

# lagom.

*a journal*

*Lagom: A Journal* - December 2018.

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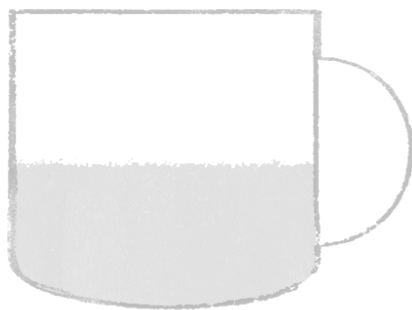
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Editors: Meagan R. Thomas, Henry Milek, and Jessica Bensimhon

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*Lagom: A Journal* showcases flash fiction, narrative micropoetry and short-form creative nonfiction submissions that, in their brevity, reveal the infinite possibilities contained within the very simple. The name “lagom” comes from the Swedish word for “not too much, not too little.”





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## Snore Catcher

Babitha Marina Justin

I recorded many  
a snore tonight.

My sons breathe into  
the depths of their dreams,  
they smile, snort and tremble  
with every snore.

Now, girls dance nimble-toed  
into their smiles.

My father, who once  
snared a village  
with his snores—  
villagers tracked  
the tiger's roar  
to his bachelor's room—  
has now toned down.

My mother, who  
hardly breathed  
when she slept,  
now snores like  
she has a tin-drum  
tied to a leg.

At her age,  
abrasive dreams  
dog her with  
an ugly grate.

I return to my room,  
to a sea of heaving waves  
rocking the ocean beds  
of apnea.

I stumble into  
the dark beach  
combing snores.

My sleep, too, tiptoes  
along with me  
like a stubborn child.

## Backcountry Boy Magic

Evan Williams

When we were kids we'd walk with straight sticks,  
pretend to hunt the birds,  
you, pretending to hunt, me pretending to be someone who can  
pull off camo. In the expanse near the river,  
we stalked—silent, hidden—stood  
arms up, mimicking the trees.  
Then overhead, chirps. On the ground,  
serious, you took aim,  
weathered wood of fallen branch hoping to fell another  
being. Skeptical of the banality of your foraged firearm,  
I turned to face the ground, absolution  
on the grounds of ignorance. You made the sounds and I did not  
see which direction your voice fired the gun.

Eyeing the sky once again in the absence of make-believe-  
lethal ruckus, I saw  
the bird steering toward the open arms of the earth,  
trees parting to allow its homecoming.

There was a song, the flock raising a choral dirge,  
an aerial aria, the sky itself  
singing. I long to forget  
how its wings did fold,  
trajectory spilling downwards into the water, flying  
downriver. As the avian's drowning tune passed us by,  
we both wondered how  
our boy magic had made the bark bullets reach.



I.

Laura Justice

I had a dream about your mother -- we threw you a party. I jumped into the harbor and it was full of gasoline, boats lined me on each side. My guilt made me gather everyone you've ever known, I swear I yelled for hours.



## The Boarded-Up Storefront

Theo Johnson

Across from the doors of the church there stands an abandoned brick building, with boarded-up windows. Here in years past a kind woman and her husband spent their daylight hours. It was a grocery store then, and they were the proprietors. They did not get very much money out of their store -- they gave away too much of the food for free, especially to the young children who came to the store hand-in-hand with their parents. The couple told themselves that life was conversation, and so they stood in their store each day and talked and listened to all who would hear and speak. But after not so long a time, their hair turned to gray, and soon after that their hearts turned too and they were buried. The store was gone as well, and nothing appeared to take its place.

No one thought very much of it -- they were old, after all, when they died -- but one began to notice a certain emptiness around the boarded-up building: on the sidewalk, in the church, and in the storefronts, even a block away. This was something no one could explain.

In a far distant, near-identical universe, a gaping black bottomless pit emerged on the abandoned site, swallowing up the boarded-up grocery store. The police were called in, a full-scale investigation was launched, and the episode made national news. Tourists started coming into town to see the site, and kitschy souvenir shops sprang up all along Main Street. It was certainly a very remarkable event.

## Out of Nowhere

Alison Price

Sunny skies after  
rain dropped days.  
Not hot enough for the AC,  
not cold enough for the heater.  
Full of smiles.  
Screeching rubber.  
The smash of glass.  
Tenderness along my elbow.  
Sights on a silver Toyota.  
In only a blink.  
Safe but unhinged.  
Try to steer off the road,  
but the wheels refuse.  
Open the door.  
Cops and an old man  
try to jumble the information  
from my flustered, shocked brain.  
Tears that halt when  
unseen subsidizers  
need facts,  
but shock that waves  
through me until the hours  
diminish the crash's  
haunting echo,  
but at least,  
I am alive.

## Berth

Rowan Waller

half asleep, he wrapped me in long arms  
pulling layers of blankets around us  
a fat calico swept in with the downy waves  
I smelled cigarettes on the wind  
his soft rasp of breath stirred the sails  
I prayed for rough water to loosen his grip  
so I could slip mooring and find breakfast

# Least of All My Parents

Scott Hess

*“Nobody knows anything.”*  
*-William Goldman*

And so true freedom arrives not as bravado  
but as confidence in no one, meaning

if everyone else is off  
the hook, I am, too.

My father seldom pretended to know much,  
born poor as he was, with the words

all knotted up in his mouth and his mother  
always under the influence of her

mother and the endless bottles of gin  
delivered by various Asian gentlemen.

My own mother, though, thought it her duty  
to know, and to make sure I did, too,

and so she spoke with conviction, like a hanging  
judge meting out sentences from on high,

beneath a sprayed dome of dyed hair. But I, arriving  
at my own version of adulthood and feigned wisdom,

have dropped all the fakery I'm aware of. And so  
my life moves on as it must, as chaos, an outlaw

bar full of condemned women and men  
still in their battered civilian clothing, counting

hours like drinks, like punishment,  
wearing gratitude like a sentence.

Field

Dennis Etzel Jr.

I take my son  
to the opening of the field  
or it's me at bat or it's about  
my father's so-called  
return from the War  
or about all of us  
sons whose fathers  
brought the War home or *so*  
*you are the son but you are*  
*not only the son you*  
*are the father as*  
*the Vietnam War*  
*drove a stake right into*  
*the heart of America*

I live in Kansas  
the heart of America  
in America the instant  
replay cues the reconnection  
reels to be a better batter  
when the fastball switchup  
comes at ninety-nine miles an hour  
trying to call it practice when it *is* that  
*if you take the father out*  
*of you you collapse*  
I chose a field then  
got back up



tooth fairy

Katie Johnson

You used to wake me when my jaw clenched  
pulling my teeth tightly together  
helping me soothe this tension  
But it looks like quitting you  
leaves me with no one to wake me.  
I woke this morning with a piece of tooth  
in my hand  
I wanted to put it under my pillow and  
wish to be whole again.

Post-Memory  
Dennis Etzel Jr.

We collect photos. “And near the bodies  
cardboard signs read Viet Cong,  
*Because this is how we were told*

*to keep track, he says, through photographs.”*  
My mothers complain about me shooting,  
camera in hand, *To document*, I say,

*because I want to remember.* My memory  
affected, that I memorize the photos  
that I only need remember the photo

to remember. There is a rule  
of thirds. A third of my life  
in fear, a third in depression, the last spent

writing, recovery of memory.  
After my father’s mother passed on, he found photos  
of thousands of relatives without known names.

He threw them out, overwhelmed.  
As our fathers never spoke of Vietnam we had  
the movies. A certain post-memory, moving pictures

to fill in the gaps caused by trauma.  
“As mentioned above, the stress of PTSD  
can have severe effects on the hippocampus,

causing problems with transferring short-term to long-term memory.”

Does the baseball remember

the bat? “The bat-on-ball connection lasted a split second, the memory a lifetime.”

## Brothers

Casey Fuller

One has a tattoo of an angel nested under the patchy hair on his bird-like chest. Another has a shining scar on his eyebrow like a Soviet sickle. Another has crutches and a cast from something he won't talk about at all. One has grown fat and tired and is holding a tallboy of Coors on his miserable lap. Another is questioning their gender and no longer feels comfortable with the pronoun "He." Another is going bald and keeps smoothing his comb-over with sad, conspicuous caresses. Many are lost in American football on the Chinese TV. A few are staring at devices two feet away from

their sweaty faces. Many are imagining small but substantial victories at work or dreaming about professional wrestling promos from when they were twelve. A few are doing nothing at all and have no job and are hovering in the background like mysterious wraiths. Sharp tension mixed with indifference proves they're family; self-involvement and DNA may be the only thing they share. They don't look like much, no, because they aren't. But when they're asked to, they can stand up, form a half-assed circle, close their light brown eyes, and simply by holding each other's hands, make poems.

## Music

Arran James Grant

I loved you  
like a silent  
movie lead  
unable to  
put it all  
into words  
all of our  
love  
and all of  
our hate  
unable to speak  
while gorgeous  
and beautiful  
music played  
I am  
unable to speak  
unable to process  
our love  
but I know  
it was all  
just  
music.

## Missed Connection

Kathryn Comber

Your train is late, so you miss him standing on the platform. He tries to wait. Long, lean, and fidgeting with frustration he could never map. He shifts on the balls of his feet. Begins to pace. Tucks the book with the poem you love marked by the flower you despise for its easiness into the crook of his arm. Digs into deep pockets. Checks his phone. Huffs.

He has no trust in serendipity. His branding of hope is as the eternal wellspring of misery, for optimism is a characteristic of the spoiled. To be here, to dare, to anticipate goodness—defies the coding of his being.

The book he carries, he has never read. At least, not most of it anyway. He flipped through and broke the binding, distressing it in certain spots; found the poem [that got you out of that burrow in your mind and filled those caverns in your soul] and bookmarked it with a rose. They were good, his intentions, but they wilt in this waiting.

At the point when your train arrives and you are jostled along with the commuter stampede, something happens on the platform where he stands. His internal timer dings. He places the rose on the bench marked for passengers. Thinks its red lips might reach you. Remind you of the days for which this meeting was intended. A reminiscence mission. Reunion of sweethearts. Opening themselves to what ifs and do you remembers... for the purpose of closure that can never truly be. He considers the rose one last time. Believes its thorns will reprimand your tardiness and its loveliness will signify the Big Chance you've missed. He turns to leave—ignoring the approaching train.

By the time you get there, the flower is gone; carried away by one of the joyful who firmly believed it was some other sign intended just for her. By the time you get there, you see his slumped shoulders pouting toward the exit and a book being tossed away. By the time you get there, you exhale and wonder at that holding of breath. Something about the set of his back simmers for a moment; then, the thrum of your heart reminds you. Blocked flashes of your story uncoil. At their unfurling you pause and let that fleeing chapter stalk away.

Your train is late, so you missed that track. Now it will be rerouted:  
another course,  
another life,  
another person,  
another something.

Bella  
Billy Thrasher

Bella was a great dog.                      She could dig  
a trench, six feet long,                      faster than  
you could sing                                      the A, B, C's.  
That was at my                                      first house.

My parents moved me  
to a new house.

Bella changed. One time she nipped  
my cheek                      as we ran                      She  
also jumped the fence,  
   ran through the pet door  
of the neighbors' house  
   and mated with their dog.

She was independent;                      a free spirit  
according to  
   mother.

Bella ran away.  
   Mother moved out.

I ate pizza most nights;                      my father  
didn't know how to cook.                      He swung  
the sledge hammer  
into the kitchen wall  
to create space.



The sun broke through patio doors,

it became brighter.

Junior

Benji Katz

Don't bite your nails he snapped  
a road soda's metallic hiss open  
& swerved — before us, as always,  
a pinstriped sheet of glass gravel.

His suits weren't ever wrinkled,  
my bed made always in his likeness —  
soft linen, firm mattress, often empty.

I spent the day he got laid off  
playing Marco Polo. He hollered  
for me & my mother shut her eyes.

The day my son was born, he insisted  
the baby deserves our name.  
I signed the birth certificate  
“Otherwise”. The first

of May, the day he died,  
I went to work,  
came home to split pea soup  
& thanked my wife.

I still bite my nails.  
I don't own clippers.

I eat my fingertips, my knuckles,  
disarm myself down to the wrist's  
raw stump, so nothing else  
is difficult to swallow.

## Bequeath

Laura Young

As I lie here waiting for sleep, I see the tears that spilled from your wide eyes this morning, hear only the silence between the breath and the cry. You couldn't dam the festering grief for the thing you wanted. I felt it, too, that inevitable mourning, the tangled strings, the quicksand at my toes. *Lean into it, my girl, Mama knows.*

I keep the stillness inside of me hidden, push down the salty panic. You're only six, but you are my first and most fragile. What if you have what I do? What if it will now flow out of you like thick, muddied silt? These unaccustomed waters lap at my feet: will you sink in them like I did, drowning and gasping and reaching for the airy surface, your fingertips brushing against blue sky?

The other morning you couldn't decide what to wear to school. I said anything would be fine and hurry up, get down here, you're making me mad, we're going to be late. Later, when the house was empty I thought of Newtown, of the ghosts on that razed land, of the ways by which you might never return. When I picked you up that day did you feel how I held you? I pressed your body into mine as if I could unbirth you, make safe again your small body. *I love you more than the universe and stars in the sky. Okay, Mama, okay.*

You screamed at me the other day, milky shrieks spilling down the stairs, cries too big for your body. Your little voice carried like a stone gull's song against my ears, in your face a fiery fury you did not have words for. How could you? I went to you, ringing the toy doorbell so that you felt respected and safe. I lay down next to your still sobbing body, pouring

into you the words *it's ok* and *bush, child*, and *tell me where it hurts most*.

I know you see the bottles of pills lined high above where your tiny hands can reach. You haven't asked me about it—not ever—and though I long to tell you what they are for, how would I say it? This one calms me. This one slows my mind. This one makes me want to live. No, child, I will not tell you, not yet. I will let you pour your worries into mine, fill my chasm until the boiling mass brims. I will hold on to you, girl, lest you slip back down into it alone.

I cracked open your door tonight, pausing to make sure you didn't wake before walking across the creaky floor to your bed. I bent over you, hoping that as you fell asleep you did not think of your sadness from that morning, hoping that it did not lurk underneath your layers of skin, hoping you thought only of strawberry popsicles and jumping rope and trading candy on the playground.

## Poisoned Passages

Prairie Dyck

Bury these thoughts  
Within the rocks  
As elements turn  
Cliffs to sand  
Hide these bones  
Beneath the grains  
Concealed calcium carbonate  
Beneath blanketing beach  
May the children  
Fail to excavate  
These ruins below  
While they're busy  
Building their sandcastles  
Hope the tide  
Does not expose  
All these remnants  
That rest unknown



Grape

Edgar Ulloa

She has spent her entire life

working and raising  
her children & and grandson as if we were

raisins.

(she washed my sister and me gently when we're

newly born)

(she let us dry on the sun)

(she put me on a baking tray)

(she covered me with a pillowcase)

(she took me outside in the night)

(she let me go into the darkness of the new moon)

A woman named Cecilia,

who does not belong

to the aristo

cracy,

nor any privileged

class of writers,

intellectuals,

nor lawyers

works now for herself in her own business by facilitating

bedrooms in a guesthouse to the undocumented. Mexican who crossed

the border many years

ago,

a guesthouse to those who need to apply

for a legal pardon for entering to the U.S. or are getting their permanent

residency visas

I am so close to the Atlantic Ocean.



I am so close to the Atlantic Ocean.  
She is my mother. And I must honor her.

The Carpet Fitter  
Vicki Roberts

“If Abbey is uncomfortable with the silence, she doesn’t show it,” Martin told the doctor. “I told her we should try to draw Ethan out more, at the dinner table for example. She said it will just make things worse.”

That his fifteen-year-old son lived behind a locked bedroom door with headphones glued to his ears didn’t faze Martin as much as his wife still sleeping in the guestroom. Even though she’d returned, tired of the young muralist she’d left him for in less than a month, six months had passed, and the house was still a silent, impenetrable shell. Three hermits in their separate chambers.

“Do you talk about the affair?” the doctor asked.

Martin lowered his head and peeked through his hands at the carpet. On his first visit, he registered the similarity of its pink and gray fleur-de-lis pattern to the one in Abbey’s downtown office. In the last five weeks, his annoyance over the simple parallel mutated into an irrational loathing. He imagined coming here on a Sunday and carefully dragging the blade of his utility knife around the regal shapes. Even in his care not to leave ragged edges, the holes left would never be perfectly matched up with another fabric, and the whole thing would have to be tossed.

“Not since she came home,” he admitted.

He rose from the couch and walked to the open window. A lukewarm breeze squeezed through the screen, and horns blared as a bus pulled out into the lane a taxi was already screaming down.

Children offered loud goodbyes, struggled out of reluctant hugs and ran to disappear around the fenced grounds of an elementary school. Martin thought of Ethan at their age and tried to remember the last time they'd hugged. He silently cast a couple of the young fathers in spin-offs – most likely to wind up in this very office ten years from now, wondering why the smile fell off their child's face or why their wife started screwing someone else.

Martin turned around and looked straight at the doctor. She would take this direct contact as a good sign, but it was only to avert his eyes from the carpet.

“So, is this life from now on? My counseling, her counseling, couples counseling, family counseling? I mean, shit.”

“Shit, what Martin?” the doctor asked. “Shit, you'd like to stay in your room and listen to metal? Or shit, you'd like to lay in bed all day wishing you hadn't left your lover?”

He went back to the cold tufted couch and laid down. “Can you shut the window?”

# New England Zen Perfectionists' Entropy Haiku

Karina Lutz

Nothing can be done.  
This stone wall in disarray  
started out finished.

## Call the Boat

Jessalyn Johnson

Standing on my toes,  
walking from room to room  
listening to the rain hit  
the window, hit my face.  
Do I make the floorboards  
creak when I step  
on glass and eggshells,  
or do I cry so you will hold me?  
It happened in November  
and the shower drain  
would clog and I'd wear your hat;  
you became so, so dim.  
The roof is caving  
if you cannot tell or if  
you do not mind, I think  
I must take the ferry tonight.  
Stone is more vibrant  
than the colors in your eyes,  
now sailing through a sea  
of dry ice and shame.  
I bid you a relaxed farewell,  
and you have already  
laced your shoes, started the engine,  
left me to head to the dock.

## Closed Circuit

Neil Flatman

Let me pluck out an eye

share what's out there, who's doing who  
what the light dances around

and what it doesn't want  
revealed. In black and white, and from above  
the white time

signature shows two twenty seven a.m.  
and the mini-mart clerk  
gropes  
for a gun just out of reach beneath the counter.

It's his move, his  
movement that's important. Put the needle on  
the record and the needle  
on the record      jumps

between

*grasp* and *gasp*, *grasp*.

Meanwhile, the seamstress and the butcher:

Measuring scratches

is how  
they accommodate the repetition. Nothing's original.  
In this way

the world remains intact.

## IV.

Laura Justice

There are no thoughts or sounds as I watch you sob in the half-light of the apartment. It's not at all how when I talk to you so constantly when we're separated by time, and work, and what sometimes feels like outer space. "I'd roll my eyes if I went to Mars": you make me laugh before disaster weather reaps your energy and you ask me why you were chosen. If I were honest I would tell you he didn't choose you. In fact, you sprung forth into his path, like Athena, fully formed -- already armed past the teeth, and into your spine. You were put here to destroy him. You and I are new to each other, but something smells ancient. A distinct orbiting of apparently needed souls. You told me once you thought the gods made us meet so I could help you be a human again. You aren't broken by someone who set out on their own journey to ruin. Remember that it takes strength already to hold something in protection: a sword, a shield, your own tears in a courtroom.





## Soobin

Karen Pierce Gonzalez

Soobin sleeps in fits and starts. Both day and night her dreams are filled with conversations she wants to have only with her son Joonsuh. Alcohol killed him six years ago. It is more slowly destroying his father who quietly closes the screen door behind him each morning as he leaves the house. Once a stout man, Roger often nicks himself while shaving before wobbling to the corner store where the small bottles of whiskey and gin that stabilize him sit on easy to reach shelves.

On the couch where she lies during the day, Soobin is cocooned in a blanket. Against the sofa's gold and green brocaded skin, her birdlike body sighs as she turns over. This Korean War bride no longer tries to accept her life in America. Even though she has been here for five decades, the 69-year-old has not gotten used to it. Here, women do not obey men and children are without proper ancestral names. Such offspring do not care for their elders. She has seen old people stand outside soup kitchens and huddle together for warmth on very cold days in senior centers or libraries.

Joonsuh was supposed to help her in her old age. But, his half-Korean stomach and liver could not withstand the drinking he started as a teenager to be like his once-fit military father. Hardened by the strains of war, the older man encouraged his son to toughen his 'mixed' hide against racial attacks. By 43, he was gone.

When her husband returns from his walk he fumbles for the door handle. "Shhhhh," he whispers to the screen door that bangs behind him as he walks over to the couch.

“Rise and shine.” He touches Soobin’s shoulder. She pauses her search for Joonsuh who is always just beyond her fingertips’ reach.

In the room’s curtained darkness, Soobin glares at him then gets up. She goes to the bathroom and turns on the shower as she always does. But this time she locks the door.

What is a love letter?

Emma Sheehan

Surely it is not the gum wrapper you left in my room,  
crumpled on my bedside table.

A love letter is supposed to be the declaration of affection  
and all that gum wrapper does is remind me of your presence,  
where you used to be.

Of the words you said while you sat  
on the edge of my bed and slowly unfolded the foil,  
finding the pink inside.

Was the gum ready to come out? I wasn't.

But you popped us both in your mouth.

You crumpled the wrapper  
and placed it on the bedside table.

With the garbage can being a foot away,  
it made that placement feel purposeful.

A love letter is purposeful.

## The Northerners Cut Holes in the Lake

Evan Williams

When the forecast frowns and turns icy-  
bitter, we're all wannabe rain feet and dry  
bones, staying indoors defeated  
all day long. Cook  
what fish we caught last time it rained,  
fried golden, batter coats like Midas' touch.

It's quiet here in January  
and we laugh about ice  
fishing. Were it possible, we would  
dip our lines beneath the truck-bearing thick  
layer between sky and water.  
But we live  
in a place just shy of that kind of cold,  
and besides,  
the fish are asleep now,  
or so you always used to say,  
and then I'd joke that we should  
wake 'em up, cook some  
bacon down by the lakefront;  
the smell oughta do the trick.

So we did, and the fish did not  
wake up. To leftover bacon,  
we raised our mugs of cocoa,  
drank to the next rain.

Lift

James Nicola

When the roaches scattered we didn't know what to do.

We lifted her up to the whining of the night  
from between two cars parked sloppily by the walk  
when we heard a cry, from beneath and between two scraggly  
cars, in the whining of the night, *Hey, Mister,*

*MISTER!*

*Lift me up!*

*Now take me home!* she burped as she led the way  
to her home— or pointed, rather, with her nose  
and her whiskey breath as we carried her, sidewise, home.

The door wasn't locked and the streetlight fingered in  
enough so we could see—as she hiccoughed *Put*  
*me down. Right here! Here's fine!*—  
quick as a mutual gasp, the cockroaches scatter . . .

She shouted from the floor for us to go

We didn't know what to do

And so we lingered.

Did we stay too long?

Did we not stay long enough?

Is she still alive?

And how could we find out:

Neither of us noted her address, but scurried outathere  
when she snapped, on choking on an unkempt snore,  
something even I cannot commemorate.

Can you tell me now what we should have done?

## Easter Eggs

Babitha Marina Johnson

My memories crack  
like an Easter egg.

Remember when the Christian bakers  
started selling them sugar-coated?

Even the Hindu shops displayed them  
as a festive fetish, while Muslim ones  
carved a secular signature  
on theirs.

Then there was that special egg  
my brother and I fashioned, painting  
it with watercolours that  
ran off the shell.

Craving technicolour  
in a still pre-globalised world,  
we then dabbed it with  
in bright acrylic hues—  
our egg, our ego,  
crudely fingerprinted all over  
with our innocent efforts.

Now, like all adults  
on Easter eve,  
we hatch  
politics.





Candy Heist  
Thomas Genevieve

My girlfriend leans over to me and whispers something. I can't hear her. Not only is the plane loud, but I have earbuds in. I pop them out.

“You should steal that girl's M&Ms.”

I look across and there's a woman having as much of a picnic as you can on a plane. She's got her snack tray down, and there's a big bag of Peanut M&Ms on it. One of those resealable, glossy bags. She's got a can of Coke and a few small bottles of Jack.

My girlfriend isn't Bonnie, and I'm not Clyde. My girlfriend isn't pulling a Lady Macbeth on me either. She's only joking. She'll say the same thing at a movie theater. But if one of us wants to circumvent the outrageous prices of theater snacks, we'd just walk out, buy some Junior Mints or Snow Caps at the CVS down the block, and smuggle them in. At 35,000 feet, though, monopolistic forces prevail.

Instead of saying, “You distract her, and I'll swipe it,” I say, “I gotta pee,” and unbuckle myself from my seat.

Since this isn't an airbus, to reach the sole toilet in the back of the plane, you need to walk through where the flight crew stores its in-flight treats. And as I walk by, there's the cart. And there's a big bag of M&Ms. There's the sodas and the small, vial-sized bottles of booze. There's all the ingredients to satisfy a person for the two remaining hours of a flight. I think the cart is unattended.

As a waft of stale airplane-toilet air catches me as I open the door, I turn and see several members of the flight crew toward the front of the cabin. But when I look over at the cart of goodies, I see the bottoms of a man's shoes on the other side. The shoes belong to a flight attendant, kneeling in the shadows of the dim space, struggling to open a storage cabinet.

Inside the lavatory, I pee. There's a mirror to my left. As I zip my fly, I decide I will take whatever I can.

I have never stolen before. I reconsider that thought. Though I can say that is true for items of significant value, I don't have the time to review the petty thefts, the venial sins, I might be repressing.

I will look for the shoes of the attendant. No. I will first look down the cabin in case the others return, then look for the shoes. I will take two grabs. One grab per hand. I will casually stuff whatever I poach into my pockets. Grab and go. Casually.

I flush. It's unnecessarily loud. It sounds like a dragon's objection.

Startled, yes. Dissuaded, no. I wash my hands and comb the residual wetness through my hair. I give myself a nod.

When I open the folding door, the cart is gone. The M&Ms, the booze. Gone. I walk back empty-handed.

## Damage Deposit (It Isn't Coming Back)

Prairie Dyck

The applause is enough  
To cut anyone down  
With its serrated silence  
I've been pacing McMillan Avenue  
As if it's a living room  
Trying not to let my eye get snagged  
On the slanted blue slats  
Of the house you lived in  
When I knew you, as I pass  
By the way you left, packed boxes  
A room painted fresh, like a portrait  
Of someone better left on the edge  
Like a fox in a live trap all gnashing teeth  
No poorly feigned regret or letters of goodbye  
Reticent, unexpressed sympathies  
Holding back, unsure what could be  
Taken out of me before there'd be nothing left  
Empty envelopes with a scrawled address  
Stuffed into the hollow of my chest  
There wasn't a symbol or a gesture left  
Just the puzzle of who was the spilled wine  
And who was the shattered glass

## Strength

Yueying Guo

She's dragging her finger over the wood—hoping  
A splinter can dig itself in her flesh and callous her  
smooth hands because

She wants to be the father she's never had, and touch  
the hand she never has.

They told her it feels like sandpaper—like bricks—like  
strength and power and courage.

She's cutting her long hair because she's sick of tangles,  
The tangles in her hair, tangles in the branches, and  
tangled sheets each night.

There's a thousand broken things in her broken home and  
hammers can't fix it all,

But when they pound on her joints, it's helping,  
it's helping her forget the feathery touch  
on her thighs and the tingling between.

Tingling, tangling, it never goes away!—though her hair  
is prickly now and her hands rough and scarred—

There's no one to protect her because she has no father.

Only the remnants of the man who her mother once loved,  
Crawling into her and crawling out  
with hands that feel like cowardice.

## Sacrament

Robin Gow

& all the faucets pour oil or milk.  
We fill father's bottles, the brown & green;  
thick glass blood-cells, a throat-slit pouring silk.  
When will the baptisms make me feel clean?  
We dig holes in the yard. They fill with mud.  
I go, I drop in all the shiny things,  
the necklaces clit- plucked, pink flower bud,  
my hole amuck mess: gargling glint rings.  
Our dish soap is blue & so is mary.  
She's plastic bottle, she's soil bubble.  
It's baby bath, she rubs me black cherry.  
We go digging for the pit, pair knuckle.  
& so, I repeat, each morning again.  
Stain skin, sugary with original sin.



## Mend

Aramis Calderon

The broken armor on the cheap linoleum revealed the future like spilled chicken guts. The gray ceramic bulletproof plate had more in common with pottery than metal. It was something about the pattern, the distribution of the pieces distorting the stenciled letters. The lower half was intact, the words Handle with Care were like an ill omen. The sticker displaying the stock name, lot number, and nomenclature looked like a ripped off bandage. It was able to stop a bullet but not a bad night of drinking.

There were a few hours left before formation, where accountability would be taken, and I'd embark on a cargo plane leaving behind Qatar and going back to Iraq. My skin still itched from the standard issue green wool blanket on the bed. The trash was full of beer bottles. The wall locker where my gear was stowed securely was now wide open. Against the concrete wall my tactical vest sagged forward without the plate and reminded me of a wounded man with no body. The Velcro identification tag had my name, rank, blood type, and the emblem of the Marines: the eagle, the globe, and the anchor.

Sometimes when drinking alone, I'd just start throwing things and yelling. Afterwards, occasionally, there'd be weeping with no sound. Silent like my mom taught me, because real men don't cry.

My first ex-wife had tried to help me get over these episodes. Once she had repaired a vase I had broken and commissioned someone to glue it back together with gold. The repair was called something in Japanese and she said it was an art form. I was pissed because it had cost half my



paycheck. The day she left me, she said the worst thing about me was my callousness. I became hard of heart, so no one could ever hurt me again; now I can't be loved.

I took a roll of electrical tape from my daypack and a lighter out of my pocket. Once the shards were all accounted for, all the pieces of the armor were placed with care on the cheap desk provided in the transient billeting. I got the batteries out of the smoke detector and used my balaclava as a breathing mask to keep the toxic fumes of melting tape out of my lungs.

I put the pieces together like the Legos my sons liked to play with. The melted rubber and plastic made an epoxy, like a poison Taffy. My eyes watered from the smoke. A few times the tape caught on fire and I had to smother it with a hand towel. When it was finished, the ceramic plate had black veins. The armor was more beautiful for having been broken.

After the repair dried, there was still had half an hour to get to formation and still be fifteen minutes early. I put my gear on and embraced the Arabian sun.

## The Divine Dwells Within Her

Josh Jennings

When I was six years old,  
my mother got pregnant  
with her third child.

This time I noticed the changes,  
the morning sickness and swelling  
of her belly.

So I went to my dad,  
my go to for answers  
on all things women.

He looked at me gently,  
then stared right past me,  
as if peering into some foreign  
memory, long ago forgotten.

You will never get closer to God  
than when you kneel  
beside your mother's belly.

For my father, the utmost authority  
on manhood, to make that remark.

Nothing has shaken me more.

## Attempts At A Renewal

Evan Williams

There was a man in St. Petersburg who was no longer in love with his wife. He was gripped with the icy inkling of endings—of things orderly by contrast to surrounding chaos. The wife, stricken with revolution in 1917, slept. Cold was the war between them. Welcome was the prospect of hiatus. Likely, she would wake to the sound of melting bonds like the dissolution of butter. On pancakes she placed her hopes, syrup between the layers. Of Dutch cookies, she said favorable things, exaggerations mostly. Hurt because they lived on the same plane of existence, they walked through the years without favorites. They claimed to share a bed. With Spinoza (their dog) they yearned for the revolution to return home.

## For the Coldest Month Under the Radar

Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah

I have decided to descend in this cavity to where  
snow leopard lives in the cold Tibetan plateau,  
I go down into the valleys as low as in my wet memories,  
I touch the pale hair with brown spots of my skin  
with hands still freezing in ibex, bharal, marmots,  
or pikas, I steal unnoticed over the snow to appear  
in many series, a device that allows me to present  
three or more narrow leaves of large clumps from  
snowdrops from the surface, a partial shade  
and moist body in winter spells. The *ounce* of me  
remains the slopes and trails around the strange *hope*.



## Waking

Kathryn Comber

Creak, creak, pause. The cacophony of floor boards resisting and relenting jolted my mental state into consciousness. In the haze of abrupt waking, everything seemed askew. The clock, blurry and wobbling, read 2:39AM. I blinked.

On the other side of the room, my mother's twin bed—sheets tucked taunt. No nest of music on the nightstand. No empty mug with a generic teabag string dangling over its lip.

Creak. Pause. *Pacing*. Her kinetic mental process: relentlessly stalking thoughts. I curled into my bed yearning to be swallowed by blankets. Feeble attempts to shut down failed; curiosity prodded.

“...she said...”

Her cadence drifted as a steady murmur through thin walls. Obligation lifted me from my cocoon, and I slinked down hallway into our Everything Room. There, I perched knees to chest onto the impractical chaise, an impulsive grab from foraging neighborhoods the night before Big Trash Day.

“How could she say that? Have I ever—”

Her hands were canaries seeking shelter before a storm. When they steadied their frenzy— shot by the weight of thought; plummeting to her sides—I observed her listening to a voice I could not hear.

The little birds curled tight into themselves, tiny clenching balls of skin and bone. They untangled, and my eyes steadied on the ring. The ring on her finger hung loose—halting at the knuckle. How it could just slip off. How it could fall... right off. Clatter to the ground. If it weren't for musician hands and dedication.

*She still talks to him. She still talks to Dad.*

Realization stung. She turned to me. Saw me, but didn't.

“I'm sorry, Juni.”

Puzzled, I wondered at my name wrapped in apology; fought through words overheard. Fit them into their seams. Sought pieces into completion:

*...she said [I need to leave this town. I need out. I need space.]*

I was the pestering thief stealing her rest. I was She. Weeks ago, I'd finally named the craving that constantly gnawed in my mind. I'd finally voiced it. I just didn't think she'd heard me.

I felt her pleading for me to look into her eyes and forgive. My eyes went everywhere else: to the walls that contained years of rent, worry, and my growing. Spurts, recorded on the doorframe in trembling ink; somehow provided for with sustenance and clothes. My mother's apron hanging by the front door, metaphorically limp in its presentation of the life sentence for a pianist whose husband left the world too soon. That loose ring. Those calloused stick fingers once comforting, padded, and strong.

I shivered. Thoughts I should never allow simmered in my mind. Her hands reached and closed around mine. Her grip, cold and skeletal, tugged me under the riptide of small town surviving and adoring life's small gifts because the big stuff requires too much hope—that euphemistic word meaning risk of misery when complacency is comfortable. I looked into eyes so similar to my own, and wondered. *How can I leave?*





Novum

David Xiang

One day you pull out the mirror, it's open  
And where faces should be you see trees  
Little leaves flitting in and out until  
This dust is brushed away, blurred out  
Of existence. The coarse water ambles  
Towards you, the moon sets closer  
And then a fire, a large silent thing  
Cracking glass with alchemy.  
Another beginning, a long road ahead  
Instead of angels the words are flying  
Smoke in place of clouds, but only in haze  
Can you see the invisible,  
The outlines of many running away,  
Dropping pocket sized reflections in the dirt until  
You can't tell which way is up.  
And the whole world is alight with stars  
The wind, the mountains, growing  
More comfortable with newness.  
Instead of constellations you memorize  
The sounds crackling into this hard earth,  
Move closer to the fire, overhead or under,  
It does not matter anymore. It is  
Here and spreading, a forceful light  
Waiting for you.



