



THE HIGHWAY PEGASUS

Illustrated Poems

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*Illustrations appear on pages 7, 35, 48, 57, 63, and 70.

Introduction

Before I learned to write and to paint, I wanted to be an entomologist, and spent most of my free time hunting for insects—you will find echoes of those encounters in this book in poems like Orchid Mantis, and others. Of course, I learned the sometimes-heartbreaking lesson of life—how to preserve it—in jar, pencil case. I remember leaning over the windowsill of my bedroom with a scrap of paper pinned beneath my pencil, writing a poem to a dead caterpillar. When I showed it to my dad, he remarked: *that is a good way to deal with sorrow*. I kept writing. I watched a Garden Tiger Moth emerge from its cocoon, a red surprise, only to be stung with grief when one of its wings tore upon exit. I helped the tiger into a nearby bush and watched over it in the night. I kept writing. I didn't know that writing was the only thing that could prepare me for what was to come.

I would wake up at a traffic intersection in the night many years later. I had been driving for many days, lost, no cell, just some spare change, trying to make it to my destination—a place I had never been, with no map. I was writing at stoplights, writing at cafés (after bathing in their sinks), somehow writing, despite a dire situation—or because of it. I wasn't terrified only because I was inspired, and that was life, I mean life-giving. The words rushed. I pinned only a fraction down to paper. I shudder to think what those days would have been like without poetry. I wondered where the poetry came from. Eventually, I would find my way to my destination, but it didn't matter because I had already made it—made a poem that would begin “Sick off the flip of a raggedy runaway ship...” I was.

At that time, my self was already splitting, it had been for years. So, I seriously entertained the possibility that these poems were messages from something...else. Sometimes, I would just hover my fingers over a keyboard like a Ouija board and wait for something to happen. I did not know how I formed words without looking, without thinking. It was nice to believe in something, anyway, and isn't it great that God loves poetry?

The truth is that I didn't know who I was. It was me writing the whole time, it always had been, but I was lost, more lost than a week driving around California looking for a house. I was lost to myself. My voice was drowned in other voices—violating, and deceptively kind. The deception was that they were even allowed in my head to begin with. I made excuses for them—everyone always wants to know if the voices tell you to kill people. If mine made me laugh, was I normal? I was diagnosed with a severe psychiatric illness not long after I woke up at the intersection between my life before and my life now. I was afraid that the medication would take the single best thing in my life away—art, poetry, which seemed inextricably linked to my condition. The voices disappeared, but a deadening silence took their place. Art as I knew it, had left me.

I stopped making art because I was compelled to, but eventually I learned how to make art the way I imagined most people do. It was not the same. Images and words did not spill from my brain like an oil leak, but the ducks kept their feathers clean. My mind became slow and predictable. I had to relearn art with a deliberate and clumsy faculty instead of one that raged. I can say the poems that I wrote in this book came from me, not the people that illness wrought in me. Yes, sometimes it still feels like there is a mysterious force dictating the words, but that

force is just a part of me that stays hidden in the day-to-day coming and goings. We are still getting acquainted.

Beauty is redemptive. When I started out painting, my works were odd and messy, not beautiful. Yet the artwork I admired had the quality of being visually stunning, delicate, resplendent. I grappled with the discrepancy between these two poles—the art I made versus the art I liked. It took me years to bow to the reality that I was not there yet. My art was ugly. It needn't have taken years, but self-deception has been an enemy of my creative process since the beginning. The deception typically glosses over the flaws and tells me how great everything is. The deception champions only the work that feels within my reach and rejects the errant masterpiece. It can be an advantage, when you need the will to keep at art despite obstacles, but eventually it becomes a real nuisance. I think you might also call it Ego, but I prefer self-deception. While self-deception has its uses, there is an accomplice that is completely bad: low standards. I have been limited by what I imagined possible, and too easily impressed by my slightest achievement. Learning to ask the next question, and the next, is vital. Sometimes what is possible is something you can't see yet, because it has never existed ever before, and that is what you should aim for.

Many of the poems in this book were completely reimagined from a prior identity. Others were the estranged cousins of great poems, ones I was reading at the time. When it comes to inspiration, I really feel that these poems were influenced by every poem I have ever read, but Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens made a big impression on me. As I wrote, I found many lines surface that felt like memories. I had to stop to ask myself if these were direct quotes from other poets that were living inside me and if I was about to plagiarize! (Please find me and tell me if I have and accept my sincere apology). Often, they were distortions, and I included them. I have failed to truly “understand” most poems I have ever read, but some things reverberate beyond understanding.

My proto inspiration, and the reason I decided to pair painting with writing, Clive Barker, says he wrote his Abarat series by hand first (books four and five topped over 100,000 words!) While I admire his illustrations—which aren't really illustrations but stand-alone works of fine art that happen to go with books, and try here to achieve something similar, I made the transition from writing by hand to writing directly on the computer before this project began. When writing on the computer, it is simple to shift, erase, redesign a poem, which is why I prefer it to writing by hand. Which is not to say I have not done the latter, messily, with many smudge marks and strike outs, but never as well as smoothly as on the computer. I learned through the process of writing this manuscript that my mind thinks backwards when putting words down, so I had to flip the sequence of many poems, and the computer makes that easy. I have also burned poetry into wood and am researching ways to paint poetry for the next step in my evolution, but these may begin on the computer as well.

Some funny hang ups happen when you are learning to write poetry—did I mention I'm learning? Yes, I'm pretty new to it, and this is the first collection I've put together. At times, I worried that I was not being loyal to the facts—as if there was an invisible judge with gavel decrying my lies. Many times, I had to remind myself that in a poem anything could happen and

should. Sometimes real life does not write real, and who says the speaker in the poem is me anyway? I went out of my way to try including speakers who were not me. I learned to recognize the pedantic plodding of my own style, and to break it. I often say too much in a first draft. I learned to hold the poem up to the light in different weather. I whittled the bark and carved the core.

A small selection of images accompanies these poems. Writing and painting are compatible as two outlets of a singular creative process. Their differences came as a relief during this project. When painting, the mind can roam freely (so long as negativity is kept in check) but in writing, thoughts must be aligned with the task. When I felt that my mind couldn't take any more writing, I painted. Both arts are symbolic. You can think of symbols as standing in for the real thing—the letters s-u-n standing in for that fiery ball in the sky, but a painting of the sun is a symbol too, like a pictograph. The word evokes a mental image in the reader, drawing from the compendium of the mind's suns, while a painting superimposes itself over the mental schema for sun, replenishing the compendium. This project was a process of extraction and expansion. The wonderful thing about a painting is that it is priceless in the same way a poem is worth nothing.

It is strange thinking of people reading these poems. I mentally go over my words, wondering what I said, and if maybe I should have said less. I wonder why anyone would want to read some of these poems—maybe they are a little too personal, a little too ugly? I can't say that I wrote for an audience. They are devoid of comforting quips, useful advice, and if they are inspiring, only indirectly so.

On that harrowing note, I would like to add that I've been bored most of my life, because I know you are getting a little bored by this introduction by now. I've heard it said that only boring people are bored. I will not throw a similar barb at the easily entertained. The few things I have enjoyed doing in my adult life I have enjoyed with a passion: writing, painting, and rock climbing. These three activities allow you to get outside yourself, to make your own way, and they inform each other in interesting ways. If a mountain is an upward climb, a poem is a decent, a white page free fall.

Under cling, mantle, toe hook, smear, high step, pinch, hip shift. I have these techniques to navigate the cliff's unique topography. Rhyme, meter, metaphor, anaphora, personification, slant. I have these techniques to disrupt the white silence, that is every silence, that is, we've been practicing for this our whole life, since the time we were apes taken to the trees, since the birth cry. The first time I watched someone rock climb a roof, I said, if I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't have believed it was possible. I don't remember the first poem I heard, so ubiquitous poetry is, but I can tell you I was hooked. While I momentarily envy great poetry, I am also assured of our capabilities in the same way the roof climber expands the definition of human possibility, and so, a part of that definition, I started to climb, to write. You bring a poem to a roof climb.

Jug, crimp, pocket. You answer with: footwork, hips, hang, lock off, hold. The language of movement bearing you safely up the cliffside, each change born out of a need divined by a rock, your granular teacher. What of the poet? how do they slow the decent, how do they stop the reader? As long as someone is listening, you are safe, you are buoyed, so what do you say in the space of a page, a white flag? What will you surrender?

Irony, double entendre, allegory.

Turn the page.

I hope you don't come alone. I hope you bring other climbers with you— a spotter, a belayer. Do they believe in you? They must. They offer protection, encouragement, camaraderie.

The poet comes alone in the company of a reader, following the tracks left by the poet. Readers offer insight, patience, association.

The holds are grasped, word by word, edging their way narrowly to victory down narrow lines of a precipice of an exposed drop. ---Readers, climbers, they catch you, feed you a rope of vital connection. You will need them unless you prefer to free solo like Emily Dickinson at her window, call her the Alex Honold of poetry.

What happens when you fall? They catch you. When they don't catch you? When you climb alone? It is to risk death. Some do this. Climbers die in shock trauma. Poetic death is an unopened journal, the suffocating press of bound pages yellowed and brittle from age. They would disintegrate before slitting a bitter papercut.

You learn to move your body in a new way when you climb. When you write poetry, none of the laws that govern day to day communication will apply. Clarity, conformity, cliché, body language...Dynamic movement, leaving the wall--leaving the page, returning, not falling, but leaping, sometimes falling (to the last anchor). Always, bringing your reader with—a burden? You need them, like a soft catch. Of course, there's always those climbs when a crash pad in the forest will be best.

The wall is indifferent, silence is indifferent. Struggle. You will leave no sign of this, though, not on the rock, and not in the finished poem. Unless maybe you do—faint chalk marks powdering the holds you tried and those of others, caking on the duplicitous crux, eraser marks. Evidence. The scabbled traces will show the way for the newcomer. Bolts rigged in the rock to sow a rope through with the surety of a poetic form laid out long before you. Unless you are placing your own cams on a multi-pitch poem. Sometimes you must mark your own way, and take a fall or two to see if the new route holds.

Now, the cliff hanger.

I

Expectations

There is a tilt
Upon which expectations sit

And softly angle
To the deep,

Where I am borne
Slowly dangling,

My feet
Like pendulums
Before the plunge.

Watching abstractions ripple
Over the still surface.

See mist obscure, and clouds reflect.
Fish emerge, and water immerse.

This is a record of a movement.

Let the water barely touch your face.



A Blue-Lipped Poem

Your leavened voice bread-soft
Blue as air, cold as char

Whispers in the dark
The Black utters
The White shutters

Your livid mouth to mine
Shunting air to the wound

The sound surprise makes
When you are found

Then the way your throat aches
When the first word escapes

Batter My Art, Multiversal God

Batter My Art, Multiversal God!

Praying to you, I pray to myself.

Sparks from our heels, are we awed?

Too easily, thing-in-itself.

Intone in toques. Tell me secrets.

But destroy this art! Until uni verses fragment

And words dissociate departing like egrets.

Make This my Holy Sacrament!

You fail me, Creator.

You present me perfect pictures

In pretty-patterned-words,

When I ask for mystic scripture.

I implore you for surpassing —vastness— of vision!

All you say is simply: look, the Son has risen.

Bitten

are your words.
They bleed as they are said.
Reasons—

are lesions to you.
With words so soft

and teeth that sharp,

you salivate ethyl acetate.
You taxidermy *I love you*, and *I'm sorry*.

When your white bite precipice is bared,
No word is spared.

Suicide mouth—
sluiceway of self-hatred.

Your words are no good.
Once spoken—
now dead.

Ripped from your lips like tape,
You cannot make a bandage of them
Or spirit them away.
The best you can do,

Is to bury them
under the yellow willow
with aspirin leaves.

Periods will seed
Flowers will shoot up
schools.

Blood-covered Moon

Radio lips spit static licks

I'm a bride inside
your veiled threat,

 Peering through metal stitches
Your--
Smile like nails

Glare your
Seventies stare

I am a
Paper cut

Moonrise above
and wise to it

 This hazy heat
 leaks over
 It is a blood

moon covered

Arresting

Look at how my fingerprints identify me
See how my crime is all over this, and bloody
Conspicuous, copious, see how I hide nothing

I put my hands where you can see them now
I do not reach them over counters now
I keep talking to assuage suspicions now

He said He said He said break out of your shell
Now I ask just one of them to break me from this cell
But no. Well, it is just as well, just as well.

Now a limp cigarette leaves traces
Where a brittle smile once crushingly tasted
A kiss of life. Facsimiled smiles will be lambasted

We want the truth, the proof, we ask you to swear
Arrest the artists, attest to the soothsayer
Danger is no plainer painter than in plein air

I admit, I was not used to being the dangerous one
Be careful how you paint the surface, scum—ble
He said life is all about appearance and so is love—ly

With each press of red finger into canvas, an admission
Not of guilt—of existence. This art is an affirmation
Not contrition but an unconditional kind of composition

I gained my composure. I reached my hand toward a chink of blue
And wrapped the wood in a dirty shirt until it tugged loose
And in that shifting sea of favor, felt there was something to hold on to.

The Rendering

Stationed in the periphery of our apartment I painted myself into a room on fire
each brush stroke stoked the sun of fire.

There was the desire that consumed if not consummated.
There was the desire that distance grew for the love of fire.

I summoned a watery void, did not divide the sky with nothings.
These doublets expose a rending—I rendered a way to rise above fire

I hunched in arch, burning, as source trickled out into a mediating sea.
I watched him ebb, holding a sun's vitality in my chest. I could not outrun fire.

I should leave this spot. I crouched in the apartment door. *He might walk through.*
To temper the flames, I painted a tempest and spoke nothing of fire.

I moved out & took the painting with me,
painting over the doorway behind me. I was done with fire.

I wish I could see that painting just once more, but not even a photograph survives, only flames.
My signature is blacked in red. I wouldn't touch you with gloves, fire.

Self-Portrait as Unnamed Woman, Pompeii 79 AD

One small cry

awakens a cinder cone of soul.

World pours over. I'm a volcano, blasting again.

In landscapes, collective memories passing.

Pompeii's burning.

Fires in our eyes flashing again

Preserved in volcanic ash—

a pigmented smile broke the crust,
for you were born—of Vesuvius.

Laughing and crying,

sonus anima vita, resounds as if all the

broken

pottery

came

crashing

again.

Escape poured out the door in waves of galore, I stayed my words no more.

Only to return

To be beside your silent door waiting for fire

to find us. Into the nursery I came dashing again.

But into my mind, I could not take you.

(Hiding beneath the table from rubble as trouble fell.)

And you

fell

over,

and

over.

In temple enclosures, your eyes of burning umber

downcasting, again.

They found a mosaic

of nameless woman

set in dark

and gilded tiles
among the ruins of Pompeii.

I am unnamed woman.

Love erupts, we never know when. Ours is everlasting,
again and again.

Turpentine Smile

as I draw
a smile from
your painted
face pressing lines
your
lips run
down my painted
thumb as I
trace
You erase
into canvas
this will be
the very last
will be the last
time I
brush
you aside
That I let
you
linger on an
idle rigger
I wear your
color under
my fingers
and I don't
mind
turpentine
would be
kinder
than outlines
to define you

Model Homes

i will feed you the
glass grapes
they love to
display
and say
we will someday
someday live here

Penchant

... for aberrance and bespoke poetry,
I say, feeling I have missed the joke.

Adamant now, *I have a penchant for*
these. The sight of his sly smile catches

me. He goes, Hey! That's my word! Not that you
stole it, just that *I say that all the time...*

So, we silently counted all the ways
we were becoming each other. He says

he is five of his closest friends, sanely.
To which I replied, I was made up of

him, mainly. If a penchant was a pendant,
it would be the one I never take off.

If penchant were a person, it would be
a version you become through years of

steady meditations on appearances
you know better than your own... so what are

his proclivities? Despite our similarities
I do not know his penchants. I cannot

even remember him mention the word
before I stole it. If penchant were a

hole, it would be the hole you make for a
seed, and wait to receive the fruit of a

ripe red habit, like a pomegranate.
My mind is on graves, is that apparent?

If penchant were a pen, it would enchant
You like a fairy tale, or what the hell

If I am becoming him, does that mean
me erases? But I think I am making

impressions, too. I am pressing my ears,
I do not engulf you like a slime mold

to a cheerio. Tell me your penchants.
I will hear you with a cheerful guile.

I have a penchant for you.

The Piano

I heard a song
As flat as a piano
Sounding a dirge
On a pirate barge
I stood on a plank
And played it
like it was just
another key

I came to a plane
Where sounds
like sea surge
And all paths
with horizons merge—
Sight beyond scrutiny.

Waves overtake
the rain. Paintings,
and words, submerge.
An ocean for Gods
to purge. I am
the mutineer.

Here where the light
lilts, then scorches,
And lips foam
in the drift, gorge.
A pitch to lift
salt from brine.

No Lullaby

I could sing to you, but lullabies make
You cry. That's fine, I've found a rhyme (unsung).
You are my day, you are my light, don't say

Goodnight. Will love hold tight till my clock breaks?
Let's count only tocks, three, two, ninety-one...
I would sing to you, but lullabies make

Tears like saltwater pearls precipitate.
Snakes slough rough skins, but what of human tongues?
My dimdun day, my lacquered light, don't say

No, for fear flowers overgrown when haste breaks
Bone. My heart is polished stone on strings strung
Oh, I would sing, but dry lullabies make

Dulldrums against your seashell ears, how they ache
When forbidden songs won't stay hidden long in lungs
Chiaroscuro, lux tenebris, Just say

I love you. With those wayward words, we speak
Promises. Look, the necklace came undone.
I once sang for you, but lullabies made
You sigh. Comes the night! Shades drawn tight. Don't sing.

The River Stone

He places a river stone in her
hand.

She feels its full weight in her
throat.

Put it in water

She starts

toward the fountain.

to cough,
rasping,
clawing at her clavicles like
they can hold her up.

She can see him
no longer.

She's at the hospital,
the mirror showing her the top
of his head.

Push! The vice of her around
his neck.

Visual stutters her
hand comes away with
a stone from the
mouth
of the fountain

conforms to her palm.
Jade laced
with veins
of white quartz, like it is
alive.

Then turn slowly around.

No one is there.

Talisman to chest
as day

burns black.

Mommy! You did it!

Rushes to her side,
holding a firetruck's headlights up for light.
Jumps snatching his from her
chest.

Look at the color

Turns the
stone around
and around.

Green and white, like river water

Dull, dry
dormant stones on the path home.

The firetruck's sirens blare,
red sounds.
He pockets stones.

The Color of Collision

a mottled storm cloud
gathers on his knee
purple the
color of collision

raindrops are pebbles
that shower
as he gets up off the ground
leaving behind dents
where they had
pressed in skin
a young boy inspects
them and fears
these will be
permanent

Time blew the storm cloud
from his knee
exposed the stars

bruise
 scar
cloud
 star

He would want me to tell it like this.

His fingernails are crescent moons
eclipsed by their gripped balloons

distant planetary eyes
possess water
and maybe life too

pain an ebbing who traverses
a subtle scission
between heaven and boy

purple the color
of collision

III

Monostitch

May these days leave traces

The Highway Pegasus

In Native American tradition, a white owl is thought to be an omen of death... In Mexican folklore, the white owl is a shapeshifter who preys upon the weak...In Greek mythology, Pegasus symbolizes the immortal soul and is the protector of spiritual journeys...

a red apple in a crumpled
brown paper bag was my offering.

I circled back,
returning to you,
toeing the gleam
of a train track—
dramatic foil to the
ragged-edged ravine
that circumscribed it.

I was determined to
deliver it to you
—to the unlikely existence
of you.
Small shed, barbed wire, lavender sky.
The carcass of a white owl
seemed poor company.

One of America's
many anonymous stretches
of highway languished in
a featureless landscape.
The speed of its cars
insulted my inertia.
My car, out of gas,
my self, out of hope.
Neither made to last.

I disappeared into
a field of wild grass,
then you parted it.
You tossed your mane,
luxuriating in your own

exquisite beauty,

your sheer alive-ness.
Cavorting, kicking, snorting.
I captured you
through a moon

crater on my touchscreen

until the battery drained
along with the sun artifact
from a marbled sky.
There would be no escape.

But it was all according to plan.

This field was the field.
The last field
on a planet of quickly
vanishing fields.
It was the field that the last
of the gas
had carried me to.
So, it had to be this field.

And yet—
the presence of another in
the field—
that was not supposed to be.
Bottomless black eyes
probing me...
I plumbed their depths,
A well of sadness that I recognized

for my own.

Twisting my fingers
through barbed wire,
I stroked your velvety pink nose.
Your head cocked, ears askew,
as if to ask me.
Did I only imagine this?

As the sky above deepened,
you disengaged
from our trance,
peeling away from the fence.
And then turned
back and looked
pointedly at me crouched in the underbrush
as if to rouse me to action.

You, the unlikely existence.

Small shed, barbed wire, lavender sky.
The carcass of a white owl, and me,
made poor company.

Yet you endured,
surging through weeds like an epiphany.

What excuse did I have?
I stood. Then walked—
I ran the length of the fence.
You slowed to match me pace for pace,
going wild at this latest development.
We reveled in the power of our bodies.

Until

the fence made a sharp angle,
confining you.

You were glorious—
rearing back into the air
in blazes
When you could follow me no further.
Raking the air with your hooves
an impossibly long time
as though you could take off flying.
Could you?

It was a hell of a send-off.

I kept going.
I charged five hours
on foot to the gas station.
Oh, day of all days to be wearing a
see-through shirt!
If things had gone according to plan,
I was not to see anyone today.

Still, I begged for cash,
in abject surrender
to the cold indifference
of strangers that no
amount of clothing could
have sheltered me from.
I walked up to a woman who could be
your aunt,

who told me she was so tired
of taking care of everyone around her.
I backed down
and accepted the rejection
but still she lingered by my side.

Waiting for me to change her mind?

I was curt and, in the end,
it was I who shooed her away,
repeating her words to her:
You're tired of helping.

I called a suicide hotline.
I called a probation officer.
I called my sister.

She rolled up in her red Jetta with her boyfriend—
his permanent look of disapproval badly masked,
hers not at all—
offered me cash or card.

Taking the cash,
I bought a can, gas, and a red apple.
Walking along the highway is illegal,
a cop warned me before
speeding away in his cruiser
without me. I began my 15 mile
foot-journey back to you as night fell.

Lightning struck, resuscitating
the pulseless valley.
With each strike, I caught sight
of the train track
lining the field like a metal zipper.
The land was rent with a fissure like
a wound that would not heal
and I did not want to fall in.

I could see so far,
but it did not seem far at all.
The world closed in and became
like a glass globe,
and everything in it under the protection
of something unseen,
the lightning just static electricity

from a child's finger.

Would I see you in the darkness?
Would I make it out?
Fearing the loss of that
which I had nearly given up,
if things had gone according to plan.
If you hadn't been there in that field.

The dawn sun wiped the blackness from its eyes.

I searched

along the fence for you.
I saw the dead owl
strung up on the fence—
a marker—and knew I had made it.

You were sauntering
along the fence. I took the apple
from my bag, rolled it under.
You did not react, dully
chewing grass and ignoring
both me and the apple.
Satisfied, I took this
as a sign that you weren't going hungry.
Then I peered closely at you, searching for
a glimmer of recognition,
a spark of magic,
but there was none.

In this moment,

I ceded
it was time to move on.
The message
had been received.
Now, in our second encounter,
you were transformed into
a normal horse,
with normal eyes,
nothing so
peculiar about you.
You weren't going to give me any reason to stay
And go through with my plan, were you?

As I turned to go, morning light
illuminated the landscape
under a lavender sky—
not so desolate
as it had first appeared—
though I would
never have known
if I had just driven straight through.

I would never return.
I could not find my way back if I tried.

I poured the gas in, and my car spluttered
then hummed.
I recharged my phone battery.
Sitting in the driver's seat,
I thumbed through
the photographs I had taken of you.
I hovered on one—
your head cocked at me, ears askance,
and the strung up snowy owl carcass
draped before you like
a pair of resplendent
white wings.

Back at home, I struggled to give
the impression to all
that I was sane and well.
It was difficult to explain away
why I left my apartment door
wide open when I took off,
and why the building manager found cats
loose in the halls.

But my heart still beat
with the private wonder
of my encounter.

And so, I abandoned the plan.

And a bleak omen of death that
marred the barbed wire
also marked my way back in the dark.
Your wings in disguise.
And you, dappled, earthbound Pegasus—
I caught you

suspended along a tenuous
separation

between just another
anonymous highway,

and .

The Keyhole

Somewhere far below us,
sprawls a life

we departed.

Where the wind
disarmed every verdant hill,
laying blades down—
green, shiny, and black,
the only disturbance
over a placid settling.

In these hours of surrender
we stole away
toward the upward thrust
of our aspirations.

A shy moon
swathed in eyelet lace
pretended not to see.
A spider spied us then swiftly closed
seven eyes.

We clambered our way up
as the pines shrunk,
miniature, and fairylike.
The effect of our bodies
gradually grown colossal,
convincing us we would make it.

Our giant steps carried us
past the tree line.
The ephemera of earth
revealed still more massive
rocks without roots to grip it.
We leapt over the crevices.
An extended arm, the crucial
embrace.

We spun into the periphery
of the sun's fervent vision, and climbed.

A doubled-over drag of atmosphere—
too familiar with the language of vice—

and our eyes were on the gate
to the top of the world:
a keyhole where people pose for pictures
and sometimes fall to their death.

What if we fall what if there is nothing to keep our feet on the ground what is the world worth after all?

Entrenched with crystals like stakes
that lived in our hearts,
fear's tail thrashed upon the threshold...
launched lithely into the air, circled once.
Not like a vulture waiting for us to die,
but like an eye, waiting for us to follow, already.

Fear dived into the unfathomable.

The glint of our twenty fingernails
spotted from a starless eye.



Look of my Soul

When I was a bird, flapping
the wings of an art magazine,
age fifteen, maybe, sixteen,
I had been aimlessly lonely
and volitionally starved.
Maybe I had missing parts,
but I would say they were
carved. I was *severed Winged
Victory of Samothrace, armless
in her loft embrace, some days.
More often, I was just the bird
with the keen face.* On the eve
of everything, my beating wings
ceased, center creased, as I drew
my pages in toward my chest,
I saw a vision in cerise—when I
was a red winged black bird
clutching a straw, reading the
words, *What does your soul
look like? Reflection* I saw my
self, whole, a rolling boiled soul
risen to the top on a lake of ire.
Talons bending a reed, I leaned
deep in awe, upon a flawless
thawed lake, saw a seraph
surfacing among the scumbled
ice and dark stones. Carmine
passed thru my plummy body
like liquid ruby rushing waves
thru my blood. I balled the
page when I was done,
till no one could tell what it
was called. Brooding in my
darkness –now a bird concealed
in covered eggshell, gestated in
primordial feelings, a bloodied,
burgeoning swell. Until...Crack...
and the soul ruptures—here is
your bird to capture! Then the
crumpled wings of the magazine
lifted into the air, tore its pages
from my cages and soared away.

A Waterfall in the Rain

The artist adjusted
the stretched canvas
on its hooks,
like he was nailing
a racked body
to a cross.
As if art could save us.
With a tape measure handy I
stepped back
to take in the imaginal description
of a mid-shimmer,
the suggestion of color
within vaporous
phosphorescent
glazes that glowed ghosts
in the shadows
of the gallery.
Eyeballing it, I told the artist it hung level.
Rippling paint
like the way water moves against
windows in a carwash and just as mesmerizing.
and a Vivid vivisection of the center—
like a tower, I thought,
pared down to four levitating lines.
Or a waterfall
in the rain.
The perfect title for #15.
But what did it mean?
My measured mind could not rule it.
A minimalist masterpiece that hung on
a wire between vision and—
perfect oblivion.
The only thing to do,
was to give it a name
(as if it would answer to
the sound of water on rain)
and watch it disappearing
off the ledge.

Return to the White Shores

A response poem to “Walk With me to the White Shores” from *Amor Sin Locura*
by Gregg Eisenberg

I have been to the white shores
of the green lake. My two legs
took me there when I was a
blender, churning the pedals
of my bicycle. When I
was a memory, resurfacing
upon still waters on a
windless night. Revealed in the
searchlight of the moon, the
spotlight which roves the surface
in search of drowned remembrance.
A poet's hands, which once painted
the stones with water, leave no
prints. His alter of stones is fallen.
Our trace is effaced, but still
this place resonates. I saw
my father walk into the
lake, his back to me, his hands
moving in the water happily. It is
all I can remember. Will
anyone know the things inside
of me? I do not expect
to find my way back to the
lake to show you. The best I
can do is to tell you how
alpine peaks, touched by snow,
overlook the lake. That people
only ever see them from
afar. How they crown the lake
in fragile beauty. How they
look just like ivory fingers
through silvered hair that the
poet once combed, parting the
dark shores. Spilling liquid
memories into cupped lands.

Isle of View

"A made-up place....so near to the heart"-Robert Duncan

You came to it all at once, on a wave bigger than you, it was pregnant with you,
in an ancestral blood-rush

You trudged the
pebble shore,
water darkened
and colorful,

Deposited with so many moons.

You collected the smooth
milky stones,
threw back the cloudy ones.

You sought clarity
Philosophy

You found feckless wildflowers, animal tracks that wandered aimlessly
that the isle, tentative, ventured to reveal—and no more.
When what you sought was surety, reason,
drawn and quartered
seasons.

So, you climbed cliffs of affectation,
Crumbling under the weight of your affections.

The view from the top was
turquoise intonations

each rivulet bearing a soul
like yours, each whirlpool a fool.

You with an Isle in your eye, of an almost,
Standing on a mote on a moat,

You asked for intelligence.
So, you dug a hole in the dumb earth
And found penetration,

Then, the sky blinked and what remained of you and the ocean isle
was expressed in a drop

that will explode when it lands on a girl's crimson sweater—a thousand pines rising from her chest.

STOP Protected Wildlife Refuge

Standing on the stage
of a crumbling and stained
outdoor amphitheater,
I knew more Hamet
than I had supposed.
Pinching a perfect strawberry
like it was a brilliant cut ruby,
I wondered what it felt like—
to be the strawberry?
With so many seeds
embedded in my skin,
and me just bursting
to pop them off.

I did not see the sign with bolded words.

In a trance, I pushed my way through seeded grasses,
as a sense of timelessness, of never-ending afternoon
stretched before me in this dream-like apparition of a place

How did I get here?

click! click! click!
sounds interrupted,
source unseen,
as I parted my way to the yellow-green ocean.
I was born by the ocean.
It seemed I had always been making my way back.
The ground was pocked in holes,
as plentiful as all the seeds of the strawberry.
I wanted to plant them.
So, I bent down,
then realized I had already eaten the strawberry—
which was lucky.
Synchronously, from each hole
Two yellow and red stalked eyes protruded,
followed by a blue crustacean shell,
in sizes fingernail to tank.
I stopped,
even as the water made an island of our dirt,
even as I was about to be overrun by crabs.
In my stillness, they grew bold

and began approaching my sandaled feet
waving their claws, clicking.
I could see the ghost of the moon above,
filmy in the white afternoon sunlight.
What did the crabs think of their moon ruler who commanded the tides?
Clawed arms were raised for crab liberation on that wild enclave.
I wondered how I could avoid stepping on so many holes
And decided to wait for the tide and just swim back.
I sucked a seed from my tooth,
looked at the moon,
and raised a seed-studded claw.

Green Veins

Stopped by the old pond
To sit a while, as rain draws

Trails tracing veins like yours.
To feel the peace

Of the dreaming leaf
Upon a summer storm.

I watch wind fold water,
A sleepy sun push back rippled sheet.

Wind, a flattening hand smoothing strands of wheat,
Making whispers out of air.

I think of you and raise a rock to my mouth
To speak to the cracks.

;

The moon of air and water was a ;
My body orbiting the black pond
Had completed many rotations.
The path of my ruminations
would be blurred rings
that could make Saturn jealous,
if you sped up the film.
But no one watched me that night.
I was sure I was alone.
Fractious, cameras could not capture us.
Intimate, our bodies turned in axis.
But we were more than bodies:
reflections of water, of mind.
Your ; joining two independent clauses:
my life before; my life after.
A pause, a liminal space in which I was
held in polysemic suspense—
bridge between sky and earth.
Foreshadowing *there is more to come*.
Shadows for throwing,
only a stone could disrupt
this theophanic punctuation.
Even then, only temporarily.
Maybe I didn't want more to come.
I thought I might die.
What happened after that night
a semicolon appeared?
As I write to you now, I already know,
and I have returned to say:
We moved on with our lives;
the past moved with us.
I paused, to take a photograph.
I was not the only one.

Orchid Mantis

I watched the mantis from within the orchid.
Stilted movements, elongated eyes, voracity
disguised as charm. It was like someone had
dipped their fingers in pink talc, left pink
fingerprints all over its creamy white body.
All over the orchid. Its appendages fanned
and ruffled at the lip just like the orchid,
sculpted and decadent as a frosted wedding
cake. They were lesser than the green mantis,
fit for petite florets, yet corporeal like
something you would neither wish to kill nor
dare to keep. I watched the sun spill its marbles
of light over the occluded swamp under
which I had buried a mouse the morning prior.
Each of many orchids wore a delicate mantis,
like a pin. Each mantis was a motionless buddha
meditating on oneness. Not as I might,
or you might, but as nature might, to survive.
Like the way fresh cuttings were taken
from a corpus of words for this endeavor,
to give life to the swamp. I offer you a bouquet
of orchids with a mantis at its center,
disguised as something you could want.

The Golden Beetle

to possess them

decorations
encrusting leaves
in improbable splendor

scale the stalks
little knights
 storm the parapets for morning glory
hoist shimmering shields
in emerald,
 ruby
 gold on your back
blotted signets so ambiguous

shell part
wings unsheathe
lance air
ride sun signature

the Gold are swiftest
to capture them
is to be caught
in their thrall

a glass jar
a nondescript
book
inside the squat house
through glossed pages

Chrysomelidae

the jar
bright with little beads of beetle

pin last the Golden between
thumb forefinger
a pulse
a throb
heart hammering
against hard shell

its, yours

twist
gasp
the last... seal of the lid

inside war
soldiers batter
bodies against cell

around and around
glass dome
tomb

Golden slows
red as an alarm

golden
 happiness
 emerald secrecy
 ruby panic
bodies plummet to bottom
jeweled shells
in death darken
like finger worn coins

too late
to unscrew the cap—hypoxemia
morning-glory-cyanosis

a flower opens
to the touch of an abiding sky

curled the lips of blue
trumpeting news
of a brand-new day

for those innocent enough to hear it

reborn from her mouth
flick
a shell
golden, caper up
the supplicating stalks
 dripping green
petals weep your dew
 dour doves mourn
in trees above

the Golden Beetle
 beats



Birth of Venus

Diaphanous, Gossamer, Sheer,
she came out of the sea from another shore, a woman She arrived on a swell
with coral locks curling, rose out of the sea, her hair with kelp well ensnared
her skin sticky with pearls a home for anemones, in her hair and viridian
encapsulated in the aloe her body riveted with pearl drops on her eyelids.
of sea birth. She picked one pearl in colors of hematite. She unglued them,
off, pulling it from the jelly, Her appetite voracious, raising newborn gaze
and brought it to her she plucked a pearl smooth to meet mine, holding
pursed lips for a taste, to the touch and living, her hand like a
quick ground it deliciously lifted it to her succulent lips. lantern in a cave.
between her teeth into a She crushed it like a secret. I took the pearls each
fine paste. Her skin shone, Her skin took on the brilliant as she trod on the beach
bright, opalescent, depth and iridescence and watched myself change
taking on the fairness of a of the space black pearl green of corroded copper on skin
salt pearl as she ate of it. as she ate of it. As I ate something—not meant for me

Oh, how the Gods would hate it.

The Risk of Beauty

"he can take no risk that matters, the risk of beauty least of all."
- *The Kingfisher* by Robert Olson

According to the research, we ascribe virtues
to those we perceive to be Beautiful.

Honesty, Intelligence, morality, capability...
Doesn't everyone want to be
Beautiful?

Incandescent lights
stuttered awake
row at a time
with a sibilant hiss.

Beneath,
Beauty coiled
in mesh cages, metal,
padlocked, and shaking.

Beauty emerged
from their plastic caves,
glittering, amorphous
as nebulae.
They vibrated, trilling
in otherworldly voices.

I approached each
enclosure with my clipboard
and slipped my shadow through
the openings.

Beauties gathered themselves and bunched,
diaphanous organs opalescent.
With insectile jaws,
they fixed on the darkness, and siphoned
until I grew transparent
and their organs thrummed with darkness.

I snapped on latex gloves.
Selected glass pipette
from sterilized tray,
I filled the pipette
with salt tears until
there was nothing left to mourn

filed down the rows
depositing a single
drop
 to each Beauty.

They reached out with their flagella,
engulfed the droplets.
A sweet
 steam curled
 in the air around each,
intoxicating.

I strapped on a mask and plastic
Goggles. Gripping
a scalpel, I pressed
the softness of my arm until
 Blood pooled.
Swabbed the incision.

Twirling the swab in
each Beauty,
their potentialities
swirled.

I bled more, for them.

Their cages rattling,
lightbulbs burst overhead.
The ground shook
 and the sound of rending deafened me.
I ripped
 my goggles
 to behold the blinding—Beauty.
An explosive, unstable reaction.
 Ravishing and ravaging the lab.

It was neither virtuous, kind, nor courageous.
It was the stars, moons, ages.

III

November Inventory

My favorite music is wordless now,
But I guess I talk more.
I thought no one knew how
To argue with a painting. I poured
Varnish on a sore. Words are
Easily met with harsher Word's War.

Pumpkins mold on the steps.
Their smiles wither & turns inward,
While a toothless moon grins convex.
I thought I saw through the world,
But now the veil is chainmail,
And the knight is dark and hails.

Will childhood be most of my life,
Even if I age like a catalpa tree?
Recently, I said I don't want to put a knife
To my mistakes, just end their spree.
I wake some days ready for a culling,
From the spice on my words I'm mulling.

Mica flecks of memory,
I crushed and covered my face in them.
Light didn't catch—may as well be emery.
I rewrote this poem again,
It isn't even November anymore.
Words didn't catch—should have sworn.

Elizabeth

I fell into the waiting room.
If I didn't belong there before
I did now, clutching a sore ankle.
I saw Bishop slide across
the black and white checked floor.
So determined was she
to get the attention of the receptionist
that I was nearly bowled over by her
as she superseded the line.
The people hardly watched
nor found me peculiar,
though my clothes were very 2022
in February of 1918.
All eyes were cast down,
the oppression of War
over all things. There was nothing
untouched by it—except Bishop.
I wondered if this forceful young girl
knew who she was, was to be,
one day an Ordained Priestess
of a religious institution called
The Authority of Canonized Poetry.
Presently, she was done waiting,
that much was clear.
She turned her head and looked right through me
She had the ear of the receptionist
and was turning it clear, too.
Bishop herself was sleek and black like dark wood
as her hands smoothed her dress
that revealed a curvaceous form
hovering on the edge of womanhood.
she had a rumpled collar that turned outward
like the ruffled edges of a black orchid,
presenting a smooth, inscrutable face.
Did she know who she was?
She was unbeatable.
Hopscotching all the black square floor tiles,
Disappearing with an orderly in turquoise.
I went outside and untied my white horse as war closed in.

Spring Frost

I saw Frost creeping on the other side
of the wall. On mine, lush green moss,
where the Foxes den. On his, bleached winter,
where the Robber steals Tea for warmth.
A hole in the wall whistled like a missing tooth.
He set a winter red apple in the gap and
apologized. I did not see it fall,
he spoke, feeding it through. I took it
in my hand and saw it was flat and browned
on one side. Climb over, I said, it is nicer here
friend, but he declined, I have lived through one Fall,
and do not wish to see the birches shed again.
If I came to your side, it would no longer
be yours. I took one path, and you another.

How to Write a Poem

Begin with a fleck of dust.
An eyelash, a skin cell, will also do—
Any impurity.

Compelled on a drift of air
And the static electricity
Between you,
Let it settle on a blank page
Without influence.

Take the page outside.

Hold the page outstretched
In the scattered rain
Of your thoughts.
Let it collect beads of water,
on each convex lens a reflection.
In each droplet a black letter
suspended like an ant.
The letters will pool into words.
On that glacial field of cold indifference
Meaning will solidify into ice.

These formations are not your poem.

Bring this brittle page back inside
And it will disintegrate until
There is no page.
All that's left
Will float on the air
Between you.

Let these snowflakes settle on your sleeves.
Each image alive for only a second.

Procure a cold white page and
Enter it
To preserve them.
You can only spell,
So cast a spell of preservation
And say it aloud,
The vapor of your voice
A cloud

Softly letting
A tiny crystalline lattice down

Shored to bear
The weight of a soul.

Leave your body behind
And climb inside.



Snowflake

I am small, in the car, searching for irregulars.

Bullets,
Columns,
Plates,
Needles,
Rosettes,
Dendrites.

Everything you need for your funeral.

Bullets for death,
Columns for the tomb,
Plates on which they will serve everyone the deceased's favorite food,
Needles for the embroidery on the shroud,
Black rosettes of mourning to pin to their hats,
Dendrites because you are still alive.

Everything, everything but irregulars.

There is no place for an irregular
at a funeral or any other function.

To die is the most regular thing to do.

I Thought I Found You

You were just the shadow cast by an angel statuette
Just the hum of a carpenter bee hovering
You were just the silk of a caterpillar tent
A leaf with only veins left
A burnished epitaph
The gaze of a portrait of someone I do not know
The swallowed word on a dead tongue

Elegy for the Bee

pain
is the bitter bee
of memory
that leaves its splinter
beneath the skin
never to fly
again

Little Puncture

Mourn them. Air swallowed the dead.
A little virus put a slit in our cells, now we
long for the year's puncture instead

of museums visits. We collect more dead
for the displays. Round the house, sit round, flee.
Mourn them. Air swallowed their breath.

Escape safely, and I will tell you. Some catch
air and many fall—got in a dream so swift.
Dread for the virus' puncture instead.

To the same tune all days can mean at truce
many are deadened. Do not touch the oleander.
Mourn them. Death followed in their tread.

Oh, some are tripping graves, some
got in God's Kingdom so swift.
Prolong for the fear's sepulcher ahead.

At altitude, some have blue flames round them.
Silhouette a soul. A human for us to honor.
Mourn them. Stare, wallow in the dead.

Puncture, and swarm,
Call, or ring, it seems random.
Mourn them. Air swallowed the dead.
Long for the year's puncture ahead.

Ophelia

Ayesha's father filed a complaint with police in 2020 against Aarif and his parents for domestic violence against his daughter

Ophelia makes an opalescent pendant dangling
Cut free from silver strings, taut and tangling
No one is wearing her on a strand
No one is closing her clasp in their hands

her in-laws started demanding dowry from her

No one will grip her like a cross

Aarif took her back after taking her dowry

Her pearl will not rise but playwrights will emboss
Her lover's name in perpetuity

told her that she is going to end her life by jumping into Sabarmati

And like something tarnished and tossed her gratuity
Will not provide an adequate offering for a wish
What does she wish
she is a lip ring on a fish
and she is fish
As she washes in the confluence
Of hatred fate and innocence
Farewell the river's flourish

She said she was taking this step out of her own will and nobody forced her to do it

No casket of stars to ravel the bodies
Romeo and Juliet were a jewel too gaudy

the victim has been identified as Ayesha Banu Makrani

*Love was plundered for its token
A sun sundered and hangs broken*



Burial

You take your toys and cover them in dirt.
I watch, nonplussed, thankful for park benches.
Sweetly, you whisper *goodnight* and insert:
Cars, dinosaurs, disbelief suspensions.

Grandfather was a pragmatist-- he burned.
I, in turn, never knew why we buried.
Spare us the space of so many undisturbed!
What does it matter? I whisper, wearied.

You ask me to cover the feet entire
Of your sleeping big brachiasouraus...
With fastidious resolve, you fire
Mom, finishing the job with tenderness.

Now, I see rightly how Earth is a bed...
Dirt a soft blanket pulled over the head.

What Have I Become?

See? There, on the railing, is Araneidae of labyrinth.

She lets down a silk, stitches,
weaves her orb to scry death.

Crawling, plucks bow,
her arrow-shaped abdomen red and gold.

A victim wrapped in string of fate,
she plays a berceuse with her legs.

A soft draught of venom fang,
and she embalms a lacewing

that earlier was scaling the screen door
in the insectile traffic of synthetic light.

I hover near the soulless bright now, shining,
to filter through age stilled in agate memory.

In the pulp of my being, I have changed.
I hold the bug up to the bulb.

I move in shadows, my wings a breath. Am I Shade?
Watch the exacting Araneidae deliquescing.

There was a soft embrace that obliterated me completely.

To Catch a Dream

Sphynx Moths.
Catch one,
It will give you a riddle.
If unable to solve it,
turn into a moth yourself.
A defense evolved
to keep humans from capturing them.

She cradled net in lap on the black grass.
The Sphynx considered.

Who was I?

Sphinx caterpillars are horned like green and orange unicorns.

I don't know

A lie

My dream is to be one of you!

Wanting to be what you are not is not a dream...
... Find out who you already are.

Net opened,
the Sphynx a pink dart throwing in the spiral sky.

Handle vibrated.
She looked down at the plastic
transformed to gold.

She wandered the night, catching dreams off sleeping irises.

The Rending

We were razed by machines
And automatic machinations
undeclared war raged,
taking lives in silence,
the deadliest war
was the one without name,
that no one fought.

At first
a treble voice arose:
leaf, thorn, petal, stem.

A lipstick smudge horizon trembled, then
swallowed with the whole mouth of a sun.

Spool of a God—
Good marionettes laid down.

People cobbled together in the past
Tense, we swabbed our lenses,
cracked like eggs.
Even the smoke burned.

Futurist manifestations,
unmanned gas stations,
hastened
falling over marble eyes
crusted in upper
class cataracts that made us believe
we were millionaires.

We were
Potato eaters, knives hungry,
with eyes that could make your skin curl.
But we stole scraps and pieced it together.

Hugo Ball's premonitions sounded.
When it was all over,
and crystal clouded over,
even the psychic stared
deep into him and saw—
nothing.

When the Stars Go Out

As I drink my pen, ink
beats through the artery
as a pulsar radiates radio waves.

A signal of life,
or passing cloud.

Dear Omissions,

You will never know what we have known.

In a night made chemical solvent,
no star will ever see this page.

Once, in a pierced sky,
we thought we could
climb through those holes to
enlightenment.

We were like kids
on the trampoline of space time—
flying high until, eventually,
we did not come back down.

Nothing did. Light didn't.

Our astronauts rolled a blue marble and chased the chasm,
and colored kaleidoscopic zones and imagined impossible new homes...

Then watched heaven
ebb like a dream—
until you woke up and believed it was only in our heads.

I wonder if anyone
will attest to my veracity?
New human, evolved terrestrial, crocodile, you there,
is meaning opacity?
Then good because there is nothing to see.

This is exile.

Will you write it off? As embellished history?
Or science fiction? The astral city
I have known, just a poet's sophistry?

We were not always so alone, reader of futurity.

So, take this existence of eternal expulsion,
and scatter it.

Flick a blue marble,
and shatter it.

You will never know.



How Long is Night

When will you see me again? It will be
 swift if you close your eyes and then—listen
to my voice grow distant
Let my answer
 become your dreams.

As long as only ether
 may enter here.

As long as it takes to
 palpitate a fire,
 and make the ashes
 burn the brighter.

Long as passion straightens the
 arrow. I will follow you wherever

you are found, like a bound letter into a sealed night.

Not so long as your silk
eyelashes, crushed against a pillow.
Not so long as the twilight shadow of
your closed door, but

As long as the golden
 crack along the edge,

where poems commence.

Things To Do Around Ten Thousand Years

Compare the fluctuations of sunsets like you would minimalist masterpieces of all whites of varying shades, their differences slighter as the compendium grows.

Translate snowflakes until you have decoded their secret language and uncovered the unwritten rules. Write these, shred them, and scatter them across sand dunes until their peaks are all white.

Run your fingers through thick bladed grasses, then observe the micro tears in your skin. Wait for them to heal, then do this again. See if you can make a scar.

Leave feathers on anthills. Watch the feather gather dewdrops in the morning, the ants amass to drink. Save overzealous ants magnified in the water.

Sew stitches into paper so thin and brittle that it crumbles in your hands. Put the crumbles with the thread in an envelope and wait for a storm. Send on the wind and expect a reply.

Break all found glass. Reassemble in jagged mosaics depicting artful reflections of clouds, without birds. Rearrange every time a bird is reflected.

Descend through a subterranean grotto barefooted, shining a lamp over the blind cave creatures.

Turn off the lamp. Stay until your dreams forget how to see, then feel your way out without the lamp,

you can now.

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