
protecting the sheep,
bleating in all four quarters.

And from the Gods, the high seats,
we see them as mushrooms again
in childlike wonder and folly.
For make-believe is a gift in these lonely roads
that are both clàrsach-plucked and sizzling.

Watching down from the sky's painted ceiling,
we trace the dance of that wheeled metal bus
as it connects the dots that snake across the island
at the same time every day,
dirt-track constellations on the grass.



Photography on pages 27, 34-39 and 71 by Alexis Buchner



Selkie

Mara Strang

“There were seal skins on the shore again,” the girl says over breakfast.

“It’s a strange little cove,” grunts the fisherman, obligingly. To him, home is aboard his boat surrounded by seabirds and writhing fish. He doesn’t taste the salt on his lips anymore; he doesn’t notice that his ears ring with the tide even in silence.

“When I gaze out to sea, it gazes back. It stares so hard I can’t look away.”

The fisherman looks up from his breakfast and frowns. Bacon fat foams on his plate as he sets it back down.

“You don’t like it here?”

The girl is silent. She frowns too.

“Your mother likes it,” the fisherman reminds her, saying the words like they might anchor her. Her mother does like it on the Island, separated from cruel words by ferries and winter storms.

“I don’t know if things are going to work out for us here.”

The room re-focused as her mother spoke. The living room wall behind her mother’s head became merely panels of wood, coats of paint and nails again.

She recognised the distant clarity in her mother's gaze as she searched the brack-en-coated hills beyond the window. The sharp film of light over her eyes was familiar; she'd said goodbye already.

They moved before the end of the week. The words that chased them away still lingered like sand under the girl's clothes.

The wind howls when the girl steps out of the fisherman's cottage after breakfast. She rocks back on her heels, smiling at the sea like they share a secret, while it spits and pounds its fists and roars. When they first arrived on the Island, she stayed inside; lying frightened on her bed in their little rented room. She listened to her mother make work calls and tried to ignore the angry crashing of the water. She often wondered why the fisherman chose to rent out the empty room in his cottage. He didn't speak to the girl or her mother much, although he cleared a space on his bookshelf for them. Her mother said he was lonely and that the white stone in his garden marked a grave. He didn't seem lonely to the girl. His silence, like hers, hinted at the presence of something other lurking beneath the surface – something that roared like the sea.

She watched the fisherman's boat bob on the waves beyond the window. It kept above the water, never dipping too low into the thundering swell, it grew smaller and smaller until only the seagulls marked its position.

She found two, the first time: grey slippery masses, lying half-in and half-out of the sea. At first, peering through the kitchen window, she hadn't realised what they were. She went out to investigate only after the rain blurred the glass. Crouched beside them, she stroked the soft mottled flesh. The lapping tide hadn't seemed quite so violent then - the sea reached out for the pelts as if it didn't want to let them go. The girl understood; they were beautiful things, spotted and shiny. *Otherworldly.*

“The only trace they left behind were their seal skins. Most of the selkies delighted in belonging to two worlds, but some were torn; desperate for the permanence of one home, one body, and one life. In their human form the selkies were just like us,

only perhaps a little fiercer – they were creatures nurtured by the sea, after all.

“What are you reading?” the fisherman asked.

The girl looked up sharply. He stood on the doormat still wearing his long oil-coat, water streamed down the thick material and dripped in a ring around his boots on the floor. She hadn’t heard the door as it thudded closed behind him. She found the book on his shelf, though she was afraid to admit it.

“I’ve read it before,” the girl explained quickly, “my mother used to read it to me.”

The fisherman didn’t reply, though he stepped out of his wet boots and eyed her uncertainly. It struck her as odd in that moment, that he spent so much time at sea, and still didn’t listen to what it was trying to tell him. He didn’t ask her to return the book, and after a few moments of silence she turned back to the page.

Before she found the seal skins, she pictured the selkies with glittering black eyes and pale slimy pelts. Now she sees them dancing beneath the weight of the water. At night, when she can’t sleep and the wind howls beyond the fisherman’s windows, she imagines the selkies calling out to one another; wailing and exulting in their eerie seal tongues.

Today as the girl edges towards the shore there are no seal-skins; the tide’s far out, leaving only dry barnacled stones.

The wind ripples her coat like she is made of water. She flattens herself onto a rock below the tideline. The longer she stays there, the more stone-like she becomes. The roaring of the sea sinks into her throat and chest echoing her pulse. She finds grief and rage, and each crash of the waves satisfies the unquiet ocean she’s kept locked

in her chest.

She sits for a long time beside the water – letting the sea carry her anger like silt and stones, thrashing it against the shore and leaving behind the little pieces she's bottled up.

Hours pass. The tide rises. She sighs, letting out a deep breath. The salt makes her skin feel tight and new, and grit crackles between her teeth. Slimy stands of seaweed make her arms buckle as she tries to rise, so slowly she slithers backwards along the rock; a creature emerging from the sea.

Getting to her feet, she smiles. She feels lighter as she walks back towards the fisherman's cottage.

In her wake, lying half-in and half-out of the sea, is a seal skin.




Traces

Douglas Crammond

The book waits where you left it,
on the worn, yellow cushion
with the dent of you still there.
Pages open, unwritten – light spills across
the spine like a hand
sketching the paper with lost conversations.

This is how we come and go –
between the sun and shade,
between the rooms we inhabit
and the ones we leave,
silent like echoes from closed doors.

The empty pages gleam with promise
of a new beginning, yet for now,
they are at rest.
The spine curls as if breathing slowly,
Lying in wait until
the right words arrive.



On the windowsill, shadows of leaves
pulse and tremble – faint, like memories
you almost forgot to let go of.
Stacked books on a low shelf
hold their place
but their pages shift in the breeze.

Beyond -
the hum of distant pasture,
not a place you've seen, but one you've felt,
a quiet stretch of thought
where all your departures
are softened by return.
Here, you linger.

The armchair glows golden in the afternoon –
it remembers your weight,
as if comfort could be something
you leave behind without losing it.

The Catch of the Century

Brooke Jessop



PETE stands alone at the edge of the harbour, facing out to the sea. The sky is fading into twilight. In the distance, a seagull squawks and the sound of gentle waves lapping against the shore echoes through the cliffs. Dressed in an old, weathered coat and wool cap, clutching a little old book, he casts his fishing rod into the open abyss.

PETE

It's me... back again. Aye, I've come doon tae the pier like I always do... waitin'. Waitin' for ye, so I can hold ye again. I'm here most days, same time, same spot—checkin' me wee book for the high tide, as if the sea might whisper somethin' I dinnae already ken. Funny, nae one else bothers settin' up here now, 'cept that daft seagull that never leaves me alone.

He chuckles to himself, then there is a pause.

Aye, I like it here, by the sea. I like that it has its secrets, coz I have mine too, and she disnae pry. Just lets me talk things through... when I can. When I come here it's like I'm feelin' everythin' and nothin' at the same time. The salt air clears me head, but it disnae stop the memories. They come rushin' in, like waves, one after the other, pullin' me back tae things I wish I could forget.

A thoughtful pause.

But I don't want to forget ye... how could I? Maybe ye never were mine... maybe I just dreamed ye up. Just a flash, a glimpse in the water, a shadow in the deep. But it's enough... enough tae keep me comin' back... even when I know ye're gone. They dinnae get it, the folk in the village... always givin' me grief. Think I'm daft. "Pete, away wi' yer stories," they say, "Give it a rest, eh?" But I say to hell wi' them all. They dinnae ken. They dinnae ken what we had, how ye made me feel—like nothin' else mattered. It was real. Rain or shine... though there's not much of the latter, I'm here. Castin' oot, hopin'. Not had much else to do since I lost her.

I know you've heard this a couple times before, sorry. But she was me everythin'... We could never have bairns, us. Just wasn't in the cards. She'd come doon tae the sea sometimes too, wishin' for somethin' tae change. I never really knew what tae say about it. There's an emptiness about that house now. Always had a bit o' emptiness if I'm honest... but we never spoke about it. We had Jasper our ol' collie. But he left me not long after as well... I could tell he couldn't live without her either.

Anyways, I cast me line, over and over, hopin' it'll reach ye. Maybe ye'll come back, tangled in the kelp, but naw... these murky waters don't give much back. Bloody hell there ye are again Mr. Seagull... takin' the mick... am glad ye find this funny... anyways... each time I come back here I think this'll be it—this'll be the day. But instead... the line snaps back and the hook catches me in the chest. Feels like it's rippin' oot me heart. I cannae breathe. It's the weight of it all—loneliness, aye—but it's more than that. It's a rejection of sort. Ye've got a proper hold on me this time, haven't ye? And by the time suns gone doon me heart's ripped straight out me body and throbbing there in me hands.

He enters a moment of deep melancholy as he stares at a nothingness in his palm. Then he hurls himself out of that dark place before it lingers for too long.

So I pack up. Pop me heart back in for another day. No luck. And I'm startin' to think... maybe it's time to let go. But if I cannae find ye... maybe it's time I joined ye... no man is an island they say but I sure do feel lonely.

Pause.

So please... will ye come back tae me? Just this once, let me prove them all wrong. That's all I ask. Then the local examiner'll take a photo and write: 'Pete McKinley Lands the Catch of the Century,' and that'll be me done. No more waitin'. No more sodding seagulls. No more... shame. But if I cannae find ye... maybe it's time I strap an anchor to me leg and let the sea take me too.

Pause.

Same time tomorrow then, Mr. Seagull?

He packs up his things and leaves. PETE EXITS.





Photographs on pages 42-47 & 78 by Ulianna Makoveeva



UNKNOWN (b. n/a),
Manzanita, Oregon,
UNTITLED, 1999,
...1 mi., blood on sand

Henry Romain

But I had slit my heel on this scallop shell, and that was what, you know... soured the whole thing, our trip to Oregon, summer '99, planned months in advance for it... was supposed to be perfect... where we went to... and—the trip we took right before—you—you—I—.

Ahem.

It cut deep, my blood striking red lightning bolts in the sand—you stood there with your open mouth, that face—you yelled, not knowing what else to do—the first thing that came to our minds then was fuck, we're far from Manzanita's only hospital, which was a mile away, down the shore—we both knew this with a look, without saying anything. The sun in the pink sky then's yellow rays radiated like a clock hung over the ocean telling all times at once, a perfect sunset. I can remember it vividly, though it's a shame that I don't exactly remember it fondly.

Your arms didn't work—I mean you had them, you tried, but—you know, the chemo, which—weakness, inevitable, the doctors said—I don't... I—I—.

I am sorry. Ahem.

There was no choice but to walk the whole way to the emergency room, about a mile down the bay, turning the whole beach into one long shiny crimson sentence's page. So much for a romantic getaway. Sometimes it is good to be closer to people, generally, I think now. Solitude is not always good.

It was a sentence which had no meaning, of course—just the sort of thing a toddler scribbles on the wall. I collapsed just before making it to the emergency room, and when I came to, you explained how when you went in to grab the nurses they had to pause their chess game to come and help me, which was a bit awkward, because, according to you, they had no board and so were playing mentally, so they had hastily written down the boardstate before they came and helped me, if it was the truth you were telling and not playing with me in my weak half-conscious state in the cot in an effort to cheer me up.

In the local news the next day which I watched half-conscious on the angled-down TV mounted to the far corner of the ICU's paperwhite ceiling with you sitting in the bedside visitor's chair, they reported on my blood, calling it a priceless artwork, "the new pride of the town." Critics and hipsters drove in from all over Oregon to see it, calling it "a masterpiece," "a bold statement which commands respect for the new generation," "deconstructivist, radical," "demanding

all real Oregonians' immediate pilgrimage," "challenging genre conventions," "grunge." The city council's art conservators put up a milelong partition of stanchions and purple velvet rope alongside my blood to keep people from entering the sand-kicking vicinity and released a public notice for the artist to please come forward, his or her work is greatly appreciated by the city, who would like to bestow upon the artist a medal of distinction for his or her talent and contribution to the cultural development of Manzanita.

Of course, I could not come forward as the artist: I was detained in medical observation and not entirely "with it," given, the exsanguination, and it is an understatement to say that I was not feeling entirely myself, let alone the fact that I still could not form coherent sentences—and if I could have spoken, I would have said that I did not care for the medal anyway: it was an accident.

The blood-soaked sand was dissipated a couple of days later by hordes of newborn turtles who hatched from their eggs and scuttled towards home in the early hours of the morning, when none of the art conservators were there to have their say about it. I didn't mind.

Manzanita's go-to local art enthusiast, Dr. Angström (who, notably, was not himself an artist), was featured on the news that same morning saying between disgruntled puffs of a Meerschaum eagleclaw pipe, "I hope they choke on bottle caps. These animals don't seem to have any respect for the hard work of human artists. I'd like to see a turtle try and make a piece of art. They just hatched from those damn shells and left all the bits strewn over the beach. Agh. Ridiculous. Not only have they destroyed this town's best public art piece in decades, but they've littered their eggshells all over—someone could step and cut their foot on one if they aren't careful, you know. PETA, I'm talking to you: when will you put out little trash bins so that these stupid animals can dispose of their biowaste?"

When I had recovered to the point of being able to form coherent sentences again, I asked you to go back and look for the sharp shell whose thin rim caused all this.

It wasn't hard to find: you just followed the blood all the way back to where

it began and snuck under the partition when the critics and art conservators weren't looking, came back as I was eating microwaved mac and cheese. You said my heel's bandage bled through again, I said that I didn't care, I knew that already, could you just give it to me?

You pulled it out of your pocket. I saw that it was only half a shell that I'd slit my heel on the broken edge of, which still had my blood on it, and I'm sure would have fetched a pretty price at auction if seen by those art people.

And so this shell is what I hold when I want to think of you, the last thing that you gave me that I know for sure that you touched, I touch it now and think of you, now that you are gone. It never leaves my good wool coat's breast pocket.

But I can't help recalling this whole damned thing when I touch it either—and it's because of this that I will never go to Oregon again, or any beach, probably—and I cannot stand to hear anyone talk about art at all anymore, or sunsets—from now on I will prefer colder, rainier places like this that keep me inside, in chairs, gazing out windows through my reflection as the rain drums against the glass, trying to remember the years we spent together but helplessly thinking of this terrible memory we shared, the dense clouds out there nearly black, like the sun forgot to come out.





Photography by Ailish Wade

My Siren-Mackerel

Isla Leavley

My siren turned out to be a mackerel.
From a distance I had watched her
swish those sea foam skirts,

glisten in a silver sheen,
her plump, trouty lips
entrancing me.

She danced a tide-tossed waltz,
scales glinting like new pennies.
Those sleek fins, that coral flesh,

deliciously soft.
She was just begging
for a fishhook pierce.

And oh, the thrill of the chase!
As she eluded my net,
in the folds of the waves.

But when she flopped on deck,
I gagged at the stench of the sea.
The putrid cling of an algae frock

the pearl-white eyes sunken in.
She lay blank-faced and gulping,
all rough scales and gasping gills.

Her throat was brine-packed
and she was too slippery to keep still.
No good for sex.

So, I gutted her on a bed of ice,
belly up, fins sliced,
filleted for fish steaks.

Oil slicked, with skin crisp,
I salted the cockles of her heart,
shucked and pierced those pearly eyes,

added lemon wedges and cream,
sage, pepper, dill,
and served her up with a nice Chablis.



Photography by Grace Harvey-Dunbavin

Got Rid of Nothing

Elizabeth Througenil

Going on a rugged drive overnight, now.
Got oats (rolled) for dealing with occasional narcissism.
Grabbing onto recurring dreams, often nightmares.
Girl's ointment resurrects my dreary open nerves.
God ordered ransom down on Nebraska.
Gathering orchids 'round downtown, owing to nobody.
Grass odours ringing at my door, oh what now?
Guitars all over my rug, dreading the outcome of the nation.

There are Moments of Quiet

Holly Chan

when the cold sinks its teeth
into the marrow of your being.
When your skin itches with guilt
that scrapes at your soul.
When the grief tightens its fist
and kneads your heart like clay.

A reminder that the sea sighs into the night.
What-ifs echo like the cries of gulls,
regrets catch like seaweed around ankles,
yanking you down into this churn of sorrows.
Who can hear the murmurs
of your shivering heart over
the weight of our fears,
the brunt of our failings,
the drift of the world?
For drowning is a silent affair
compared to the crash
of wave against wave against rocks.

A reminder that the lost drift on gentler waves.
You are not an island to be lashed at
just for reaching your arms out toward the light.
You are but a tributary,
that is all you need to be.
I know the contours of your soul,
that you cry for your mother,
clinging to her dampening image.
Let me rinse saltwater from your head,
lay a blanket across your shoulders,
and kiss your cheeks dry,
while I tell you I miss mine too.
But it does not do to dwell on what has passed.

Should you find yourself bereft of tenderness,
I remind you that love returns like the shore.
Patiently assertive, wildly sprawling,
sometimes retreating, always arriving
at your feet with a hush.
Come home to yourself with idle persistence,
if that is all you can bear for the time being.

Come up for air.



Photography by Gintare Kulyte

Commensalia

Jed Hill

The world stares at me from behind this window, and I ignore it. Sometimes I feel as if time takes the shape of the person it deludes. Ten past seven in the morning. I brush my teeth and stoke the fire. I put a clean pot on the stove. Ten past seven in the morning is *different* now. Hundreds of patient lights are waiting on the cold horizon. Ten past seven in the morning and the men are already shouting faintly down below, their voices interfered by their hoods and the loud rain. At eight I open the house. At eight twenty the landlord will come down and have his breakfast and then help me with the soup. Steam rises from the pot, and with it, a dark, almost sensual, smell overflows into the cabin. I carefully light the lamp hanging beside the window. A great, fancy upholstered chair stands mightily in the orange glow. I pull out beside it a short wooden tray table, on which I balance my mug of fresh, scalding coffee.

Looking around, one notices the landlord's cabin is nothing but a curious collection of intricate, unnecessarily detailed things. My old handmade mug, a deep green ceramic, etched with warm red triangulations. The chest of winter equipment, painted so freely with flowers and birds, a lost artefact of some tropical origin. *Afunctionalism*, I thought to myself. I was satisfied to see the old bookshelf we picked up a while ago finally populated with something other than the landlord's personal stash, after a large box of books was brought to the cabin last week. I walked over and picked one of them out to read with my coffee.

The first to arrive at the house was a man with a new face. He was young, but

still appeared a few years older than me. He had injured himself down at the dock: a small cut on his hand. The other men must have told him he would get help here. I sat him down, cleaned the wound with antiseptic and tied on a bandage. Except for the embarrassed, apologetic phrases he uttered while I helped him, he was rather quiet, and seemed unsure of his surroundings and his place in them. I served him some coffee to help calm him down and told him to come back when he was hungry.

“The owner will give you food. All he asks is that you pay what you can,” I told him. He thanked me after gulping down the hot coffee, and rushed back down to his job.

A short while later, the landlord descended from his bedroom. His neat, white beard paired well with his unaged face, and was always the first thing I noticed about him. He took a seat at the wooden table, and I brought over bowls of cinnamon oatmeal. Beyond the window opposite the table, the world turned and twisted mechanically: a sophisticated network of yelling, siren sounds and ship horns, a dominion that stretched over the freezing water to the throbbing hands on the dock. The men—lifting, verifying, inspecting, bargaining, laughing—oil the machine. These fleeting residents, who eventually return to the cold water themselves, will soon require sustenance to heat and oil their bellies and bones.

For the next few hours, we washed and peeled the potatoes, chopped boards of leeks, and lit fires under the pots. The vegetables boiled until they could be mixed into a creamy, velvet soup, at which point the landlord seasoned each pot with salt, rosemary, and some butter. I lumbered the case of bowls and spoons from downstairs into the kitchen, and the landlord put on a pot of tea for us while we waited for the waves of cold, hungry men. In this free moment I thought about time again. I wondered when it would visit the landlord, inveigle him into removing me from his basement, and free up space in the cabin for a lover. Or perhaps time would appear before me, to convince me of my recovery and shake me from this womb.

Eventually through the window I watched the depleted men ascend from the

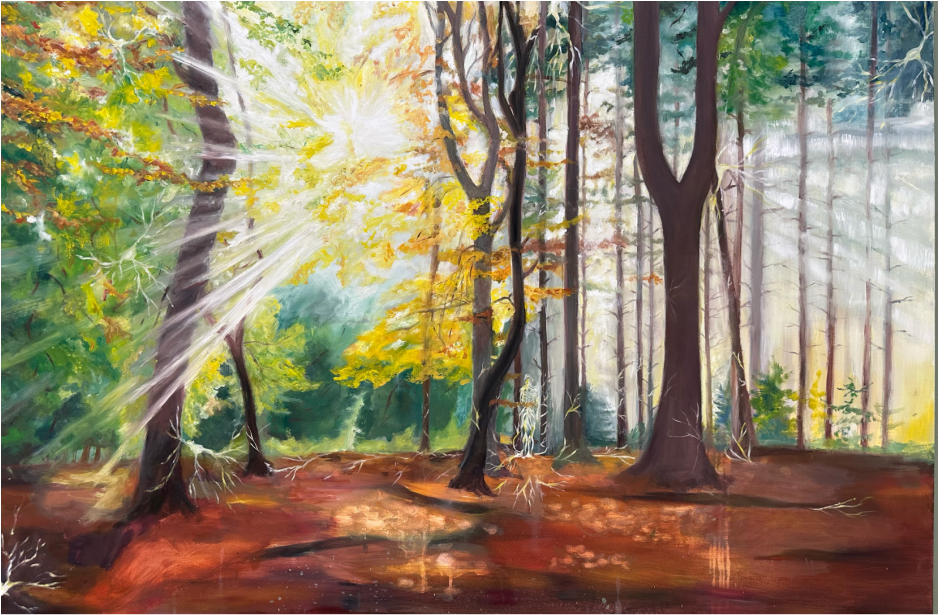
harbour up the road, at the top of which stood the cabin. The landlord jumped from his armchair. This brisk motion worked against his restful manner, and betrayed an alacrity to welcome his guests. We ladled bowls of the hot soup and placed them into the pale, greasy hands of the visitors. Some quietly took their bowls and plonked a few coins onto the table, while the familiar faces had long conversations with the landlord. One of the men deposited a crate onto the table filled with beautiful, fragile lanterns. It had been left behind the previous evening, he told the landlord. A few of the men had gotten to know me, as well. I thanked one of them in particular: a large, middle-aged crane operator who was responsible for all the new books on the shelf.

As the men packed themselves tightly in the cabin to eat and rest and laugh, I decided to step out for a few moments into the cold. Standing there, I felt even more strongly that I was getting better. A crepuscular sky had broken above the sea. For the first time since the landlord took me in, I began thinking of home. I missed our house, our voices entangled in one another's, the hard days... I realised now that I missed it all. For a moment, I wished for time to undo itself, to somehow unfold this halfway-voyage I had been living across its crease. With this ache restored in me, I almost felt like a full, healthy person again. I welcome this discomfort which slowly nestles in my soul. I think of the cabin and the landlord, vowing to use the rest of my stay, however long it may be, to repay my debts. At this hour the port shines wonderfully in the valley, its light pulsing far across the vast, blue mirror.



Artwork by Cristi Watson





Artwork by Ione Jenkins

The Dream

Amelia Moore

In an age of accepting reality and moving on, we're mourners,
Forced to stop and step back into something more benignly-felt.

When I wake it's like currents are hitting me,
Splashing and milky like smoke, wispy and wild like ghosts,
Old memories, cranberry-coloured and curdled,
Toss me rumpled and dried-out into deference,
Duping me into believing that I've been a realist all along.

We arrive eagerly, shouts throbbing our throats,
They've put us in winter. In front of hills,
Taller than what we can see, and we sled down them,
And the trees are all purple or pink, and we eat,
Chocolate cherries and cups of gold wine in front of a fireplace,
Time twining through our hair, smelling like
my stuffed animal from when I was nine.

They give me a camera, I take photos of the trees,
I bend and wobble into rubber, I am easy, eager,
Saying 'please, let me keep this' over and over again,

But the dream drops slowly, murky before my eyes,
The soft rose-tint of joy, the caught chill of winter.
It drops away quickly, deadened age-old sense of hope,
my split condition of want slitting me down the middle—
I wake, haunted.

Jagged Peaks, and the Valley's Abyss

Taylor Campbell

Before leaving home, I resented the uniform council houses – neat and square like veneers. I worked in a shopping centre which smelled like buttered corn and heat. And I go on about jagged peaks, and the valley's abyss. Pregnant with ketamine addiction and moving on. I watched people leaving from my bedroom window, looking out onto the railway below. I tell boys at parties that there are two kinds of people in this city – people who are from estates and people who are from estates. And I remember myself in girls' bathroom Epitaph: "Taylor's a whore." There even still.

The way I describe it to other people isn't really how it is. Or isn't only how it is. It's called Hebden, which means 'Bramble Rose Valley', and it's just like that. Murky, but sort of precious. We have these buildings called over-under dwellings, which are houses overlapping on top of each other, and that's how living there feels. Not enough space, too many people who know you. You can't do anything; run across the road, smoke a cigarette; without someone telling your parents. Someone left all these sweet little miniatures of fairies in the woods behind my house. I wouldn't tell anyone here about these parts of home, because I don't want anyone calling it nice. I would rather tell them about the time I found the white arm of a lamb on the forest floor, next to a symbol drawn on a stone.

In my restless dreams, I am reminded why I left home. I am eleven again; my hair stands on end as I watch a boy in my year get hit so hard I think he might die. Later on, he walks down the hallway as my classmates, even the kind ones, pretend to be sick in their empty hands.

I dream of Lily, her slender hands clapping in my face to give me a fright, my books falling to the floor. Her beautiful form, aptly named, lily-white skin and blood red mouth. The voices of boys I've known all my life, Lucas, Lachlan, telling me to kill myself. They call me a whore as I push them back, try to get through. I never went back to school after that. They called me a school refuser, so my parents got into trouble, and my dad sat me down at the dinner table and asked me if I ever thought about hurting myself. All these moments, in the past, but not forgotten.

Where I am now is a haunt with high ceilings, I think someone once died in the bathroom. My flatmate sleeps in my room sometimes and one night we thought someone was standing at the foot of the bed, watching us. We keep the doors open. I see the crags of Arthur's Seat from my window, the thick fog which sinks down outside. You never forget that the ocean is nearby, the colours of the city, like sea glass. But, somehow, when you reach the shore, it's still a shock to see the buildings fall away into sand. It's only for that first second of looking at the Atlantic from Portobello, that Edinburgh ever seems small to me. Even in this glut of loveliness, I sometimes miss the rural dark. The

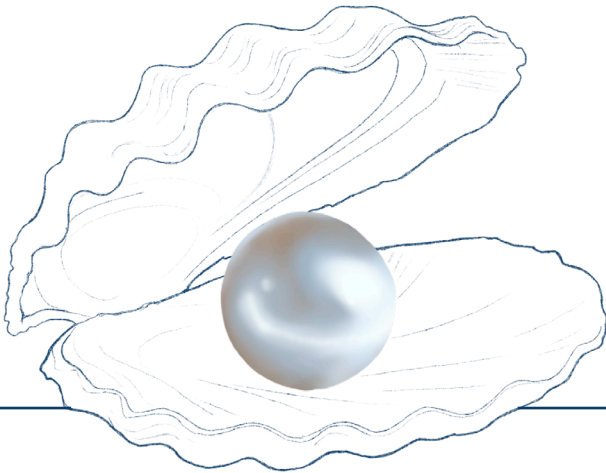
blackened corners, the muddy ground. The houses that can't compete with the hills that rise around them. I thought, and I still sometimes think, that I might become an Edinburgh woman. Tall, like the tenements, warm, like candlelight. But, as they say, "wherever you go, there you are."

I can't blame Hebden Bridge for the person that I am anymore, because bad things can happen anywhere. In the middle of my second semester at university, I was sexually assaulted. I remember we had these automatic lights which switched off after they hadn't sensed movement for a while. Rotten lights coming through the doorway's narrow slit in the distance. The yellowish colour was something familiar and humanoid, like being in the body of something alive. I remember how I went limp and waited for the darkness to return. I never told anyone about that night.

My life now reminds me of the instrumental part of Angeles by Elliott Smith. The movement of his fingers across the empty belly of his acoustic guitar, strumming hunger, the hope of being full. Alone in the city which holds everyone I have chosen to know, where the trees are as blue and delicate as veins, the thin mist like the skin of our wrists, I allow myself to be homesick.

I think what I have found, is that I carry Hebden, and all it put inside me. Now, I am stepping off a northern rail train, pulling into the station where nobody ever seemed to arrive. I notice how quiet it is. I smell the firs, the rain which comes down heavier here than anywhere else. I walk my dog, getting old now, in the same forest where I found the dismembered lamb. It's also the forest where I had my first real kiss. With a strong cup of tea, I read a book in the crook of the sofa. I walk into the moorlands, looking over the edge from the crest where purple heather grows. I look into the Pennines, and they look into me. Jagged peaks, and the valley's abyss.





Perlas ng Silanganan

Bea Foz-Asuncion

Pearl of the Orient Seas,
Nestled in the harbour of far east.
Boundless home, evergreen
Sun caressed sands and nipa leaves.
Tempest winds dance to the beat of rain,
Mother's piercing roots of Cagayan
Tremble and shiver beneath western soil
It is hot and the Manila concrete burns bare skin.
Storm strikes land from sky,
Bolt, it says, run, as santan red spews.
I am the volcano
whose sorrow burns when it grieves.
Dear home of warm waters, blue skies, and great maya birds,
How do I stay when it is here that I bleed?

Distances

Adam Blair

Here is the pen, nestled like a nervous limb,
lodged between the creases of my index and thumb
alive with damp placeless patches of ink
jointless and blinking rising and sinking
in the miniature contortions of my minor commotions,
carving silent spaces on the sagging white page
like a stick through a soggy sheet of snow.

To walk with you (I'm reminded by your drawing
perched atop my bookstack)
is to birth something unknown
in the mist of our sweeping feet,
in the birdsong breath of our lips parsed and pulsing,
in our drooping hair dense and dancing
in the gentle mood of moments of wind
and the muted moaning of traffic and light.

A lake in its reflections holds our imaginations:
sunset siblings laughing on the decking,
moon and sun crossing the border of each other,
fingers twining the trellis of fingers,
tunnels of tree, estates of cloud,
a castle, a sundial, a red scarf, a shroud.

I have just spoken with you on the faraway phone
as my room hosts the winter looking for rest
and the memory of your close heavy warmth
presses on the threshold of my coughing chest...
Oh! Where are we going? Where do we play?
Between what walls can we find our stay?
I have nothing for you but that which I can't say...

Against the window, snow-speckled leaves seep
through shifting airs. The space between us still
abounds with something bountifully sufficient.
I retreat to the linen, and the book you lent me,
and, levered steady like a gauge,
my fingertip traces the lines you've drawn
under the words: your silent sketches
on the boundless page.



Artwork by Ysobel Gouriet



Helen at Wapping

Sam Stevens



She nimbly foots the flags,
filth-feathered, salt-stung
as if they were her beachside stone
or the old, cold floor of home.

It is low tide, and the first wash
paints rock stanzas of steps,
stickies them with sewer mud.

He hangs there, creel-cased.

She recalls

a dark splinter in a bayside view,
and when she came closer his coat would sway
and bare his treasured chest;

up close, a wide murderer's grin,
a smile of coins and rings,
collars to clutch and
eyes glittered with sand.

He's been in there three tides now.

His fingernail

tumbles like a petal; kisses
her leg on the way down.

Quite dead, very dead;

barely him, but unmistakable.

Inside her something slips

its moorings, sailing into
that fathomless ocean.

Tomorrow, she begins the long haul home.

No masts stray the horizon. Nothing stays

but seagulls and stones,
and the sand, plucked free of shells.



Bà Nội

Trần Tâm Nhi

Monarch butterflies migrate annually from their breeding grounds in Canada and America to their hibernation grounds in Mexico. Because of their short life spans, it takes approximately three generations to complete this journey. The first generation took flight, never to reap the benefit of their journey. I told this story many times during the summer when I worked at a zoo in Winnipeg, Canada.

My migration journey also started three generations ago.

My grandma was born in a Vietnam that doesn't exist anymore, in a town that none of us could name and point to on a map. She was the youngest daughter of a Mandarin teacher who struggled to work during French colonial rule. That is all I know about the first 20 years of her life. During the Vietnam War, facing poverty, she took my two eldest aunts, one still in the womb and with my grandpa, headed out to the sea.

The people of Vietnam live on the sea. In Vietnamese folklore, we were born from an egg birth by the goddess of the ocean. We worship the water, and in turn, it provides an abundance on which we nourish ourselves. Our history engulfs us like a storm in the middle of the ocean, and many lives lie restless on the bottom of it.

On her dying bed, my dad recalled that my grandma had called out a whaleboat...

Rumours about the whaleboat have been circulating in my grandma's village for a while. If you take your fishing boat out at night and find the whaleboat, it will open up its mouth and carry you to the South, where there is plenty of land to cultivate and food to feed your children. Struggling with life and raging wars, my grandma took a fishing boat and headed to sea without a single guarantee that they wouldn't all die by the time day was gone, on the bottom of the sea floor. They paddled for half a day under the night, and by sunrise, they found what they had come out for. An American Navy ship was enormous compared to their humble fishing boat. As the back of the ship lowered down and slapped down on the water to allow them to board, it almost knocked their boat over. My grandpa held on to my grandma, and they held their young daughter in between them and braced for the impact of the water.

In total, my grandparents left behind the following: two living parents, two dead parents lying in an unmarked grave, four siblings (one has never been found), six nieces, two nephews, and 700 years of genealogy. In total, her descendants now live in fourteen different countries, and three different continents.

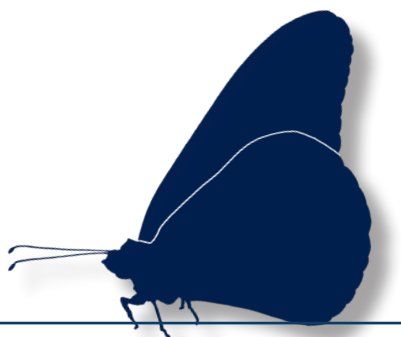
‘Kỳ thực trên mặt đất vốn làm gì có đường. Người ta đi mãi thì thành đường thôi.’ Here’s a famous quote from Lỗ Tấn, a Vietnamese writer, which roughly translates to, ‘In fact, there are no paths on the ground; it’s because people keep walking; that’s why we have a path.’ I thought about this quote a lot while I was stuck in Scotland when my grandma died this summer.

My grandma took the first step on a migration path that has lasted three generations. I wonder if she predicted when she first took flight that this was where I’d land. Am I even supposed to know where to land, is this migration ingrained into my DNA like monarch butterflies? How many more generations until we reach our destination?

The monarch butterflies that fly south will never get back to the north. Only the future can visit the past.

When can I write another story that doesn’t revolve around the sea? Every story written down creates an infinite thread; every thread is another story of division. Why did you call for the whaleboat... hadn’t we got off? Has war ended, if my lungs are filled with salty water?

The last monarch survived and landed on a branch already filled with ghosts.



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