Contents

Poetry

Julia Aloi About a Girl 1
Mother Rabbit 2
Alahna Alvarado lessons in discomfort pain 3
Tiffany Stachnik Whispers of Poland 6
Remi Recchia Fratercula Cirrhata, or Boy Crossing 23
Jacob Griffin Hall Alive 28
Centennial 29
Alice Pettway Night Rail 34
Smog 35
Brendan Allen conoco 37
the gentle craft 38
Hannah Cajandig-Taylor You As Stormchaser 56
Cliff Jumping at St. Mary’s Glacier 57
Roseanna Alice Boswell Domestic Skills for the Dead 69
On Grieving 70

Nonfiction

T Guzman How to Talk to the Cops 31
Katherine Suppa Driving Barefoot 65
Fledgling 67

Fiction

Channa Goldman Where It Is That We Are 15
Jeff Fleischer Paying the Piper 43
Nazli Karabiyikoglu The Dargah 59

Art

Jodie Filan Kairo 0
ancient 5
Britnie Walston Bolt of Energy 27
Sophie Yang Downtown Backyard 30
Savannah & Evan D. Williams Sky Room 36
Guilherme Bergamini Photogram 41
Christie Ma Celestial Mind 68

Contributors 73
Editors

Co-Editors-in-Chief
Lisa Favicchia and Kit Auner

Poetry Editor
Meagan Dermody

Fiction Editor
Hamza Rehman

Nonfiction Editor
Lucia Iglesias

Managing Editor
Hannah Soyer

Design Editor
Korbin Jones

Assistant Fiction Editor
Annie Trinh

Assistant Nonfiction Editor
Marcus Höehne

Assistant Managing Editor
Arielle Raymos

Assistant Design Editor
Erika Grandstaff
Girl has two pink bobby pins in the shape of a cross in her hair; the cross is covered in clear lip gloss. Girl aches to be pure and takes bitter sips of peach schnapps. Girl pops and smacks a wad of dry bubblegum—tasteless aching between her teeth.

Girl dances wildly in the glow of the summer. There are lightning bugs performing silent symphonies in front of her. The air tastes like honey and peaches, and she feels alive. Girl reads beauty magazines in the waiting room of a psych ward. Where did Her vibrance go? She is a ghost, a forgotten ripple in the world.

Girl’s body slowly rots like a festering wound. She melts into slime and Her bobby pin crucifix acts as a gravestone. Flowers grow from where Her body lies, and a bee lands onto the flowers to make honey. The honey is sold to a family. The family eats the honey (Girl). Her vibrance has returned.
Female rabbits are known to devour their offspring during periods of extreme stress, or whenever they are feeling just a little bit hungrier than usual.

Is a mother’s love that immortal if it swallows the child whole?

Dear Mother, please, be gentle with these old and scattered wounds.

If I leave my body for just a moment, I may as well end up with the rabbit children.
at the turn of each moon
my ovaries take a stand
against my ego—a wall of
water, a saline fog that
stings the eyes like an
afterthought, it breaks in
the same foolish way we
take for granted the
smooth, involuntary breaths
of our lungs until our sinuses
filled & swollen remind us
to be humble. my ovaries
take turns, left, right, ebb,
tide, they whisper in contractions:
*you seem to be too comfortable*
*we’ll help you recall.*
in this, at least, they are
certain and precise, their love
brutal and bloody, a wave
sure to hit, a swell
certain to break, leaving behind
a beach of overturned memories
and half-moods, with no pearls
to salvage, but sand so fine it
clings and falls into places
we still don’t know the names
of, wave after wave after wave
if i were a ship, and you scoured
the shore you’d only find
driftwood for bones, speckles of
dust would trail thinly in the water
bringing me back to the sea. until
the week is over, and
my cervix rises again, waned
and waxed, clean and crescent, with
panties poorly bleached
a smear of pink-brown, like a
forming scar, reminding me
to hold my breath
and stay humble
Dedicated to my father, who taught me to treasure my heritage as I treasure my family.

I.

Among the Americana
Seven precarious layers of Jell-O
Vessels of mashed potatoes
Boiling meat in Coca Cola
Laying in resplendent glory:

Whispers of Poland, given up as heirlooms

I could sing an ode to a pierogi
Buttery and pan-fried
Crumbled cheese sticky on my fingertips
Deft hands folding dough
Not being able to pinpoint when the skill was learned

Next, the gołabki
Drowning in saches of tomato
The swaddled meat in cabbage
And subtle hints of peppered love
Waiting patiently in a glass pan
Never forget the kielbasa
With snakes of sauerkraut
Simmering in the enameled crock
Bubbling and bursting in that slithering symphony
Welcome on my tongue

If I crave a touch of sweetness, the wings of angels, Chruściki
Ensconced in powdered sugar
And a caress of orange
Flaky, crispy, warm
Twisted to live up to its name

The grand finale
Before we push our stomachs over the edge
The final whisper, opłatki
That wafer most holy
Thrice breaking and blessing:

I wish you healing.
I wish you growth.
I wish you love.
Whispers of Poland

II.
Rose/Rosalia
Frank/Franciszek
You get married Catholic/ You get married Catholic
The church is resolute, arabesque/ The church is muraled with flora
You step outside/ You step outside
Detroit/Kraków
City of motors, city of immigrants/ City of kings, city of cloth markets
Industry, technology, growth / Culture, music, gathering
On your faces, smiles/ On your faces, smiles
Rose, head veiled in gossamer/ Rosalia, head wreathed in roses
Frank, head gelled and combed/ Franciszek, head hatted and blossomed
Your minds blithe and blissful/ Your minds blithe and bothered
In the air, concordia/ In the air, disturbia
You envision yourselves wizening/ You envision yourselves withering
Your family name/ Your family name
Safe to wear/ Dangerous to bear
Why you left/ Why you stay
Just a theory/ Just a theory
For your heirs to ponder/ For your heirs to ponder
III.
Does my face carry memory?
Are farm fields printed in the dimples of my cheeks?
Is Kocham Cię written in my vocal chords?
Is my skin the same shade of olive pale?
Are the shapes of my teeth like grains of Wieliczka salt?
Are they, too, white-gold?
When I laugh, can you hear echoes of my lineage
Ringing like bells in Galician cathedrals?
Or is it a blast like a bugle in a town square tower?
When I don my headscarf, do you see your grandmothers
And their mothers in turn?
Do my tastebuds sense the orange peel in the paczki the same way,
Or do I demote the dessert simply to doughnut?
Can my fingers also peacock blue into pottery?
Maybe the green-brown of my eyes and the wave of my hair looks the same?
Or maybe
My face is an imprint
Of what could have been.

Tiffany Stachnik
Whispers of Poland

IV.

*Czarna Madonna,* will you take my *busha* home?

She has been biding her time
Waiting in dewdrops on rose petals
And the whispers of breezes
A carrier pigeon for prayers
To and from that great I am

*Czarna Madonna,* will you take my *busha* home?

I wonder how she must have felt
One tongue kept inside, one rolling outside
Grammars leaking
Caught between two places
One what should be and one what is

*Czarna Madonna,* will you take my *busha* home?

I see her in my father
Care-worn and reminiscing
I see her in my mother
Promising to care for her *Michał*
I see *her* in gray, grinning amongst roses

*Czarna Madonna,* will you take my *busha* home?

I see her here, with her people
Surrounding, chanting, swirling
Goosebumps rising on my skin
Eagles rising toward gilded frescoes
Catching prayers in their talons
Czarna Madonna, will you take my busha home?

Ten jewels times ten venerating you
Rosaries wrapped around Częstochowa,
And now hers in perpetuity
Enmeshed with the iron-clad walls
One last time, I will pray,

Czarna Madonna, will you take my busha home?
Whispers of Poland

V.

Whispers of Pierogi
Heirloom foods
Mere outlines of porridge
Unnamed and congealing
Warm, nested in your stomach
Mate-er-joss-kuh?

Matrjoska.
Grammars leaking, tumbling out of your mouth
Shouting out of car windows after loved ones present
Ja Cię kocham!

Going, gone.
Memories of snow globes, angels, lambs
Crouching, root-like hands grasping plush toys
Green grass growing on the front lawn
Eyes
Eyes kind, warm, sharp
Brown

Cataracts crawling
A spot of yellow printed on her sclera
And her daughter’s
And your father’s
And yours.
Kneeling at the feet of your ancestors
Enthroned in La-Z-Boys and gilded frames
Aquiline faces echoing Byzantium
Our Lady, Black Madonna
Hail Holy Queen
Trading blessings for rosaries with crystalline beads

Czarna Madonna, will you take my busha home?
A Maria encased in sunbeams
Protecting a homeland you know in your soul like a memory
But know in your heart isn’t yours
You walk as an imprint, a copy of a people
Like a child tracing printouts through sun-pierced glass
Similar but not the same
Trading scrunchies for headscarves
Belonging and unbelonging to a history of
Beating drums, dragon balloons, carriages, flower crowns,
Voices shouting, gunshots, pain, finality
Then *Invictus*
Hodgepodge architecture looming on cobblestoned hills
God’s glory encased in scaled golden domes and the eagle’s cry
Surnames surviving against all odds
Responsible for bearing?
Wearing.
*Upholding.*
At long last,
Vindication from clunkiness
Deserving of glory.
Fame.
Praise.
*Pride.*
Caramel-colored coating plasters itself around the already off-white enamel of my teeth. I smooth my tongue over where the carbonation has been residing, feeling the acidic burn it’s left behind. I imagine the scornful look of my Bubie’s aged face, and her accent, a Russian-Israeli fusion, reminding me in Yiddish that what I put into my body is either a form of worship or sacrilege. My obsessive consumption of Diet Pepsi has become about the only nervous habit that I have not been able to part from since leaving home. After leaving the Southern Negev, my home for 22 years, I can no longer seem to bring myself to consume any beverages chilled. Not even water. It has to be room temperature, like it’s been sitting out on my coffee table, warming with the summer air. Although Diet Pepsi remains an exception—this, I’ll drink at any temperature.

In Hebrew, the word ruach means both “spirit” and “air.” To me, it felt like even though I felt a deep love for my family, and our single-story home that was more likely to have a full bookshelf and not a refrigerator, my spirit was dying—only ever having breathed one air. After my military service, I craved to know all the “others” which my world did not contain. I yearned to understand something different from that which had raised me—the people, the terrain, and the only person I’d ever known myself as. I wanted to know what else I could be, and what that even meant, being completely on the outside of all that was ever familiar to me. This phenomenon is common amongst Israelis after they serve. We often want to leave the country and go
somewhere to restart ourselves and wash away the routines that'd become like a religion to us for so long. For me, this desire was all-consuming.

This is what led me to cold weather. Freezing weather. The harshness of an uncompromising force during winter’s entirety woke up my insides and reminded me of the nameless feeling I'd been searching for. The Alaskan winter was a new kind of discomfort—one sharp, and one that had lasting effects unfamiliar to my thin-blooded body. I became obsessed with the burn that'd spread over steaming hot, shower-soaked skin after being recently exposed to the bitter outdoor air. Drinking my coffee hot felt like a surge of living, breathing energy, moving down my esophagus and greeting the rest of me. I became grateful for the heat another person could give off when pressed against another, instead of bothered by it, as I was before. Or at least, I imagined I would be—for I hadn't really had much physical contact at all since being here. Not enough to really understand, but enough to know.

There were handshakes during first introductions that would turn into someone who resembled something of a stranger, but still wasn't a stranger entirely. I’d pass these people on the street, filled with discomfort and an overwhelming uncertainty towards whether or not to greet them. Usually, I did not. When I did, my words would sound forced and inorganic. Sometimes, there would be the hand of a stranger on my shoulder during an interaction, and my body would become overwhelmed by the feeling of physical touch. There were also my few attempts at complimenting the occasional pattern of a woman’s wool sweater in the grocery store, or the way a father handled his crying child in the park near where I’d been living. Sometimes, I’d appreciate the red-wine tint of a teenage girl’s lipstick, as she asked me if I’d found everything okay, scanning my purchases at the checkout line in a department store. Always, I’d answer back, “Yes, thank you,” slip in a compliment, and nervously wonder if my English sounded okay.

Snow’s collections within the ringlets of my ginger hair made me feel like a still from the kind of film Hadar would like. I always wanted to capture these moments, these so Alaskan moments, the kind I came here for, on my 32 millimeter that I’d had since my early teens. I wanted to send them to her and write something like, “Thinking of you. I’m always thinking of you,” which was true. But I’d stopped doing things like that. I’d stopped doing things that were inextricably intertwined with the details of my new life that I knew she couldn’t relate to. Often, I’d look up at the inordinately dark shade of my bedroom ceiling, painted a mossy graphite, and be reminded of her IDF uniform, which was of a similar shade. I’d longingly remember the
way it looked on the cranberry-colored carpet of her bedroom, torn off in a hurry to make love with me before her parents came home.

Back home, stationed in the North, she sat in her mossy, olive-green uniform and stared off somewhere, despondent. She was often this way. Insisting on some mundane sense of happiness that was clearly not real to her, and spending her time being “elsewhere.” I too felt drawn to this elsewhere, but unlike her, I did something about it. I never understood where this exactly was for her, but I thought of the way she’d grab at the cartilage of her upper ear and fondle with it when she got like that. It was as if by somehow moving it in the right direction or pattern, words would come to her. This is the last memory I have of being in her physical presence. Her grabbing at her ear, not wanting to look me in the eye.

“You don’t know what you want, do you,” she said as if telling me, and not asking.

Her face looked somewhat soggy. The skin around her eyes was baggy and reddened from crying, and glossed over by copious coats of moisturizer, meant to keep me from knowing she’d been breaking down. I looked at her gently, remembering the first time I saw her cry. I always wanted to put my mouth on her face and absorb her tears, feeling no part of her deserved to be wasted.

“I can’t say that I do, Hadar. Who does? Even when people think they know, nothing ever goes exactly as planned. And I don’t want a plan yet. I love you, but I can’t give you much else. I just love you.” I felt my voice beginning to crack. I was falling under, like I knew I would.

I waited for her to speak, knowing that whatever surfaced now would be the feeling I’d carry with me until our next encounter. I knew whatever we said right now would overpower and consume all my future perceptions of the time I’d spent loving this woman, and I did not at all want that. But I did not know how to change it either.

“This is really no different from breaking up with me.” She was now speaking through heavy tears, dripping down her face and each creating individual wet marks on her white tank top.

“But I’m not. This isn’t even close. I have to do this, Hadar. I won’t become anything if I stay here. We both know that. I will be back—I will.” I will be back, I thought. Will I?

In her eyes, I saw my own reflection. Her lips twitched and she leaned in to kiss me, not wiping any of the tears from her face. We held onto one another for a long time. I buried my fingers into the thickness of her curls,
and she did the same. As our faces blended together, pools of our combined tears fell downwards into our intertwined mouths. Hers tasted like salt and cocoa butter moisturizer. I knew mine probably tasted like nothing at all.

I have been here for 6 months, and still, I have not really spoken to anyone. There are only those occasional small exchanges of predictable words and phrases during day-to-day interactions, but nothing significant. This saddens me, although I know that it is by my choosing—however, I do not know why. I cannot seem to understand how my love for the land does not make me want to put myself into a position where I could connect to the people—I often think of Hadar every time I even think of anything human at all. The way her ebony hair is wavy for the first two inches, and then falls into tight ringlets, just like mine, halfway down. I think of how much she hates combing through it, and only does so once a week. I think of the seafoam tint to her green eyes, and how proud she is to have a color that is so rare amongst the human population.

“Only 2% of people in the world have green eyes, you know,” she’d remind me proudly. And I’d smile to myself thinking, yes, I do know, because you say it all the time.

Everyday, I will wander the terrain for hours, sometimes even sleeping there on warmer nights. Under trees, beneath their canopies of greens from every spectrum, I’ll lay my body. All my most restful sleep has happened this way, and I’ll awaken feeling refreshed—much more so than if I were to have spent the night in a bed. Never does any sense of loneliness occur in doing this—only a confusion as to whether I am where I was meant to be. But then I’ll remember how irresistible of a lifestyle I am actively pursuing—for I feel such an intimacy with this new nature. I have the solitude that I’d wanted for so long, and an outdoors nothing like the ones which surrounded my years spent in Israel. The mountains go deep purple during nightfall, and the darker days that don’t let up insist upon coloring us all with their hues. This reminds me of the way my mother always insists that Challah without raisins isn’t worth the bake. When we speak every Friday before Shabbos, she will always mention interesting facts she’s found off Google, bringing them up casually, as if I can’t tell she spends time looking for something to teach me. That’s just the way she is, always wanting something to teach.

“There are four mountain peaks there named after Jews—some because they were mayors, like Mount Ripininsky, and some because of their support
for the Alaskan statehood! Isn’t that just fascinating!” she’ll exclaim in Hebrew, making me miss the way it sounds.

In certain ways, this place is reminiscent of my home. The solitude of nature provided by a human absence is something about the desert I’ve always been fond of. I flash back to my fragmented memories of Rabbi Yonas telling my elementary school classroom how Moses would go into the desert for long periods of time to contemplate important decisions, and even just to communicate with himself in a way impossible without absolute aloneness. He’d twirl around his dark, curly beard and tell us, “A little alone time does a lot of good.”

For Shabbos, I’d been lighting 24-hour emergency candles from the hardware store around the corner from where I live. I brought no fine silver with me to use for the rituals, or even clothing to wear as I did so, and it had been starting to get to me. I decided that after all, I very much needed a connection to my culture, as well as some sort of communal experience alongside it—I’d been alone for too long. I had planned on attending a Kabbalat Shabbos tonight at temple Beis Shalom, and picked out the most flattering yet conservative dress I could find from the Salvation Army. It was about knee-length and navy with white polka dots, and once on my body I couldn’t believe how much I resembled my mother. I pulled my hair back into a sheer black scarf, being comfortable with the fact that most of the congregants would then probably assume I was married. However, I wore thick gold hoops and painted my lips bright red—just so they’d know that still, I was free.

The walk there is approximately twenty-five minutes, and I mistakenly assumed I could do it in around fifteen, so upon my entry into the shul, voices are already chiming in together for Tzadik Katamar. I slowly move my way to the back and look up towards the voice overpowering the small, quite minimally decorated room. Next to the Rabbi stands a young boy no older than 13, all in white. The opening of his mouth looks so wide, it is almost as though he’s creating another face—and the sounds moving through him and out of his body are unlike any I’d ever heard before. He sways from side to side as he sings, as if possessed by something he’s simultaneously in love with. His long peyos, which are of a length exceeding that of any other man in the room, fall past his chest, wavering like high grass in a storm made of all winds.

He does not sound male or female—the same way thunder or wind or rain doesn’t. Goosebumps spread across my skin, and I allow myself to close
my eyes, simply taking in the words and their sounds. Everyone sings in
perfect harmony, loudly crying out, allowing their voices to crack.

“The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in
Lebanon.”

I think of Hadar, and feel myself let go of all I’d attempted at keeping
within me. Tears stream out from underneath my closed eyelids, and I keep
them shut, just allowing myself to feel. I loved her and I still love her.

“Planted in the house of the Lord, they shall flourish in the courts of our
G-D.”

I remember the first Shabbos we had with both our families together,
and how her father kept saying how much we look alike. It was his way of
trying—he was somewhat of a traditional man, but his love for Hadar was
the strongest force he held within him. He accepted us, and welcomed my
family and I into his small home within the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City. I
remember him shaking my hand the second I’d set foot on the welcome mat,
and being overwhelmed by the scent given off from the cinnamon broom
hanging beside the door. I think of the weekends Hadar and I spent going
to parks with our acrylics, painting poems in Yiddish we’d make up as we’d
go along on each other’s backs, and the time a woman of nearly 90 told us it
was “unbecoming” for two young women to be doing such a thing in public.
We’d just smiled back and told her we were fine with never becoming. We
were happy as we are.

“They shall still bring forth fruit even in old age; they shall be fresh and
full of sap.”

I think of the first time we saw each other naked, and how I could tell she
felt afraid to look at my face—all of everything about what we were doing
being so new to her. I asked her if she was okay, and she cried very softly,
telling me yes, she just wasn’t ready to open her eyes. I told her that was fine.
Her dark curls grazed lightly against her bare skin as we moved with one
another, mimicking the way I wanted to be able to love her—gentle and bold.

“To declare that the Lord is upright; my Rock, in whom there is no
unrighteousness.”

I want to return home. I open my eyes, all at once being overwhelmed by
how bright the room now seems. We all turn Eastward, towards Jerusalem,
for our own personal reciting of the Shema. Still, my tears are flowing, and I
do not try to stop them. I feel them slowly making their way down my neck,
across the skin of my chest, and down my dress. I crave to be touched, to be
loved, to belong. I crave to walk down streets and hear Hebrew. I crave to
hear my mother tell me about her Challah. I crave to see my father reading the paper quietly while she speaks, never saying much at all, but looking up at us with a smile that makes me feel his love. I crave the sun’s harshness, such an incredible harshness, one that is only tolerable when I think of my ancestors bearing the same burn. I crave to again tell Hadar that I love her.

On my way out, I find the young boy who led the service, and tell him how beautiful his singing was. He looks at me as if we are old friends, and nods his head downwards.

“Thank you. I could tell you felt the words as deeply as I did—and as I do. May they be with you always. Good Shabbos,” he replies.

“Good Shabbos,” I say back, and leave right after.

Once home, I go directly to my bed, and fall into a deep sleep immediately. I dream of Hadar’s eyes, magnified tenfold. The shade of her irises blares so intensely, pigmented heavily and bold, a more saturated version of her actual color. These hues move back and forth, ebbing and flowing as though composed of liquid. The longer I stare, the more I realize they resemble waves. I reach out my arms towards her, and immediately, the liquid from her eyes comes flowing towards me. A high-pitched, somewhat screeching noise begins to surround me from all directions. Somehow, I know that this is the combined sound of both of us wailing together. I begin to feel hot, even though this liquid is still covering me—as though an invisible sun is pushing me down and trying to make me succumb to suffocation. Suddenly, the wailing stops, and I begin to see nothing but a blinding white. Then a voice, again from all directions but even louder than before, begins to sing Tzadik Katamar. It is the same voice as the young boy from the shul. I do not see him, but I feel him there.

Suddenly, I awaken crying, completely soaked by my tears. I want to touch someone, but I am alone. Completely immersed in my own, chosen solitude. I realize again in this moment, that I no longer want this. There was a time when it was indeed what I needed—but now, I yearn for the home I have left and cannot recreate, nor do I want to. I am Israeli down to the nucleus of the cells in my body. Born for desert sand, summers of 113-degree sun, and fig trees. I look down at my hands, barely visible in the early dawn, and marvel at my sun-soaked skin, the color of an olive branch. I think of Hadar’s, just a few shades darker than mine, and the way we looked blended together in our bedsheets.

Whatever else that it is I’m meant to be, I want it with her. I want it in Israel—where I was born, where I left, but where I still always seem to be
Going, even when I’m leaving. Home is a part of me, and finding myself means returning to this inevitable destination. I imagine Hadar’s fingertips tracing along my jawline, feeling myself overcome by the desire to blend into her body, existing within her, wanting an absolute closeness with her that does not even exist. In my head, I write out all the ways in which I want to touch her again, and all the things I’ll tell her in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew when I do. I stand up out of my bed and walk over to the window. Outside, the sky is the color of seafoam, ebbing and flowing around the early morning fog. Through my window, the darkness of my bedroom slowly begins to dispel. By this time tomorrow, I will be home.
A significant decline in numbers of puffins on the Shetland Islands is worrying scientists.

I buried my Russian Nesting Doll in the dirt, red paint blooming up like a worm carcass. Color dissolves like a succulent.

My sister—with scissors & glue dripping funeral march—went looking under gray sky & cough syrup clouds. Came back empty-handed.

Father came home from work one-booted & barren, kissed Mother hello with tang & bleary eyes, no paycheck.

* 

Added to the grave at night: one Minnie Mouse wristwatch, two pink barrettes. I slept outside & kept watch with the dark.
Fratercula Cirrhata, or Boy Crossing

I am my sister’s keeper, she
Mother’s helper. That meat
won’t cook itself, & Father
will not wait.

*

My mouth can carry several
teeth at one time. My mouth
can carry several lies at one
time.

After the burial: sleepless
interludes until I became ghost-
spider & vein-ridden, flattened
to the floor like old taxidermy.

*

I store fish inside a goose-
feathered pillowcase, tucked
safely behind the stairs. I
kiss them before dinner.

*

My snout aches.

*

My Father’s mouth is a rudder,
my sister’s mouth is a runner—
two always crashing, clashing
in the kitchen—show
me a lullaby & he’ll beat you
to sleep, eyes closed, fists
half-carved with sunken
moon, sterile, clawed.

Mother wasn’t home so we ate
her dinner. Mother wasn’t home
so we took her bed. We stole
her jewelry box. We wore

her jewels while Father said
nothing, while he knocked
stale worries like ringworms
from my sister’s teeth.

*

I left my sister at home surrounded
by cheap puzzle teeth & decayed
yarn—no heat forthcoming—I
packed my bags,

stole the car, ran a red light, thought
about going home twelve times &
just drove faster. I did not wait for
hitchhikers.

*

I dreamed I sprouted wings
last night. It was at the grocery
store, grand crescendo of freak
among watermelons & cherries.

A mother covered her child’s
eye with a microscope, the floor
melted into kaleidoscope coupons
of gray, blue, green, everything
Fratercula Cirrhata, or Boy Crossing

puffin imaginable, & I was big,
puffy, swollen as with the feathers
of Christ himself, Christ on the cross,
on the island.
Bolt of Energy by Britnie Walston
There’s enough tension riding the beetle’s gasoline wings
to fill a chest with heat, rapid beating—
there’s enough light coating the polyester curtains
to convince me that faith
is a lonely condition,
a whimper in the mouth, steady then not
a thing at all.
I take it all like gospel. I hold my soggy tongue
in my hands. It is what I have
to give you.
In the river park the old music
stakes its claim to your new kind of listening.
Everywhere the grasshoppers
are in tantrum. First, something is novel
then all of a sudden the world has realigned.
Sometimes you don’t see it coming.
Sometimes you just want that lonely star
to mind its own business. The music plays
and there are streamers littering
the low branches over the water, tadpoles
stuck in a spit-thick patch of mud.
You can smell the hickory, which matters
more than it should to you. A woman
closes her eyes and runs her wet fingers
over her face. Another thumbs the lace cloth
draped over the table. It seems like eternity
is an impractical thing to participate in.
The first thing the police officer will ask you is *if you like partying*. This is obviously a facetious question and definitely not an invitation. But despite its absurdity, it is the most common refrain you will ever hear.

Answer: not particularly.

This is true. You don’t like partying. You’re not a fan of big crowds and people doing the same things at the same parties ad nauseam. Plus, they never play any music you like. This is not the response the officer is asking for, so even if you want to explain that you prefer small gatherings with friends while watching some Jackie Chan flick or a particularly bad horror film, again answer: not particularly.

The New Haven, MO, police are constantly worried about the sanctity of their movie theater parking lot. So once the police officer is satisfied with asking you about your party preferences, you will be asked if you were doing donuts in the previously mentioned movie theater parking lot. Do not respond with *there’s a movie theater in New Haven?* This is, of course, your first thought. New Haven is after all a smaller town than the one you reside in, and your hometown barely has a grocery store. It’s natural that you’ll want to answer honestly. It may even begin to slip from your tongue, but stay firm.

Answer: no.

This, too, is true. You don’t even know where the New Haven movie theater could possibly be in this one-street town. How it’s economically feasible for this town without even a Dollar General to support such a business. This accusation will haunt you more than being accused of being on drugs, selling drugs, carrying drugs, or general thievery. This mystery of the New Haven movie theater will haunt you till twenty years later when, back home, you
drive down to the river with your father to see all the flooding. The river has gone down by now, but you can see the water lines on all the buildings. The odd piece of lawn furniture in the mud-coated street. Turn to your left, and there behold a single-screen movie theater tucked in a corner on a one-way street with street-side parking. You would not describe this as a parking lot. Even if you possessed skills equal to that of the stunt driver for the *Fast and Furious* franchise, you would find it nearly impossible to do donuts in this so-called parking lot. Some questions only beget more questions. The police officer will not be interested in any of this, again answer: no.

The police officer will ask to search your vehicle. They will ask you to step outside. They will ask if you are in possession of anything they should be made aware of.

Answer: yes, okay, then no.

Narrate your movements as though you are in a very dry novel, but try to make it casual. *Alright, just taking off my seat belt, opening the car door, etc.*, say it like you’ve been sitting all day at work and just can’t wait to stand against a car. Do not make it sound sassy. You will, of course, feel very sassy. Spreading your legs and putting your hands on the roof of your vehicle, all while a person runs their hands up your legs, into the cuffs of your jeans, then into your pockets, tends to put you in a sassy mood. Remember, no sass. This interaction has now entered the long stage. You will be detained for no less than twenty minutes. If you exercise your right to not be searched, the dogs of course will be called, and this interaction will last no shorter than 45 minutes. Before the police officer goes to actually search your vehicle, they will have to wait for another officer to arrive at the scene. Do not acknowledge the awkwardness as the officer stares at you with his hand at his hip. If you are lucky, he will try to make this seem casual. If not, he will make this action overt. All of this is awkward to say the least, but try and look nonchalant. Look off into the distance. There are always many interesting things to see off into the distance. If this interaction occurs at night, the odds have just increased that the second officer will have the whiff of vodka on their breath and be in no mood. Be alarmed, but don’t look alarmed. This officer will not be as kind as the other officer. You will need to repeat the steps from the beginning with prudent care. Without a doubt, each question will be punctuated with either boy or son. When this officer runs their hands up your leg, it will make you feel as if every action in the universe is predetermined, and you are but one of many bunches of
molecules moving throughout, helpless. When they place their hands into the cuffs of your jeans and onto your ankles, the feel of their skin on yours, you will feel as if you should run. Do not run. Before they put their hands into your pocket, they will ask once more if there is anything they should be made aware of. They will press into you real close, and the scent of vodka will grow stronger. They will whisper that they better not get pricked, if they do, so help me god…They will not complete this statement. It is unnecessary as you get the drift.

Again, answer: not particularly, no, yes, okay, then no.
An old man’s cigarette has turned our train in on itself, smokestack chugging white through the cars, frosting the windows with exhaust. I have not slept since Changsha; the scent of tobacco is restless in my bunk, anxious to jump from bolted windows—we are captives, swaying together in the dark, our eyes closed against the passing station lights.
In the afternoons the buildings hide, neighbors peering through sheer curtains. I thought it might help to inhale only through my nostrils, puff words through my mouth, circular breathing my way through a city vibrating, a rumbling didgeridoo hum exhaled by stronger lungs than mine. A plane almost crashed last week; the passengers took orange-snouted selfies, oxygen bags lolling out of crooked masks, transparent tongues licking at the escaping air. They forgot to cover their noses, left them exposed to the suck of broken glass and altitude, cilia straining toward the sky. My aunt told me when God closes a door he opens a window. Maybe she meant houses, not airplanes. Not apartments where spare towels guard cracks and crevices until factories and stoves and cigarettes can be wrung from them like old bathwater. Still, I sit in a patch of grass, belly swelling and sinking against the thick breeze. Those people who fell toward Earth, waiting for the other engine to fail—in the photos, their pupils are dilated, eyes gasping at the light.
Sky Room by Savannah & Evan D. Williams
just now forming
  this curb rot
crisscrossed heft
waterlogged pallets
dirty hoodie
  pickup dump
  somehow
  grass grows through
each spare tire
  circle tufts green the row
  stamp rubber bits
  into soil
divots
the same verb as sown
grubbing again and again
  the alleyway growing
  one long nail
the four-way
all buried oil
  and/or
  rivets
the city comedy begins with a one-size-fits-all blocking father:
a xenophobic shoeman, an illumination of a rose stem
and a peeping willow. top-heavy exposition, etc.

Act II is the kid’s first shot

obviously there’s a problem here.
a pattern in which nobody notices
the man in the tactical suit
waltzing through the crowd
and nobody notices him brandishing
electronics in the corner

Act III is the heist montage

when the video ends, and each couple
has died
and risen
and died again—
repeated as thematically appropriate—
there’s a slideshow:

a proposal, or
   a shoeshine

Brendan Allen
a necklace, or
  a leash

a triplet, or
  three short blasts, ringing

a crack where a weed should be.
Photogram by Guilherme Bergamini
When the phone rang early Thursday afternoon, the Piper didn’t answer it right away. It rang a few times, the dusty receiver vibrating on its base, before he realized what was making the noise. Honestly, it had been so long since anyone called the landline that he forgot he even had it. The landlord had set it up years ago and, since it wasn’t a separate bill, he never thought to disconnect it. The Piper eventually rolled himself off the edge of his bed and ambled to the desk.

“Yeah,” he said, but heard only a dial tone in response. He hung up. He looked at the clock. It was already half past two. If he had to be awake, the Piper decided he might as well make something for breakfast. No sooner had he undone the twist tie on a loaf of bread than the phone rang again.

“Please hold for the mayor,” a woman’s voice said, before he could offer a greeting.

“You called me…” he began, before the hold music clarified that nobody was listening.

His curiosity piqued, he held the receiver and listened to a lyric-less version of a blues standard he hadn’t heard in sixty years. He tried recalling the name of it. One pitfall of having a perfect ear for music was that every melody he heard implanted itself somewhere in his brain. Occupational hazard. As for living forever, one pitfall was that he couldn’t always remember all the details, and sometimes spent far too much time on them.

“Is this the Piper?” A man’s voice broke through the music.

“What does it matter—”

“This is the mayor. I need to talk with you about an opportunity. You can serve your city—”
“Let me stop you right there. I don’t do that anymore. Not for a long time.”

“I believe we can make it worth your while. Just take the meeting.”

The Piper looked around at what he still called his home and office, though it was more accurate to just call it home. He hadn’t had time to make up the sheets on the bed before taking the call, but he hadn’t done so in years anyway. The peeling wallpaper could use an update. He’d really fallen behind on dusting too; that was probably worth fixing before agreeing to let a government official come over.

“Fine,” he said, “though I can’t promise anything. When do you want to meet?”

“Now. Downstairs. The car’s been waiting for you.”

The Piper went to the window and peered through the dusty metal blinds, adding cleaning those to his mental chore list. The light hurt his eyes.

The car that had pulled up wasn’t the limousine he was expecting, but a sleek black sport-utility vehicle, the kind he didn’t see often in the city. A large man in a navy suit and sunglasses stood next to it, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’ll need a few moments to get dressed.”

“Whatever you’re wearing is fine—”

“I’m wearing nothing. You woke me up.” It wasn’t strictly true, but a torn and flimsy pair of briefs was hardly appropriate for the occasion.

“It’s two in the afternoon—”

“Give me five minutes. I’ll be right down.”

After hanging up the phone, the Piper went to the bathroom mirror and took a quick view of himself. From the deep bags under his eyes to the uneven salt-and-pepper stubble it always took him at least two weeks to grow, he looked rougher than usual. He didn’t have time for a shave, but splashed some water on his face. A quick sniff of his armpits made him lather up a washcloth and spray a bit too much deodorant.

He briefly considered whether to throw on the pied outfit hanging in his closet, but he hadn’t worn his trademark suit since before the war in Hamelin. Back then, he’d seen soldiers use colorful clothes as an excuse to arrest suspected gypsies, and had changed his style to better avoid notice. Since coming to America and giving up his old vocation, he’d kept it around as a reminder of his old life, but hadn’t even tried it on in a decade.

Instead, he pulled on a baggy blue sweatshirt and a pair of black jeans with the knees worn out. He combed his unwashed hair back and threw on
a felt cap. The phone rang again while he was pulling on his work boots, but he knew it could only be the mayor’s office urging him on, and opted to run down the stairs instead of answering.

He was already regretting picking it up the first time.

“You the Piper?” asked the large man, whose bulk was more impressive up close, suggesting he served as some kind of bodyguard.

The Piper nodded and tipped his cap.

“Funny. In that getup, you look more like the world’s oldest hipster.”

“And you look like an ape the mayor sprung from the zoo. Guess he keeps you around for your brains.”

The big man opened the door to the vehicle and slammed it hard once the Piper was inside.

Up front sat a young woman in a business suit, who must have been the caller, while the muscle slid into the driver seat and hit a button that noisily raised a partition.

The mayor sat facing the front of the vehicle and motioned with his hand for the Piper to take a seat directly across. The Piper recognized him immediately; he looked pretty much like he did in newspaper photos, except lean enough to suggest cameras really did add a few pounds. Despite his short grey hair, he looked young for his age, and his large eyes gave him a somewhat predatory look. He sat with his legs spread and his hands in front of him, touching his fingertips together in a thoughtful-looking pyramid.

Once the Piper sat, the mayor leaned forward. Just enough to look the shorter man in the eye, without invading too much of his personal space.

“I am sorry for the short notice, but there’s a matter I need to discuss.”

“How did you find me? That’s an unlisted number.”

“It’s my business to know everything that happens in this city. But I don’t think that’s your real question. You’re wondering how I knew you even existed.”

The Piper nodded in acknowledgement. There was no need to say more until he knew what was happening.

“A few years ago, I heard about a man living in a converted office downtown, and that if he walked down an alley whistling, a few rats would follow him. The first time I heard about it, it felt like a rumor, but worth remembering. The third time, it was something I had to confirm for myself. Three’s a trend, after all. Once I saw it, it didn’t take me long to put things together.”
Even though he tried not to do anything musical outside his place for that exact reason, the Piper knew he’d sometimes gotten sloppy. Having an ear for music meant songs got stuck in his head easily, and it took a conscious effort not to hum or whistle. The longer he’d hidden, and the better he’d gotten at adapting to his surroundings, the less attention he tended to pay. Seven centuries on the run did that. He wasn’t aware of any rats following him lately, but there was no reason to doubt it.

“I filed that information away for the day I needed it,” the mayor continued, “and we seem to have reached that point.”

“If you’re planning to turn me in—”

“Turn you in? No, no, you misunderstand me.” The mayor leaned back and laughed, before returning his fingers to their pyramid shape. “I need your help. I have an election coming up in six days, and I want to win.”

“We all want a lot of things. What does that have to do with me?” The Piper didn’t follow local politics closely. Still, he read the paper often enough to know the mayor was leading in all the polls, but was in an increasingly tight race against a younger and better-funded opponent. A poll last week called the race a statistical dead heat.

“I’ve been looking for a problem I can solve quickly. Dramatically. Something the average voter’s going to notice.

“Something like eliminating our city’s rat problem.”

There it was.

“That’s a big job. It’s going to cost you, and it’ll need to be in cash.”

The mayor rapped his knuckles twice on the roof of the car. The partition across from him opened, and the female staffer passed back a thick leather briefcase. It was heavy enough that the mayor needed a second effort to lift it to his lap. He then swung it around and opened it so that the Piper could see the stacks of hundreds inside.

Even though the Piper hadn’t yet worked out a price in his head, the suitcase contained more than he could have imagined requesting.

“One of these once you agree to the job,” the mayor said, closing the briefcase and patting the top. “And another when it’s done.”

“Consider your rat problem solved—” The Piper reached for the briefcase, but the mayor pulled it back. He leaned forward so far that the two men’s noses were almost touching.

“Not so fast, my friend. There are a few rules I need you to follow. Get it done by Sunday night, so people come out to vote Tuesday with it fresh in their minds. Do as much as you can at night if you don’t want everyone
knowing who was behind it. And don’t even think about screwing me on this.”

The Piper nodded and took the money. “And if you know who I am and what I’ve done, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what happens if you fail to pay me.”

“It seems we have an understanding.”

“One question. What do you want me to do with the rats?”

“The way I heard it, you drowned them in the river last time. Just like you did all the kids. We have a perfectly good river.”

“You heard wrong on all counts. I didn’t kill anyone, man or mouse or any variety of either. Merely sent them away.”

“Then how—”

“Trade secret. Can’t give that one away even for all this money. Keep your side of the bargain and it won’t matter anyway. Now, I think our work here is done?”

The mayor nodded, and the Piper slid toward the door, wedging his rear end out of the soft seat and trying to minimize the noise it made. He saluted once he exited the vehicle, but the mayor held the door for a moment before letting it close.

“Remember, Mr. Piper. It needs to be done by Sunday night.”

Once he dropped the briefcase upstairs and hid it under his mattress, the Piper took a long walk in the autumn evening, putting together a plan.

That the city’s rat problem had gotten out of control hardly qualified as news. Every time he walked down an alley, the Piper found blue or black dumpsters teeming with enough garbage to keep even the most discerning of rodents fat and happy. When dusk shifted to night, a careful observer would see rats ducking between fences or hugging the sides of buildings as they tried to get the first seating at that evening’s feast.

Even the exterior wall of the vintage brick office building where he lived had a stark yellow sign showing an angular drawing of a black rat either screaming in pain or growling in aggression—it could be taken either way—and a red line crossing it out. Lots of buildings throughout the city had the same signs; others had ones with a more accurately rendered, fuzzy rat and a more subdued color palette. Either way, the signs detailed the city’s current plan to eradicate the rodents. The point was to warn people not to feed the rats, and to be aware of the poison the city left out for them, in case a curious dog wanted to investigate.
Paying the Piper

Poison was never something the Piper liked. He found it needlessly cruel. And, based on his new assignment, it must not have been particularly effective.

The Piper stopped near the river. He leaned over one of the safety rails and let the murky smell of the water fill his nostrils. As he gazed out at the glistening skyscrapers and heard the honking and commotion of traffic, he started to understand the scale of his assignment. If he was going to earn his payday, he had much to do.

The next morning, he set to work. He’d kept his old pipes in their case for decades, hidden between the mattress and frame of his murphy bed so they would be the first thing to grab if he ever needed to flee in the middle of the night.

The outside of the case had accumulated a thin layer of dust, and he had to wipe it down with a spare shirt, but the pipes inside were spotless. “G usually works well for rats,” he said aloud as he chose which of his instruments to play. Like a master sniper, he assembled the long pipe, twisting each piece into place. The old cork inside was still smooth, and the pieces fit easily. The thin reed had cracked, but he had a dozen spares banded together inside the case. It would take a few tunes to soften the new one, but he needed to practice anyway.

“Okay, here goes.” He put the pipe to his lips. The first few notes were squeaky, and he cringed briefly, glad this particular pipe played at a frequency too high for his neighbors to hear. At least the human ones. A few more attempts, and the notes started to sound right. After a few scales to warm up, he practiced a tune.

He played one he’d used to draw rats before, something he’d first heard from a Saxon troubadour long before the plague. He wondered if it would translate. Were rats on this side of the ocean susceptible to the same music? And did their reactions change with time? The Piper worked his way toward the window as he played, trying to catch a glimpse of any rodents affected by his song.

Then he heard them.

The walls started to shake slightly, as if feeling the aftershocks of an earthquake. More telling was the noise of pounding feet along the building’s wooden bones, growing louder as it moved higher. He stopped playing when the sound felt too close, as the flimsy drywall near the door started to bulge from the weight of the stymied rodents in the walls.
“Don’t know my own strength sometimes,” he said as he began disassembling the pipe and packing it back in the case. There was no reason to wait until Saturday; the rust he had feared wasn’t an issue.

There was plenty of time to nap before sundown and still wake up early enough to really practice his breathing. It was going to be a long night. But two things were clear. First, and most importantly, he could still play.

Second, it might be a good idea to find a better apartment once he got paid.

“Do you see that?” Rhonda Tilson asked. She’d had a few drinks, but nothing unusual for a Friday night. Certainly not enough to conjure up what she glimpsed coming from the alley a few doors down from the bar.

“I didn’t see anything,” her date answered before resuming kissing her neck.

“Seriously, what is that?” She’d started work at six that morning, and the bar had just closed at two, but exhaustion didn’t make her hallucinate. “Look, over there.”

The clouds blocking much of the moon’s light obscured some of the motion against the darkness, but she knew what she was seeing. Rats were running out of the alley. Rhonda had seen plenty of rats around the dumpsters near her northside apartment. What she hadn’t seen was so many rats moving in unison. At first, it was just a few of them, loping like small greyhounds. Soon, though, came a swarm as wide as the alley, rows of rats running in formation.

“What the...ew,” her date said as he turned to see the street around them flooding with rodents. “Let’s get in the car.” He looked queasy.

As they turned and speed-walked to where the sedan was parked, Rhonda thought she saw a man out of the corner of her eye, walking alongside the rats. It looked like he was playing an instrument, though Rhonda couldn’t hear any music.

By the time the Piper stumbled up the rickety steps of his building’s wooden back entrance, just before midnight on Sunday, and collapsed from exhaustion in his favorite chair, the city was nearly free of rats.

Not entirely. There were plenty of pet rats in cages or otherwise kept inside, but nobody was going to be upset about that. There had to be some older rats with hearing so poor they couldn’t hear his songs, but they were few in number and not likely to reproduce. The Piper found it unfair that he
wasn’t able to get lab rats out of their predicaments, but the music only drew
them; it couldn’t get them through physical barriers.

His breathing was labored, since he’d spent three consecutive nights
walking around the city. As out of shape as he was, it would have been a
challenge even without playing music the whole time. His lips were badly
chapped from the reed and mouthpiece, and a few of his fingers had cramped
from working muscles he’d allowed to atrophy.

A sense of satisfaction came over him, and he felt he’d earned the chance
to fall asleep in the armchair, listening to some music on the old transistor
he kept on the end table.

In his dream, an unexpected alarm broke his concentration while he was
performing an important task; the details disappeared as soon as he woke up
and realized the noise was actually the ringing of his landline.

“For the love...” he rose from his seat with some difficulty and got to the
phone. “Hello?”

“Please hold for the mayor,” the familiar voice said.

“Ugh.”

When the mayor came on the line, the Piper couldn’t help telling him,
“You know, you can just call me directly without the whole hold routine.”

“Sure,” the mayor said with a slight laugh that indicated he’d never do so.

“Come downstairs. I want to talk to you.”

Another peek through the less-dusty blinds confirmed the black car
waiting outside.

“Keep your pants on, and give me a chance to put mine on...” he began
before realizing the mayor had hung up.

The Piper changed clothes without putting down the receiver, pulling off
the sweaty shirt that clung to his torso and dropping the pants that were also
heavy with accumulated perspiration. He changed into baggy shorts and an
old Aloha shirt, which felt both overly casual for a mayoral meeting and
appropriate to his level of concern about that.

Minutes later, he was again seated across from the mayor in the back
seat.

“This morning I took a long jog,” the mayor told him. “The same route
I always take, an hour before sunrise so there’s almost nobody else on the
path. Do you know what I noticed?”

“That sleeping in sounds like a better idea?”

“That there were no rats. Usually they’re out eating at that time, before
the city really wakes up. It seems you did your job well.”
“You know what they say. Any job worth doing. Now, about my money.”
The mayor smirked and brought out a second briefcase. The Piper couldn’t help but skim through the stacks of hundreds to make sure it was the right amount, but his benefactor didn’t say anything.
“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you,” the Piper said as he closed the case and started to edge out of the car.
“One question first.”
“Sure.”
“Where did you put them all? The rats?”
“Nowhere anyone can find them. I assure you, it will be like they just walked into a seam in time and never came out.” The Piper said it in a matter-of-fact tone, as his explanation was the actual fact.
“You killed them, right? Are they all dead?”
“Of course not. I’m not a killer. They’re just existing somewhere far away, where they don’t need to bother anyone. They’ll age and die like any other rat, but no faster or slower.”
“Is that what you did with the children? In Hamelin?”
The Piper said nothing, but he slammed the door hard behind him.

The local news called the election Tuesday night just ten minutes after voting closed.
The present and future mayor had clearly expected the Piper to hold up his end of the bargain. Since Monday morning, local television and radio hardly let a commercial break go by without at least one campaign-approved ad about how the mayor had “cleaned up” the city’s rat problem, and how he had plans to bring the same can-do attitude to other major issues. “He’s just getting started,” in the parlance of the new slogan.
Watching an ad at a bar on Monday night, the Piper was struck by the clever merging imagery that made clearing the city of rats suggest a bigger effort to clean up corruption and inefficiency. Left unsaid was why the cleanup had waited until days before the election. The Piper’s role also didn’t merit a mention.
Still, a race that had shown the mayor only slightly ahead for the last few weeks turned into a landslide.
The Piper hadn’t voted; he’d never even registered, part of his plan to stay as far off the grid as modern reality allowed. He didn’t have a strong opinion either. The mayor had solved his financial situation for some time, and he understood why people saw it as getting things done, but any deal
done with briefcases of money struck the Piper as betraying a certain lack of transparency. But, the young opponent seemed like an empty suit elevated only by being the other option compared to a generally unpopular mayor. Besides, the Piper had quite a lot of cash on hand now. He spent Election Day fixing up his unit, and bought a burner cell phone so he could unplug the old receiver from the landline.

The next few months passed without much excitement. The Piper’s routine returned to normal, though he allowed himself a few more indulgences. Without fear of attracting rats from the alley, he took to practicing his pipe a few nights a week, playing in the keys he used for the rodents but careful to avoid any tune that might risk recalling them from their current location. His playing had been strong when he did his work for the mayor, and it reminded him how much he enjoyed making music.

Nearly a year after the election, he was in the middle of assembling one of his pipes when he heard a loud pounding on the door. Not expecting a visitor, he waited before answering.

“Piper, we know you’re in there. Open up.”
He couldn’t place the voice at first, but recognized the mayor’s massive bodyguard once he looked through the peephole. He unlatched the door.

“What are you doing here?”
“We called you several times. You didn’t answer.”
“I got rid of the phone. Nobody calls that number but your boss’s office.”
“And it didn’t occur to you that we might call you again? Never mind. Come with me. He’s waiting in the car. It’s an urgent matter.”

The urgency was clear on the mayor’s face. Already a thin man, he looked gaunt, with his skin tight on his face and the lines around his eyes more pronounced. He motioned for the Piper to sit, and the partition was already up.

“I’ll get right to the point,” he said. “If you’ve watched the news lately, you know I’m in kind of a tight spot.”

The Piper hadn’t watched the news, but he’d read the free weekly paper. A bribery scandal wasn’t a new problem in this city, and he couldn’t say he was surprised, considering the two heavy briefcases wedged under his mattress.

“I’m not sure what that has to do with me. The city’s rat problem is still solved as far as I know.”
The mayor crossed his legs and made a pyramid with his thin fingers. “Last time we spoke, you told me you were no killer, but you didn’t answer my question about the children.”

The Piper nodded, but said nothing. “Is the story true, that you rid the town of its children as easily as you had of its rats?”

“If you know that story, then you know that mayor refused to pay me for my work. There’s no reason for you to worry about the children of this city. Unless you’re planning to ask for the money back.”

“No, no. You misunderstand me.” He paused before continuing, choosing his words carefully. “If the story is true, then you can draw humans to follow you the same way you do rats.”

“Sure. If I have a reason to.”

“And you don’t kill them. You merely send them somewhere like, how did you put it? A seam in time?”

“Theoretically.”

“And if you wanted to, you could call them back?”

“If I remember how to play one of the songs that does that. What’s your point?”

The mayor grinned. “So there’s really no harm if you were to, say, clear certain people out of the city. At least for a while…”

The Piper had pieced together part of where the mayor was going, but he still wasn’t sure of the details. “So you’re not even going to pretend you’re innocent?”

“It’s just money. You understand.”

“If you think people won’t notice your accusers suddenly disappearing, I know some detective movies you should watch.”

“I know that, and that’s not what I was going to ask. I just need another initiative. Something bold to get the public back on my side. Like they were after the rats went away.”

The Piper said nothing, but motioned with his hands for the point to hurry along.

“As you know, our city’s had a homeless problem for years—”

“No.”

“Just for a little while. You can bring them back when this blows over.”

“Not interested.”

“I’ll make it worth your while. There’s more where those other briefcases came from. Shall we say double the fee?”
“Which part of no don’t you get?”

The mayor’s expression changed. “Maybe people would be interested to find out you’re real, alive, and living among them. We can play things that way if you’d prefer.”

The Piper just glared at him and shifted out of his seat.

“But a whole town’s children are fair game?” the mayor called out before the car door slammed.

The mayor must have been confident that the Piper would take the job, because an ad aired during the next day’s morning news touting the success of his plan to solve homelessness. The office had tried to cancel what had been an expensive ad buy, but one instance didn’t get deleted. For a few days, the ad boasting about a homeless solution that didn’t exist became the most talked-about story in town, even more than the mayor’s financial misdealings.

Three times that week, the bodyguard knocked at the Piper’s door. First, the large man asked for another meeting. Then offered another bribe. And, finally, a direct threat. “Take the homeless job, or the mayor goes public saying that it was your plan, and that you asked for bribes to carry it out.”

“Nobody’s going to believe that,” the Piper said from the other side of the door.

“They know the rats are gone. Once they know who did that, they’ll believe it. It’s not like you haven’t done it before.” The henchman slipped a phone number under the door. “You have two days.”

The Piper watched through the blinds for the vehicle to pull away and, as soon as the coast looked clear, slipped out the back stairwell and flagged down a cab.

Knowing the mayor’s office was desperate and wouldn’t stop bugging him, the Piper decided to stay at a motel on the west side of town for a few days. He brought his pipes, his briefcases of money, and a suitcase with a few changes of clothes. Just in case, he switched cabs in a parking lot on the way, though he didn’t see anyone following him.

Late that night, in his quiet hotel room, the Piper practiced another song he hadn’t played in centuries. He stayed up long past his usual bedtime, since he only had two days to get it right.
“How can I help you?” the mayor answered his phone. He didn’t recognize the number on the other end, and almost nobody had his direct line.

“How can I help you?” the mayor answered his phone. He didn’t recognize the number on the other end, and almost nobody had his direct line.

“Please hold for the Piper,” the Piper said in a sing-song voice, whistling a few notes before talking into the phone.

“Cute. Have you reconsidered my offer?”

“I think we should talk. Thought I’d come to you this time.”

“When? I have a window this afternoon—”

“Oh, I’m in the hallway outside. This shouldn’t take long.”

The mayor opened his office door to find the Piper sitting in one of the waiting-area chairs in his faded Aloha shirt. The Piper smiled and put his pipe to his lips. The mayor couldn’t hear the tune at all, but in a few seconds heard a rumbling.

He screamed as the stampede of rats came pouring through the hall and headed directly toward him. There were too many to count as they chased him back into his office, and their combined weight prevented him from closing the door. The mayor kept screaming, though the layers of rats crawling over him muffled the sound.

The Piper continued until no more rats arrived, by which point the office doorway was mostly obscured by moving piles of fur. He quickly disassembled the pipe and put the pieces in his pockets as he exited the building. On the way out, he tossed his burner phone in the trash.

It felt like a good time to find a new town.
Do you remember when you first heard rain, or did you feel it. Your Mimi’s pistachio cake. Willow trees. Church every Sunday. Youth group every Wednesday. A birdhouse for purple martins perched atop a tall, slender pole. The sound of someone cocking a BB gun. The sound of someone shooting at a flock of geese, but not really at them, just close enough to scare them. Was this the beginning of a downpour, or is that something you have been told. Storms breaking over our lake. Love like water skiing. A summer cold and green. Pale yellow shirts soaked in melancholy and hung out to dry in the backyard. Laughing in a red plastic chair, fingers tangled in your braid. The soft fire of a porch light. A star burning out. We spin on plastic horses in this carnival of rain. How can you say it gets better than this.

Hannah Cajandig-Taylor

You As Stormchaser
Hannah Cajandig-Taylor

Cliff Jumping at St. Mary’s Glacier

This did not happen
when I was standing at the basin

picking rocks from the water
until my heavy hands went numb

& I was in love with
things created from seismic activity.

I filled my pockets with the fallen
pieces of earth, gesturing in jarring pieces
to everything that treads over it.
If I took a walk one night

on another planet, I would hope for an overlap in our skies

where the distant stars would burn cold & weighted
Cliff Jumping at St. Mary’s Glacier

but we would still be able to
see one another from our own
awayness, even after the
moons had shifted places

& the earth’s plates
were licked clean of their crumbs.
If anything, he was scared. The waves rose up high all of a sudden. From the edge of the rock he carefully stood on, he leaned down and tried to retrieve his shoe. Warmth, and cold, and warmth and cold again. Then one crazed wave grabbed him by the head, tied his hair into a knot, and pulled him in. His hands swept the ocean floor and lifted off tiny rocks as he drifted on the shore. He managed to find strength to send to his palms and stood on them, scratch-scratch. Clouds—weren’t they supposed to be leaving by now? Wasn’t it high time for an orange-purple sky? And waves, they might as well grow bigger even, take him all the way down.

He was on his way out of the dargah, the taste of the skirts he’d been rubbing his face on smeared on his lips, the resonating sound of the guttural hymns he’d been exposed to in his left ear. He took his face in his hands, scolded himself over the years that went by yearning to look up, just once, and see their beautiful face—ach! A crooked cobblestone, he hit his heel. He leaned down to see the back of his foot, a small scratch. A tiny bit of spit would do the job.

If he hadn’t caught a glimpse of a bird perched on the roof of their ramshackle shed that they called a house, he would have been suffocated by the disgusting imagery that awaited him inside of the soup dripping down from his father’s beard in streams. He stepped on the porch and knocked on the door.

The table was set around his stuttering father. He was saying how ha-ha-ha-hard the times were, but it was taking a while. The boy sat down and the family prayed, thankful for the food. A gooey soup dripped from spoons. Mothers watched the void for a while; one of them passed the bread,
another took the salt back from the mouth trying to thank the holy presence of Abdul Hamid. The old man's mind could spill all over the table through his palate; he was shouting how ha-ha-ha-hard it was to swallow. Meanwhile his son was counting the minutes until the main course to continue writing his story, which had been coming together on the backs of several fascicules. He leaned on his own mother's shoulder, where he couldn't find comfort. He stared over the table through the tip of the rice spoon. Grains stuck in his father's beard as he spoke: “These people, they gave up their trust in Allah and the night. I received some copies, I only glanced over them. But they did forget about the sultan's shadow. They continue to live as if in a sunny desert.”

He had begun frequenting the dargah to escape his father's wrath at home. His tutors had spoken well about his reading skills, which had helped him join for good.

He commuted to Kanlıca from Üsküdar with a pull cart every day. He thought about the awaiting night on his way back. His own trust in Allah would smile at him from under the sheets where it was hidden. People spoke about someone going somewhere and resisting something... What was the truth behind that? Was it something that Muhammad said? Could an amulet help? There was no way of knowing for sure. His eyes locked on the blank page in his hands. He pondered while he waited for the rice to finish.

This was extremely odd. They were both naked and wet from head to toe, a layer of sweat reflecting onto the dargah's walls. He wanted to yell at them, but he knew that would be an invasion. Of something. Something challenged him to stand strong and to not fidget as they made a run on him. He wasn't one to be crushed by them or stay silent, not a chance. He did have a stance, a characterized walk of his own. With only two steps, he could create a gap between the two and self-govern like a tyrant who rules with his groins. A foreign name, a different type of skin, he saw a tongue, that was even rougher than his own. It was way too long, black and somehow left uncircumcised. It must have slipped somehow, but how did you manage to survive this long? Look at all the muscle and veins and strength you have.

He assumed that only Allah would be present, and maybe dervish in the dargah. And in them, only prayer.

The dargah was known as a conservative and religious lodge beyond its walls. Inside, boys were taught fancy Persian and tested on the wisdoms of the Quran. In reality, black beards spoke much more beautiful words, like the instructions based on Gazali the Mad Brother. There were also pictures
of visible male organs copied from bahnâmes. Special deliveries of Mahmud El-Mamut-ül İınancıvan, one of the dervishes. These things made sense to them; they were pretending to write hadiths, making copies, feasting...All of their water was for ink, not for drinking.

There were lands encircled with borders, private places. There, human meant something entirely different. He could want that, to be entirely different. It could feel like flying maybe, let free in the air. His imam told him to imagine that very moment. Close your eyes and think of Polymath. We will get you those wings; no one will ever know. You take a step into the void from the top of a tower. Just imagine the rest. Go on, picture it. See? Your feet are lighter, your shoulders start lifting off. Just like walking, but very fast, and for a purpose. As if you were dying of thirst and saw a spring afar. Quick, hurry. Don’t worry about your skirts; they won’t get in your way. You’re as naked as you wish. You take off your clothes wherever you desire, sheets of fabric fly away. I left a word under your tongue. Go on, suck it. It’s smaller than candy: Free.

At first, he was constantly scared whilst he produced the same text over and over again. As he copied the pictures, he always felt the presence of a set of eyes on his neck.

To fertilize with the two, running around and round with semen / a revelation? Hah! No, not this time. You’re not free, still not free / Not as free as you wrote in your stories / we negated you for good / all the times you felt sweat dripping on your body / my eyes into the void. How belittling it was to be enslaved by lust, instead of being devoted to it willingly.

Dervishes said: We will pick you up and take you to the stables. Put you in bed with a slave from Abyssinia. You’ll lose track of time. You’ll forget all you know about faith, all that you’ve ever learned about it, may it be the companions of Muhammad or the purpose of feasting. Then you’ll love us.

He remembered his childhood quite well. With his neighborhood friend Hamid, he shaped thistle sticks and sneakily stuffed their mouths with sherbet before the cannonball. Hamid used to talk about how he’d go to Venice to be a merchant. I don’t like the green carpet, I step on the prayer rug, but I only get money stuff, and I learned about dukedom. When I touch the tower’s stone, I’m scared. He would respond pouring out, You know that thing they kept making us write? I’ll become that and fly away. What I always want to do most, now and always is to protect people. And you know that comb? I’ll take it from the dervish and comb my hair with it. Though I don’t like muslin and silk together. Oh, and that stick they smoke? I read about

Nazli Karabiyikoglu
The Dargah

the dreams it gives you in an interpretation, Imam took it right away. I will find whatever that plant is. And when I do, I’ll do the sleep that all children do. Because I never could. Hamid. When that gooey soup smears on your beard, no matter how much you rub it with water, it stays on and around the lips. That lip touches mine after everyone goes to sleep. And you know what, I know that they hear it. I never loved the man who fathered me.

First, his door opens bringing in lantern light and half-lit beard
Turn your back on the cotton sheets, hold-hold-hold your breath
Hold it, if he utters your name
Hold it, if he snarls without your name
Let it out if he reaches to touch your hair, the light fades
To your ear he whispers, “Your daughters and wives are given to you, all females and mares,
so that you inseminate them as you wish in dark corners of your houses”
Then his door closes, you bring back air under your sheets
The bottom part of your body colored like bleeding roses
Heavy breathing, as if he is cho-cho-choking
We’d been exiled from Caucasus and handed over to you;
Take us, choke and kill all the future humans our eggs create
With your flesh
With your teeth.

He remembered the time when his nightmares began. You’re a grownup now, come on now, they’d say to him. But his back was sore, and the rice was always too heavy. Each and every evening, he needed a better lit space, separate from his other siblings, and a desk to write his story. He didn’t say a word to anyone at the dargah, which was his way of entrusting Allah. The dargah was an escape from his father, but there too, a great thirst for his flesh awaited.

He ran away. Walked for a while, quickened his steps. Then slowed down again.

The whiteness of his skin smeared, scraped. What had to be kept hidden, unwritten at the dargah in a sack, and the remains of what his father leaked in him dried—
if a woman jumped jumped jumped, a fetus would fall out. What if I did?
Hold it! We made up Persian phrases, and verses from the Quran, Who did you truly betray, your father or your dargah?

He left the house at night. It was quiet outside. He ran to the fountain and caught a carriage. The cart almost flew through the night, so fast. The wheels beat the stones, he grew wings. It was over. Was it really over?

What is human? And what is me? Who gives the dargah its power? If Allah commands us to feast, who puts thirst in the throat when the stomach is tamed through hunger? Where is the verse and who believes it? Or who wrote it? Who makes the actual rules? What is human? Is it just a breathing being? Does that make depraved fiends beings? Who are we beyond the borders of our lands? Where is Abyssinia who benefits this holy insemination? The dargah lays the son under a believer to have a holy child. Is it licit to exactly copy a handwriting?
You like to drive barefoot. There’s something about flying down the highway and pressing your bare soles to the ridges of the gas pedal, feeling the car rumble under your feet. You like to kick your shoes casually under the seat, socks tossed on the empty passenger side, toes finding every fiber of the carpet and every crumb on the floor. It feels powerful, driving barefoot, like you’re doing something bad, something rebellious in the way that will get all the good southern ladies at the country club to click their tongues and whisper in disapproval. You like to press that gas pedal into the floor, feel the car humming around you, the wind rushing around the outside. You like to eye the trees on the side of the road, and sometimes, for a moment, for an instant, when you let your thoughts run free, you think about what would happen if your hands were to let go of the wheel, to let your feet take control as the car spun onto the grass and into those trees. You think about the looks on the faces of the firemen pulling your barefoot body from the car, your shoes thrown through the windshield and into the uncut grass around you. No one will notice and pick them up, and so there they will remain, a monument to recklessness, until time disintegrates them to nothing. The thought makes you want to pull over and yank those shoes back on, even though you know they will never make their home in that grass, but the fabric against your still sockless feet would be a rough reminder that you aren’t ready to fly.

Katherine Suppa

Driving Barefoot
On the days when your obligations get heavy and gravity presses down a little harder on your shoulders, you wander out into the cool autumn morning and start to wonder what it would be like to feel the sharp sting of feathers beginning to poke through your pores. You would fall to your knees, leaves crunching under the weight of your body as you peel off layers of clothes, meant to keep you warm but overwhelming to your newly sensitive skin. You would feel the twist and heat of your bones grinding down, of your feet crunching and drying and toughening, becoming leathery and small and clawed. Your face would stretch and pull and tear, but your screams would sound like birdsong, high and melodic. Those budding feathers would finally burst through your skin, an explosion of blues and grays and whites, as you shrink down among your jackets. You would stretch your arms—now wings—and instinct would teach you how to fly, into the bright morning sky, leaving behind nothing but a handful of feathers. But for now, you must settle with being earth-bound, with the feeling of autumn wind running through your curls, and know that this may be the closest to flight you ever get.

Katherine Suppa

Fledgling
Ophelia can't be buried on consecrated ground because Ophelia went & fell in love with the wrong guy. The wrong body of water & Ophelia gets flowers because that is all confused girls deserve. & Ophelia should have thought of that before she went & lost her head over the most temporal things like virtue & skullwork.

Roseanna Alice Boswell

Domestic Skills for the Dead
This morning there is a flower on my tongue.  
I suppose it grew overnight, petal over petal  
taste bud brine & teeth—I brush  
around them carefully. I am unsure  
of root or stem. The anatomy of plants & skin.  
I did not invite this but I am used to  
unasked changes. The face of my aunt  
in the mirror. The way my hair has become  
grey overnight. My husband kisses me  
& doesn’t seem to notice the pollen  
the leaves—all my golden losses.
Contributors

Brendan Allen is a Kansan poet pursuing an MFA in poetry at Temple University. He also teaches undergraduate writing and studies a little urban planning on the side. Previously, he studied poetics and taught writing at the University of Maine. His work has also appeared in Parcel.

Julia Aloi is a writer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is an editor for BatCat Press, where she practices a variety of bookbinding techniques. She serves as the managing editor of the award-winning literary magazine, PULP. Her work has been published in BALLOONS Lit. Journal and Sheepshead Review.

With an affinity for the desperate, sinister and poignant, Alahnna Alvarado enjoys writing about losing, longing and defiance. When she is not stubbornly avoiding the Oxford comma, she studies the future at the University of Houston. Alahnna lives (and thrives!) with her husband, their three cats and a persistent mental illness.

Reporter and photographic/visual artist Guilherme Bergamini is Brazilian and graduated in journalism. For more than two decades, he has developed projects with photography and the various narrative possibilities that art offers. He has been awarded in national and international competitions and participated in collective exhibitions in 29 countries.

Roseanna Alice Boswell is a queer poet from Upstate New York. She holds an MFA from Bowling Green State University, and her first full-length collection, Hiding in a Thimble, is forthcoming with HVTN Press. Find her on Twitter @swellbunny posting about feminism and her love of exclamation marks.

Hannah Cajandig-Taylor resides in the Upper Peninsula, where she is an MFA Candidate at Northern Michigan University and an Editor for Passages North. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Gordon Square Review, Drunk Monkeys, and Third Point Press, among others. She has a bike named Stella.

Eylül Deniz Doğanay was born in 1996 in Istanbul, Turkey. She discovered her interest in the English language at a young age and therefore focused on foreign languages and translation. She is currently continuing her higher education at Bilkent University, where she added French to her working languages and aspires to become an interpreter. She took on her first long-term project when she began translating the
works of Nazli Karabiyikoglu in the summer of 2018; she believes in the particular work and its universal value and in the translator's mission to convey that value.

Jodie Filan was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. 27 years old. Jodiefilanart.com.

Jeff Fleischer is a Chicago-based author, journalist, and editor. His fiction has appeared in more than forty publications including the Chicago Tribune's Printers Row Journal, Shenandoah, and the Saturday Evening Post. He is the author of Votes of Confidence (Zest, 2016 and 2020), Rockin' the Boat (Zest, 2015), and The Latest Craze (Fall River Press, 2011).

Channa Goldman is a junior creative writing student at SUNY Purchase. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in: Rookie, Teen Ink, GRL MAG, Pinstriped Magazine, Running Wild Press, Gutter, Variant Literature Journal, Liquid Imagination and Small Orange. She currently works as a poetry editor for Italics Mine and editor-in-chief for Submissions Magazine.

T Guzman writes and does things in general. MFA student at Northern Michigan University. Splits time between the UP and Southern California. Tweets @t_guzman.

Jacob Griffin Hall was raised outside of Atlanta. He is currently a PhD student in English at the University of Missouri where he works as audio editor for The Missouri Review. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in DIAGRAM, New South, Split Rock Review, The Carolina Quarterly, and elsewhere.

Nazli Karabiyikoglu is a Turkish author, now full-time resident in Georgia, who recently escaped from the political, cultural, and gender oppression in Turkey. She helped create the #MeToo movement within the Turkish publishing industry, from which she was then excommunicated. With an M.A. in Turkish Language and Literature from Boğaziçi University, Karabiyikoglu has five books published in Turkish and has recently completed translations of two new books for international publication. Having won six literary awards in her country, she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2019.

Christie Ma is an emerging multidisciplinary artist from Hong Kong and Canada focused on realizing the embodied and untranslatable through the visual arts. Christie is also a writer, poet, photographer, actor, and activist who is passionate about international human rights and social equity.

Alice Pettway is the author of three books of poetry: The Time of Hunger, Moth,

**Remi Recchia** is a Ph.D. candidate in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University. His work has appeared in *Sleet Magazine, Barzakh, Pittsburgh Poetry Review, Porter House Review* (formerly *Front Porch Journal*), *Gravel, Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *HVTN Press*, among others. He holds an MFA in poetry from Bowling Green State University.

A native Michiganian of Polish ancestry, **Tiffany Stachnik** is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in English pedagogy at Northern Michigan University. When Tiffany isn’t absorbed in her own thoughts, you can usually find her deep in a book, speaking German, or immersing herself in world cultures.

**Katherine Suppa** is a writer and student at Elon University, pursuing a degree in English: Creative Writing. She enjoys knitting and baking in her free time; she is currently teaching herself to make bread. She is sure she will write an essay on that process in the future.

**Britnie Walston**, a Maryland versatile artist, captures beauty, emotion, and energy through light, vibrant color, depth, and texture. Exaggerated brushstrokes and abstract color give her paintings life and voice and are produced using a variety of unconventional techniques. She depicts the emotions of liberation (“set free”) and freedom (“being free”). More of her work can be found at www.BNWArt.com.

**Evan D. Williams** investigates the quandaries of the numinous and carnal self in mostly photo-based media. **Savannah Williams**’s practice transverses the liminal zone between fine art and craft. They share a Radical Reconstruction-era farmhouse in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains with their two cats.

**Sophie Yang** is an 18-year-old artist raised in Seoul, Korea. Inspired by the ubiquity of information and knowledge, she creates reflective work that does not only show herself but also portrays the world she perceives.
Brendan Allen
Julia Aloï
Alahnna Alvarado
Guilherme Bergamini
Roseanna Alice Boswell
Hannah Cajandig-Taylor
Eylül Deniz Doğanay
Jodie Filan
Jeff Fleischer
Channa Goldman
T Guzman
Jacob Griffin Hall
Nazli Karabiyikoglu
Christie Ma
Alice Pettway
Remi Recchia
Tiffany M. Stachnik
Katherine Suppa
Britnie Walston
Evan D. Williams
Savannah Williams
Sophie Yang