

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a night sky filled with stars, reflected in a calm body of water. In the lower-left portion of the water, a small canoe with two people is visible. The sky is a deep blue, and the water is a lighter, shimmering blue. The overall mood is serene and magical.

May 2022

foccc
Volume IV

Lore

cover art 'Every Night' by Amy Friend

A Note from the Editors

Welcome to the fourth volume of The Open Culture Collective.

Alarming, we find ourselves in the middle of May as we tinker and tailor with the finishing touches for Lore. Summer has crept in, and in the midst of these long and arduous days we cling to time and hope for a moment's respite so we can return to that most basic of comforts:

Stories.

The Lore issue was meant to be a means of escaping the mundane by travelling far from the comfort of our homes, as only a good story can do. It ended up being much more – an exploration of cultures new and old, an alteration of the unalterable, a whisper of hope.

For giving us a chance to present this voyage to a phantasmic realm of exemplary creative talent, we thank our contributors and all those who have supported us, and allow us to grow.

Best wishes always,

Rashmi & Meghna



photo by Swetha Mayilvahanan

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Mercury

poem by Victoria Punch

Victoria Punch is a voice coach & musician. Curious about voice and identity, the limits of language and how we perceive things; her poetry comes from these explorations. Published in *Sledgehammer* and *the6ress*. Forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Otis Nebula* and *The Gravity of the Thing*. Found on Twitter and Instagram @victoriapunch_

Note:

'Mercury' is a portrait of the Roman god of that name, trickster, shapechanger and meddler. This poem was first published by Free Verse Revolution.

you are quick, wits about you
stealing looks and likenesses
picked from pockets
mocking-jay manners
petty thief
you are bad news
the unshot messenger of cons like coins,
circular - two faced
ridged like a cliff edge
you are the note passed under the table,
the old love letter,
the pre-storm grey.
you are everywhere and hard to find
the social pressure gauge
the callous barometer of the bar -
toxic. serpentcircle.

you.

you are a liquid liar
you - a smooth one
with feet like wings
the deer that's never caught
the spear that never misses
you're the mask, the magnet, the multisided
die
cast
down
heavy. poisonous
you are like a broken arm set wrong
shapeshifter, quicksilver
you are the bright mind
of comedy
only tragic - metallic
you bring the plot twist
hydragyrating.
you stir - invisible.
antagonist.

you.

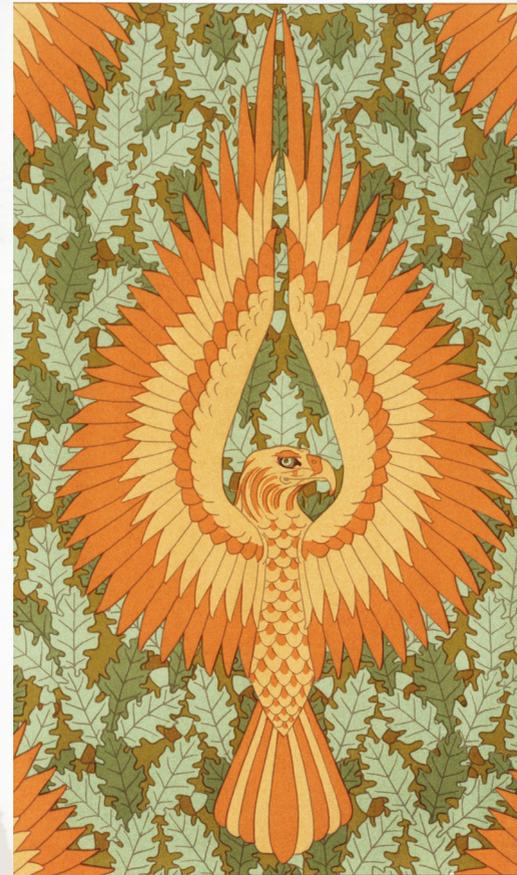
Phoenix Prayer

poem by Robyn Weaver

I pray for the phoenix, wishing
she didn't have to burn
just to start over.
All that ash to again just become.

I plant seeds in my soot,
push my fingers to deepen
each hole, keep other birds
from feasting on them. Drip
water from cupped palms
over my charred past turned
fertile earth and swallow
the sun as it shines. I'll hold that light
inside ready to share in exchange
for growth. And when the sun
won't seem to rise,

I'll water them again.
Each salty falling drop
a blessing, a promise
of firey blooms bursting forth.



Flathead Lake Legends

poem by Lyndsie Conklin

Lyndsie Conklin (she/her) is a Montanan transplanted to Colorado, living with her husband and cat, Beans. She enjoys getting outside, being a cat mom, breakfast foods, Diet Coke, and (of course) writing poetry and erotic fiction. Some of her work has been featured in *Poetry Cove Magazine*, *The Sleeve Magazine*, and *Dreamer by Night Magazine*.

Creation stories include descriptions
no other sighting has confirmed.
Yet, the fear of gigantic unknowns
keep the Montana lore alive.

Sets of lengthy, invasive species
have numbed the centuries of tales.
Fisherman's feats complicate mysticism,
that validated a child's survival story,

and other modern day sightings.
Protected by the glacial waters
swirling legends deep, technology
cannot deny monstrous fables

children use to terrify youthful friends
while fathers jokingly drink on boats.
Rivers and wildlife aerial drops
keep the colossal mountain lake

plentiful of prey and distractions.
Yet cherry-mouth travelers listen
to natives retell their fish stories
about the Flathead Lake legends.





White Flowers to the Sea

story by Jameson Hampton



“Why are you always so hesitant to walk through the portico, traveler?” My voice echoed off the marbled walls, perhaps a little more imposing than I intended. I only wanted to talk. My temple was practically on the edge of the world. I saw many, many travelers come and go, usually staying for a night or two to make preparations for a dangerous journey, say a prayer for protection, and then put out to sea. They didn’t often linger, and this one touched my curiosity. He was small, quiet, unassuming, but his presence had a kind of weight to it in my temple.

The traveler pushed a curl of hair across his forehead and his eyes darted around, as if searching hopefully for another I could be talking to.

“Is my stride so unique? Surely it’s not uncommon for men to tremble as they approach divinity.” His soft voice made him seem even smaller in the cavernous room and he was already dwarfed by the shadows of pillars.

“Mainly sailors grace our halls. Men with more courage than humility. I suspect many of them have only ever trembled when Poseidon alone was there to witness it.”

“Oh.” He seemed disappointed to learn that he stuck out in a crowd. He glanced nervously around again, this time seeming to scan for anyone else listening, but the temple was quiet. It was my chance to perhaps finally learn something about the young man I had been so curious about of late. Every day for a week, he had timidly entered my temple, a white flower held tenderly between his thin fingers. “Well, my grey eyed Lady has been known for her jealousy.”

“Ah, so you are a loyal Athenian. Do you hail from her great city?”

He offered a small, tentative nod. “I was born there, under her watchful eye, but my home is in the surrounding hills. I’m better suited to grass than marble. And... not accustomed to being called traveler.”

“What brings a child of Athena to the shores of Sounion, then, if not a love of the road?”

He frowned and it was like the quality of the air around him changed. He became guarded. It seemed like his eyes darkened, as if a door that was open had suddenly shut, and when he spoke, it was in the dull voice of someone whose heart was elsewhere. “Just here to pay my respects to Poseidon, *hiereus*.”

I made my best effort to change back the quality of the air with the crinkles around my eyes. “And you will always be welcome, traveler.”

I left him to make his offering, quietly pondering its intention.



The next time I saw the traveler, he was sitting on the southernmost edge of the known world. Idly his fingers wove through a patch of grass beside him, but his eyes never strayed too long from the horizon, aching to find something to latch onto besides endless waves and sky.

I understood then. Someone he loved was out to sea.

I left him alone with his thoughts.



The next time we spoke was the night of the storm.

His sniffing was almost too quiet to hear, but my familiarity with the path that echoes traversed through my temple brought me right to him.

He was soaked to the bone, his chlamys clinging to his tiny frame, sitting in the middle of a splotch of wet marble that marred the otherwise unblemished floor. A loud crack of thunder echoed outside and he flinched as if it had raised its hand to him. I was struck again by how small he seemed. He was surely an adult; was he really so petite or was his timid demeanor coloring my perception?

I gave him what I hoped came off as a warm smile and gently passed him a cup of ca'lida, which he took quietly. “Warm yourself, traveler.”

He stared for a few moments into the wisps of steam rising from the top of his clay vessel. The sweet scent of wine mingled harmoniously with the temple incense, bringing me back to my early days as a priest. I wondered what thoughts the smell conjured for him. After a brief contemplation, he took a sip and it seemed as if a little color returned to his complexion. Slowly, he set the cup on the floor beside him and took a small parcel wrapped in plain cloth. “Would you like to sit with me?”

I sat, and he carefully unwrapped a block of soft cheese, its faint tanginess blending with the scents already in the air. “From my village,” he told me simply, and he shared a piece with me.

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it.

“Men who show kindness will be shown kindness alike.” He took another sip of the ca'lida and his expression looked almost warm, but then another flash of lightning illuminated the portico and he flinched as the companion roll of thunder followed.

We sat a while in the returning darkness, the sound of the rain unrelenting.

“I’ve seen you looking out over the sea,” I finally said. I hoped I wasn’t pushing him too hard, but it wasn’t in my nature to give up on people. “What are you looking for?”

It was long moments before he answered, but the air didn’t go cold around him like it had before. He was weighing his options; the instinct to keep personal matters to himself struggled against the isolation of being alone for so long in his fear.

“It’s my lover. He was supposed to make land a week ago.” His voice was desperately sad. Naming one’s fears out loud, sharing them with another person, has a way of forcing them to be confronted as reality.

I nodded sympathetically. “He’s an Athenian as well?”

“Well, yes, but aren’t we all? Even Sounion is part of Attica, is it not? But he’s a child of Apollo. You can just tell.” I wanted to ask him how you could tell, but he said it with such surprising finality that I couldn’t bring myself to question him.

“He’s a sailor? A fisherman perhaps?”

The traveler shook his head, still staring into the steam rising from his drink. “He’s a poet. He felt the call of the ocean, said he needed to experience the open water for inspiration. So he took a job as a deckhand, just for a single voyage, as a way to get out and see the world. I could see how regret would eat at him all his life otherwise.”

I wanted to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder but hesitated; there was something about him that seemed so fragile. “I’ve lived here many years and seen many sailors come and go. Many ships have been more than a week overdue for uneventful reasons.”

“I know.” He sighed. “But he’s not a sailor. It’s not where his feet belong. What if the ocean can sense that? What if it can sense how scared I am from afar? That’s why I’ve been here making offerings. But apparently, Poseidon hasn’t heard me.”

Outside, thunder cracked once again. I could almost feel the crackle of the lightning hanging in the air even after the afterimage of the bolt faded.

“Storms are part of the natural order of the sea. Nights like this are why we petition Poseidon. You cannot know if your prayers were heard until the clouds clear.” I thought for a moment, memories of other visitors to my temple swirling through my mind.

“I suspect he would look kindly on a child of Apollo whose heart yearned so fiercely for the sea that his feet couldn’t stay where they belong.”

He didn’t quite smile at me, but his eyes crinkled around the edges as if they were smiling. I understood; hope can be as dangerous as it is powerful. He occupied himself with the cheese, cutting two more slices and then passing them both to me. “Thank you, *hierous*. For you, and one for the altar. I made this back in my village. It’s from his mother’s recipe. I hope it pleases your temple.”

I told him my temple was grateful to him and I prayed to myself that he could sense how genuinely I meant it.



The next day, in late morning, a ship came into port. I don’t often trouble myself with the endless coming and going of sailors and boats, as it has been a constant in Sounion since before I was born and will persist long after I am gone. But when I woke up the morning after the storm to a cloudless blue sky, I had a good feeling. When the traveler wasn’t where I expected to see him, I knew there was something to it.

Sure enough, I spotted him at the dock, watching intently as the ship pulled in and was moored. I stayed a distance back, quietly hopeful.

When I first saw the poet, I instantly knew it was him somehow. I didn’t even have to see the look on the traveler’s face to be sure. He looked like a child of Apollo, tall and strong and beautiful. His skin was bronzed, his shoulders freckled, a charming windswept cowlick in his hair like the salty breeze of the sea had permanently changed the way it grew. I wondered how different he looked before his journey, as I’m sure a poet’s hands weren’t always calloused the way they were when I saw him. But if he wasn’t meant to be at sea, he certainly adapted to it. Adaptability, a quality that makes a good poet.

I was surprised his lover could find the patience to wait for him to come down the ramp, but then I realized: he couldn’t let himself accept that it was real until his feet were back where they belonged. As soon as his second sandal touched the dirt, the traveler called out for him by name. When their gazes connected, it was like an invisible line had been drawn between them, a path that had to be left empty as they were about to be drawn together with divine force. I thought I felt the crackle of the lightning again from the night before and there was love—the traveler’s desperate relief; the poet’s confident, steadfast devotion; a completeness that wasn’t there before.

They came together and embraced, the small traveler almost disappearing in his partner’s strong arms. They embraced, and a tension in the air that I hadn’t noticed before suddenly cleared and was replaced by comforting stillness. They embraced, and the golden light of the sun bent gently around them, as if to be part of their embrace. And just for a moment, the sun, bright and powerful, existed only for the two of them.

Silently, I thanked Poseidon.

Chloe

poem by Aeesha Abdullahi Alhaji

I warned you chloe, about the tricks of deceit
 You stoop low and fell deaf to the warnings of abbott
 Your eyes hypnotized to the yearnings of fallacy
 This world never has anything to offer
 You stood ground and walked eyes open into a trap
 Fate dealt you a blow with no cover from jeopardy
 You met cruelty in a human form and fell flat to the ground
 So blind was your love to a grievous mistake
 How shattered I met you in a comatose state
 Your endless nightmares were torture to the silent night
 The brimming tears unstoppable, how lean my limbs fell
 Numb to a faded promise between You and I.

Atonement

poem by Aeesha Abdullahi Alhaji

In the search for atonement
 Will the guilty find solace trapped in misery while fate
 Eludes them any chance?

The blast from the past has landed
 Opening a can of worms seeking retribution
 For lost souls running helter skelter
 In search for peace

Their senile minds gone limbo
 Engulfed in penance
 Destiny denies them any chance of redemption
 To go back for a restart &
 A second chance of getting their deeds right.

Aeesha Abdullahi Alhaji is an essayist, poet and writer. Her works have appeared on Blank pages, Parrotbox, The daily reality, Wilishwash press, Spiritedmuse, Echoes of the African drums Anthology, People world magazine etc.

Night Train

poem by Lucy Atkinson

Mosquito bitten tourists, we ride
the slow crawl from the mainland.
A throng of bodies and voices,
recycled on the air
in unfamiliar languages.
Where the proud threadbare mother,
baby crying, cannot sleep.
A litany of decaying muscles.
Time merges dream
into waking dream.

In the tilted kind of purgatory
where our eight-hour penance
feels like life,
faces blur in the light of passing streetlamps
and burning stars on the wind outside.
We'll blink at the sun
with a dead man's eyes
at the end of the line,
astonished at the dawn.
Like moths who love light
but never see the sun.
Too delicate: our wings.
We only come out at night.

Otherworld

poem by Lucy Atkinson

Sun-washed rooftop
in the shadow of the mountains.
We drink lukewarm Vodka mixes
to the smooth notes of Turkish music
drifting up from the flat downstairs.
Through a heat that strips the silence back,
we play Blackjack in our worn-out deck chairs.
Wise women armed with tarot and
stories, rich in nothing but knowledge
and time.

Words spill from every glass
and songs so old we don't remember
anything but the arcane whistle
of their tune on our mother's lips.
Chase the sunset with drooping eyelids
a last kiss of light that dances against
white brick and washing lines.
We'll be sung to sleep by a different song,
lulled by the strain of mountain cicadas
and the drunken singing of drowsy travellers,
home in their land for just one night.

In their off-beat voices is a memory of the days before;
when our hands knew worship-
not for diamonds but dirt
and gods were not worshiped with purple and gold
but at anvils and in fishing nets.



Wayfinding in Cold Light

Pigment Print by Amy Friend, 'Multi-verse' series

Amy Friend is a Canadian artist with a roster of national and international exhibitions. In 2017, Friend published the monograph, *Stardust*, with L'Artiere Publishing, Italy. She presented her work in 2018 at ParisPhoto with incamera Galerie and was selected for the Elles X exhibition, curated by Fannie Escoulen, showcasing the work of 100 women photographers, from the beginning of photography to today. website: www.amyfriend.ca | instagram @amyquerin

“Do parallel universes exist?”

The photographs in this series draw on diverse subject matter, imagery from across multiple time-periods created from a blend of vernacular photographs and my own photography. In previous work, I employed experimental processes and I continue to expand on this practice through various hand-applied manipulations with the photographs. These interventions are aimed at interrupting expectations and expanding our interactions with the photograph and its meaning.

The title of the series, *Multi-verse*, references what cosmologists and physicists describe as parallel universes, where alternate realities exist. The photographs here relate to the idea of a multiverse through their variances in time, location, subject matter and visual disruptions via the altered surface and light that emanates through the perforations. In addition to the specifics of the multiverse definition, I play with the meaning of the word “multiverse” by breaking it apart (multi-verse) to reference the numerous stories or “verses” we may encounter or recall through these photographs.

As I worked on this project, the ongoing environmental destruction, political turmoil, and human rights violations (to name a few and not lightly), played a part in how I related to the imagery. My response was initially to create or source oppositional imagery presenting simple moments from everyday life, moments of tranquility, beauty, portraits of mothers and children, but as I worked on the series I felt it necessary to include photographs that are capable of suggesting or referencing undercurrents of turbulence with images of soldiers and floodwaters while manipulating the images to indicate darker elements at play. The title of each photograph serves to guide or link to this aspect of the work, while leaving room for the photographs to transcend any concrete reading. The meaning of each image shifted and continues to shift and their “solidity” becomes more and more malleable. I reference the past, the here and now, the visible and invisible, literally and poetically, albeit not through overtly political photographs.

The medium of photography has always held a currency of possibility. In this series, I work to find meaning in the chaos, to be with it and to search for an alternate story from where we are - *a multiverse.*”



Another World

Digital art by Jingkun Qiao, 2022

Canto_Kun (Jingkun Qiao) is a freelance illustrator and visual designer from Mainland China who focuses on digital illustration, motion graphics, and storytelling. Jingkun's art prefers to show a surreal fantasy world based on her thoughts of life, spiritual experience, and beautiful imagination since childhood. www.jingkunqiao.com | [@canto_kun](https://twitter.com/canto_kun)

We Were Told Fables and Fairytales

poem by Lyndsie Conklin

The book had gold-lined pages
and a patterned blue binding.
Inside, King Midas gleefully learned
about the most precious of things,
while ducklings were adopted
and fondly accepted. Illustrations
were smooth, penciled personifications
framed with yellow hem-stitches
twirling at the corners. In the night,
Hermes gifted precious metal axes
and Jack cut down access
to the Herculean heavens.
Mother wrapped us in afghans
and we agreed upon the next tale:
a tenacious red hen wishing for bread.
Soon, we forgot about the pages,
lined with fading gold,
and dreams took their place,
swirling our own fanciful illustrations
to accompany our nightly folklores.
Mother let us slumber
with that blue patterned book nearby.
And it waited for us to unfold
the fables and lessons within.

Lyndsie Conklin (she/her) is a Montanan transplanted to Colorado, living with her husband and cat, Beans. She enjoys getting outside, being a cat mom, breakfast foods, Diet Coke, and (of course) writing poetry and erotic fiction. Some of her work has been featured in *Poetry Cove Magazine*, *The Sleeve Magazine*, and *Dreamer by Night Magazine*.



Есть
 Маленькие кусочки моего тела по всему полу моей комнаты.
 Иногда они двигаются.
 Я закрыл дверь.
 Ты говоришь со мной, но я тебя не слышу, не совсем.
 Где-то в здании закрывается еще одна дверь.
 Я закрываю глаза.
 Животное падает,
 Я поднимаю его, оно больше не живет.
 И я, я мертв, как оно, уже слишком долго.

Russian poem by Ivan de Monbrison

English Translation

There is
 little bits of my body, all over my bedroom floor.
 Sometimes they move.
 I closed the door.
 You're talking to me, but I can't hear you, not quite well.
 Somewhere in the building, another door is shut.
 I close my eyes.
 The animal falls,
 I pick it up, it doesn't live anymore.
 And I, I died, like it, long ago already.

Ivan de Monbrison is a poet, writer and artist living in Paris born in 1969. He has studied oriental languages there after high school, not with great success. Ivan has autistic and schizophrenic tendencies that he has been trying to cope with through art, in the past twenty years of his life. He has published some poems in the past.

Seven for a Secret

poem by Mikey May

there's a ghost in my garden,
cutting the grass,
raking leaves,
and picking the year's first strawberries.
he stands on the patio smoking,
grey cap with the celtic cross pinned
just above the brim
sheltering his eyes as he watches
the yellow skies,
counting magpies.

*one for sorrow,
two for joy.*

sometimes, when the sky grows dark,
i can hardly tell the two of you apart.

you told us last summer,
over salad and bitter sunshine,
that there was a ghost inside of you.
your weeks-long haunting
had us shaking in our beds,
while you covered all the mirrors
and picked your skin to shreds.
when they asked you in the hospital
any previous attempts?

you told them that you couldn't,
not while you had us to protect.
i choose to believe that the psychosis
wasn't speaking just then.

somewhere around the centre of the episode,
you told me you were writing
your autobiography.
there are no photographs of you
between the time you left home
and the time you met my mother,
but i've heard tales of bedsits,
bolshevism, and blue hair.
*three for the girls you loved,
four for the boys,*
and all the things never said to your father
before he was no longer there.

i wonder if you both knew silence like this,
a house so quiet
i want to throw bricks
through the kitchen window.
at the dinner table,
i swallow down the urge to ask,
*do you have no more words for me?
or just no energy with which to say them?*
you're watching the screen
with sad, glazed eyes,
and the pills send you to bed at 6pm.

there's a ghost in my garden,
setting fires and shooting arrows.
five for the silver frosting the grass
as i reach for his stained-glass hands.
six for the golden virginia on his breath,
while the magpies chorus carols of forgiveness.

i always thought we'd bury you in the garden.

Mikey May (he/fae/xo) is a queer trans man poet, linguist, and trainee teacher based in Birmingham, UK. Faer self-published poetry zines about sex, gender, and Taylor Swift can be found at mikeymay.itch.io.



Anubis

poem by Leandra Lee

When I die, when my heart is weighed against the feather of justice, when I am embalmed and my brain is pulled out through my nose, when the autopsy technicians say “what a shame” before going on with their day, will the weight of everyone else’s troubles and pain and strife that I carry with me, that pumps through my capillaries and arteries, be counted against me? Will my heart, heavy with empathy, break the scale, the feather no match for such a naive woman, one who carried their pain more carefully than their own?

Whose heart will my
worries weigh down?

Note: The poem is named after the Egyptian God of Death, and is inspired by the myth of *The Feather of Ma'at*.

Leandra Lee is a poetry and nonfiction writer based in Raleigh, NC, where she lives with her partner, their three cats, innumerable houseplants, and bearded dragon. This is her eighth publication. She can be found on Twitter @DiscountDelRey



Mest

Digital art by Jingkun Qiao, 'Trees of Life' series (2022)

Canto_Kun (Jingkun Qiao) is a freelance illustrator and visual designer from Mainland China who focuses on digital illustration, motion graphics, and storytelling. Jingkun's art prefers to show a surreal fantasy world based on her thoughts of life, spiritual experience, and beautiful imagination since childhood. www.jingkunqiao.com | @canto_kun



Light

Digital art by Jingkun Qiao, 'Trees of Life' series (2022)

Canto_Kun (Jingkun Qiao) is a freelance illustrator and visual designer from Mainland China who focuses on digital illustration, motion graphics, and storytelling. Jingkun's art prefers to show a surreal fantasy world based on her thoughts of life, spiritual experience, and beautiful imagination since childhood. www.jingkunqiao.com | [@canto_kun](https://twitter.com/canto_kun)

Lore

poem by
Amulya Hiremath

Anti-clockwise from left
Exploring now: stories

*I took a Folklore and Literature class
Last semester.*

On the first day:
We arrive, wide-eyed,
Eager to explore the exotic, almost extinct,
Not knowing we were already full of
Folk and lore.
From the corners of those very wide eyes
To the strands still held snug from childhood,
We just didn't know where our stories lay.

We talk about
Gods behind masks and masked evils,
Temples left in ruins but their meaning still in place,
Differentiate between *tooth* and *breast* goddesses,
And how everything is of value for worship but
Stories don't need to be worshipped to last.
And on some days, we become the narrative.

On the last day:
We visit a museum.
Make our way from the palaeolithic to the just then history.
Nameless terracotta shapes, votives and stupas,
Snatched from their stories, their times
And arranged, encased, in the order
Of our meaning, in stick-straight lines.

My friend and I,
When no one is looking,
Lean in closer to the glass,
And generously whisper into them,
Give them some of our stories to hold.

A reader, a dreamer, a writer, **Amulya Hiremath** is a believer in the power of storytelling. Interested in all things prose and poetry she is currently pursuing her Master's in English at the University of Mysore, India. Her work has appeared in college publications as well as international sites. You can find more of her work at: <https://amulyahiremath.com/>

Twilight

poem by Lydia Rae Bush

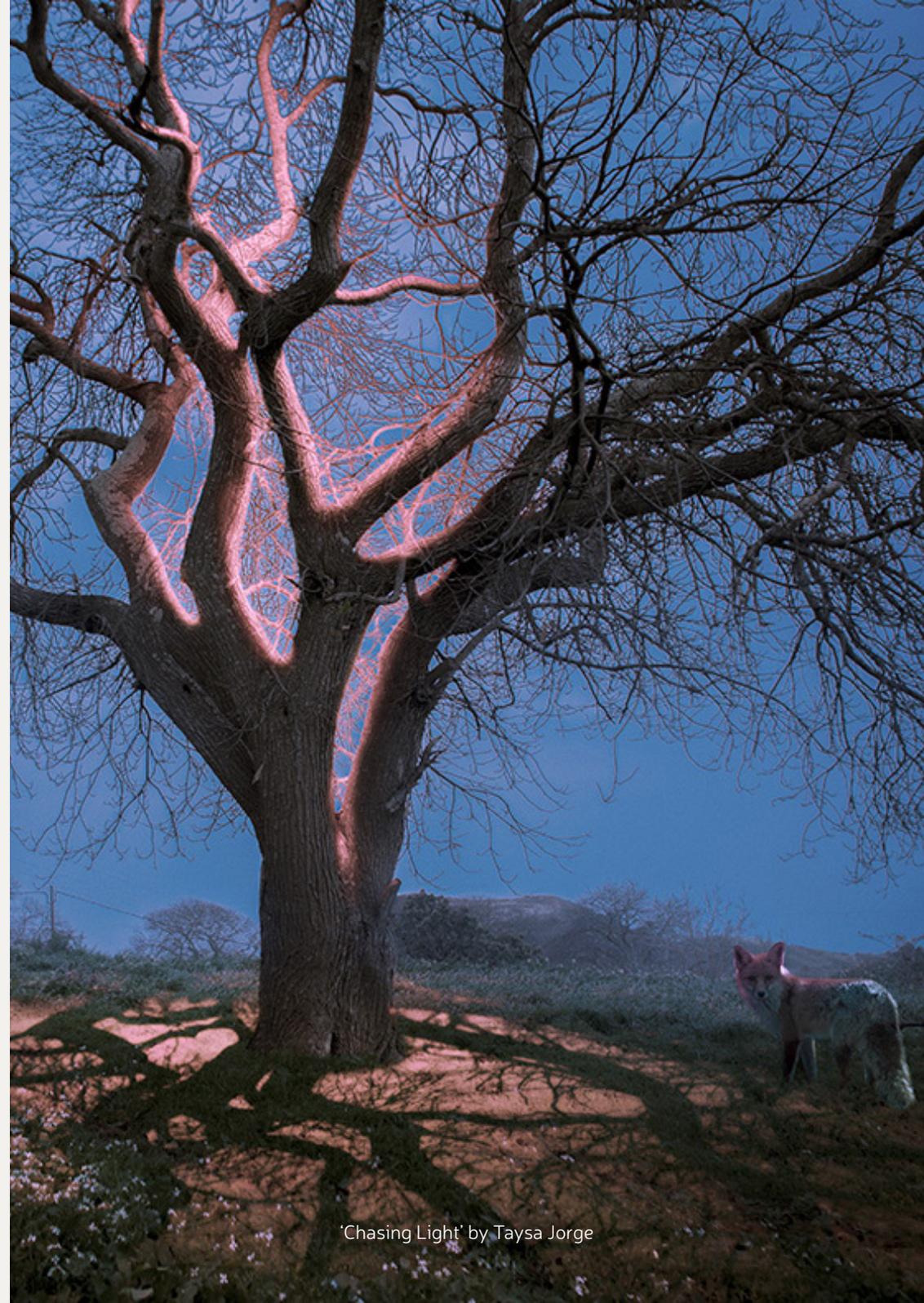
branches bare but for withered leaves
 almost like a skeleton
 black against the periwinkle sky

reach for wings gone

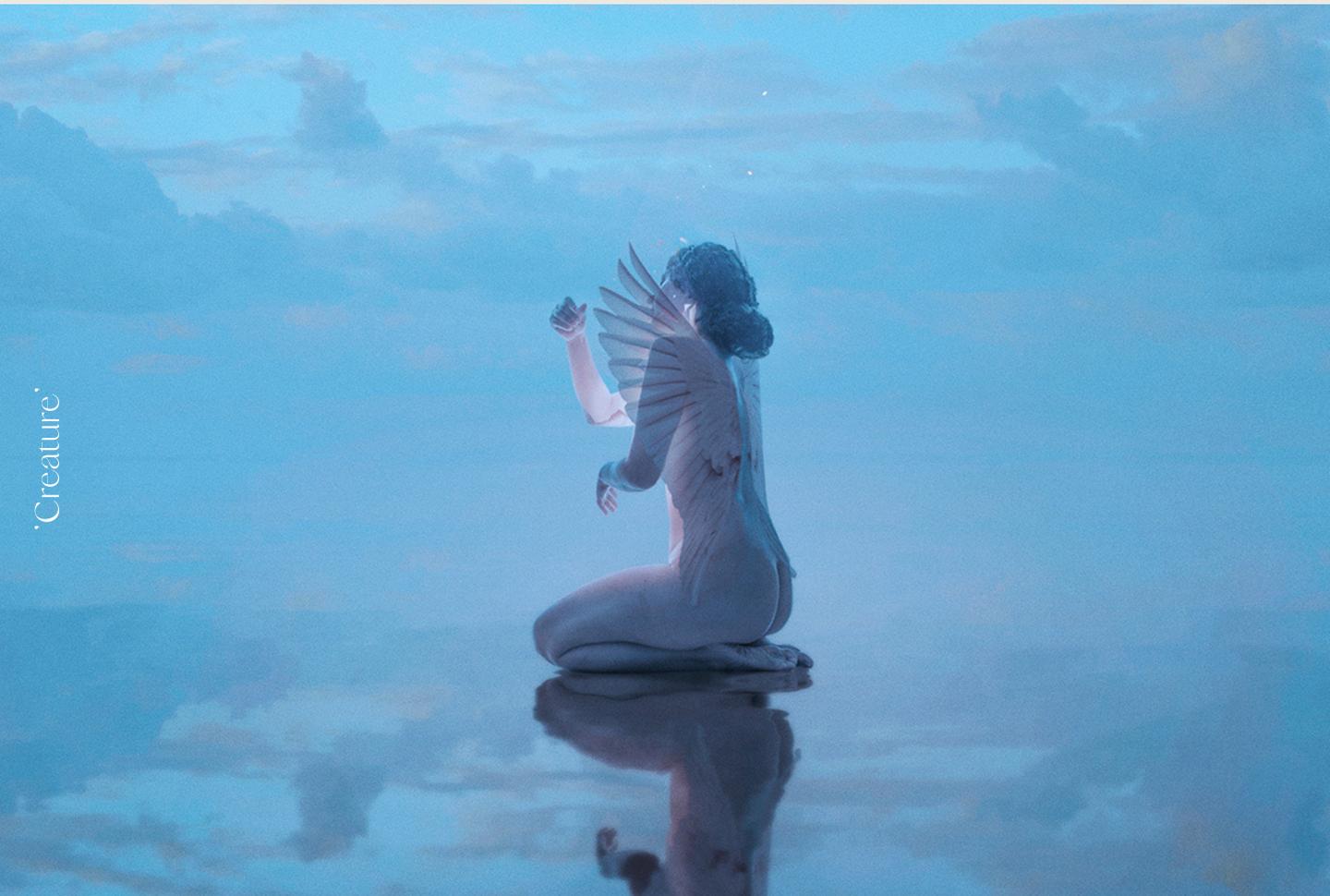
branches bare but for withered leaves
 almost like a lotus cluster
 black against the periwinkle sky

reach for wings to come

Lydia Rae Bush is a former Creative Writing Instructor and the author of poetry blog Alphabet Ravine. Her poetry, which focuses on sexuality, mental health, and intersectional feminism, has been included in publications such as "The Lanthorn", "Pinnacle Anthology", and "Overcomer: Breaking Down the Walls of Shame and Rebuilding Your Soul". When not writing, Lydia can be found singing and dancing, especially in bed when she is supposed to be going to sleep.



'Chasing Light' by Taysa Jorge



‘Creature’

Art & Lore:
In Conversation With

◆
Taysa
Jorge

◆
Visual Artist



'The Crow'



'Moments Before Night Falls'

What is your process like? Do you start with a concept of the imagery you want to produce or do you get sparks of inspiration when on the scene / while post-processing?

I mostly get sparks of inspiration when I'm shooting in nature and later in post-processing is when I end up creating something. Editing takes a big part of my creative process, many times creating something very different from the original picture and doing compositions in Photoshop from different images, sometimes I even need to take extra pictures, specially self-portraits when I need to place myself into a scenery.

However I also can start from a previous concept but it's not something so usual, it's more pleasant and easy for me to go out and observe/photograph things I like and let one thing lead to another. But it all depends on what I want to transmit, I try to (not) force myself to do a certain thing so sometimes I don't feel the need to create something from a picture, instead I just like it how it is and post-processing only helps me to create an atmosphere that reflects what the image makes me feel.

Most of your pieces are set in sweeping natural landscapes and feature a lot of flora and fauna, making your work feel feral - unbound and boundless. Can you tell us about your relationship with nature and how it influences your work?

I grew up on an island so nature has always been a big part of my leisure, it has always inspired me and I feel I find myself when I'm in it so it just expresses spontaneously in my work. At the end I think we're the result of many things that influence us like what we continuously see and think, even unconsciously, and in my opinion if you're an artist and you connect with your true self in order to create something that truly comes from you those things just find a way to come out and show up in your work.

How do you go about staging your pieces and choosing the settings for them? Is location scouting an important part of your process?

I spend a lot of time wandering around, discovering new places, getting into weird roads and isolated places but I'd call it only "scouting" since I don't feel I'm looking for a location, I feel like I'm just exploring and I probably would do the same if I weren't a photographer. I think the work I create is in part just a result of my curiosity and something I love to do, which is to get lost in nature.

As an artist, do you find that myths, legends and the very art of storytelling play an important role in serving as inspiration? If so, are there any fables or folklore that you are particularly fond of or influenced by?

I think myths and legends can be absolutely a great subject for inspiration but it isn't actually what personally inspires me. I'm a very curious person, I like to wonder about things, discover my true self and, for example, philosophize about life and psychology has always been an inspiration for me, as much as spirituality in recent years.

The space between what I see and what I know as reality and what I actually feel is what inspires me, I feel like it's a space where things are missed out and I think that's where my work stands, if that makes sense. Also magical realism books and movies are a source of inspiration to me, everything that brings me more questions than answers, and makes me reflexive, especially about mysteries of life, inspires me.

On a more technical note, your colour grading is sublime and really enhances the emotion of each piece. Do you stick to a certain palette or do you enjoy experimenting and pushing the boundaries?

Thank you so much. I have preferences for blues and colder tones but I like to play with every color. I try to stay true to my creativity and let it express without stick to a certain style but at the same time I try to be cohesive and relevant so it's difficult to me to find the balance sometimes but I feel like both things can coexist and both are important, specially to be true to my creativity and don't impose myself rules about how my work and style should be and what kind of colors I should use because depending of the moment of my life, what I'm being inspired for or experiencing I feel like creating more with some colors and elements than others so it's important to me to feel free to do it.

At the same time it's usually talked about, and I agree, about the importance of having a style but in my opinion it has more to do with finding a guiding thread that connects the whole body of work than sticking to a certain palette or kind of images.



'Chasing Light'

The work I create is in part just a result of my curiosity and something I love to do, which is to get lost in nature. 🌿



Everything that brings me more questions than answers, & makes me reflexive, especially about mysteries of life, inspires me. ”

Your work feels mysterious and features figures and natural elements in a mythical manner. In particular, a few of your pieces feature ethereal orbs of light. Can you talk about what they symbolize?

Yes, I started introducing them in my pictures some years ago after reading about spirituality and learn what consciousness means, from a point of view of seeing ourselves and everything that surround us as part of the same thing and understanding consciousness as something that is in everything, something we can't see but we can feel, for example, in my case, a feeling of belonging when I look a starry sky or a sunset, these light balls are a visual representation of that feeling, the universal consciousness.

That was the initial concept from a series of images I created in that time but little by little the use of these light balls as much as other kinds of lights I add with Photoshop has not a concrete meaning but to enhance the meaning or atmosphere of the images itself.

We at TOCC feel that visual art and wordless storytelling can have just as much of an impact. Do you intend your photographs to have a narrative of any kind? Does each piece have an essence that it tries to convey to the viewer? If so, what would you like for them to take away?

Yes I like to create meaningful things as much as the pieces individually as the whole body of work, it's what makes me feel fulfilled and would love to make people feel hopeful if possible and at the same time wake up in them deeper questions about life but that's not my goal. At the core what I want is to share a vision, my vision, and be as genuine as I can doing it, and doing it from my heart, that's what's most important to me and if it inspires someone else somehow it's a gift.



'Climbing Trees That Reach The Moon'

Taya Jorge is a self-taught visual artist based in Canary Islands. She discovered photography as a means of artistic expression in 2015, interested in the connection between human beings and nature her aim is to create sceneries that make viewers disconnect from the daily routine and wonder about deeper topics such the meaning of life, ones existence and the unknown. Links: <http://taysajorge.com/links> | Instagram / Twitter: @taysajorge



Blue Hour Wind

visual art by Taysa Jorge

Old time ballad for the ones who can't be found by sleep

poem by Clem Flowers

Dear Johnny
Dear Johnny
Come home to me
Dear Johnny
Dear Johnny
You're all I want
to see

Ache soaks every dawn
on another bitter sunrise
yearn for you Here
as life passes
me by

one more year &
then you'll return-
wrote me that
11 years today

I'm a ghost
in our home &
God only knows
what deserts
you roam

Dear Johnny
Dear Johnny
Come home to me
Dear Johnny
Dear Johnny
Set my soul
Free

Clem Flowers (they / them) is a poet, low rent aesthete, & dramatic tenor living in a mountain's shadow in Home of Truth, Utah with a wonderful wife & sweet kitty.

trash stratum.

flash fiction by George Bidwell

George Bidwell is a twenty-one-year-old student of literature at Salford University with six years' worth of writing experience, including film criticism for the local paper at 13. His background has seen him working in dive bars, factories, restaurants, and childcare to earn his way, all of which he completed alongside his few novels and anthologies.

On the A47, from the passenger seat window, all is darkness. From the drivers side window, all is darkness. Ahead the lights illuminate the road and pull the tarmac from the black void it has become. We cruise along the motorway, undisturbed by the sparse vehicles that occasionally pass us. The air is all smoke. The atmosphere is cautious conversation. The smell is body odour. From the radio an unheard voice signs the praises of a modern Hard House hybrid track. The stars have hidden themselves away and the moon is but a dot upon the emptiness. Our daze ends and, within the walls of a family car, we discuss the night as it passes into morning. From our faces fall droplets that crash upon the floor and flick back against our legs. As we draw closer to home, and away from the atmosphere that is growing, the satnav is turned off. We find ourselves amongst the familiar highways and byways of life. The radio is turned up, then turned down, then turned off. The conversation reignites somewhere around Peterborough. We cover world truths, home truths, untruths. In our heads we traverse the world touching upon the cultures we fear, the cultures we embrace, and we butcher the essence of the cultures we are yet to understand. Giggles slip from our lips and the warmth of our breath joins the atmosphere in an erotic, emotive fashion. I ask you for a cigarette, you agree it is time, and I pull the tobacco from the side of the door. Still, even as the night leaves us, the darkness prevails, and at times even seems to grow in potency. Between my fingers I roll the cigarette papers across the tobacco and slide a filter into the slim curvature of the smoke. I pass one to you and hold on to one myself. We begin to twitch.

Lighter is pulled from cup holder.

The radio turns on.

Jazz is playing.

The lighter flickers.

The cigarette burns.

The sky around us folds in on itself until we are left in emptiness. The embers at the end of our cigarettes are the only lights. No single, discernible shape lies anywhere. I reach for your hand and feel it though I can not see it. Silence fills our eardrums. Our hearts begin to beat again. From the darkness forms a light, a single strip of light that burns across the darkness. A white in the void. We lean back, hold each other close, and I understand. I understand what has happened. As I feel your warmth on my skin, I see. We have fallen in love.

Consider the Selkie

poem by Bex Hainsworth

Note: 'Consider the Selkie' was first published in Visual Verse, Vol 09, Chapter 03.

Bex Hainsworth is a poet and teacher based in Leicester, UK. She won the Collection HQ Prize as part of the East Riding Festival of Words and her poetry has been published following commendations in the Welsh Poetry, Ware Poets and AUB Poetry competitions. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Lake, MONO., Atrium and Brave Voices Magazine.

I sink into the steaming water,
wrap it around me like a coat.
The tub follows my curves,
holds me close, enamel mermaid purse.
A shower wouldn't satisfy:
I need to wear water like a skin.
It is a process, learning
to like this body, its ripples
and roundness. The way
my thighs press into
the smooth arms of the bath.
But then I consider the selkie.

Almost-more-than siren
and her blubber, the folds
of her soft belly, bursting
from seal slip. Perhaps this
is why I am fond of the water,
the way its cloth clings to
my nakedness: I feel less raw,
unexposed. It is a journey,
but maybe, after this soaking,
I will slow down in front of the mirror
and stop searching for another skin.

a little crooked

poem by Linda M. Crate

never knew it would
be written in my lore
that i would fall for
a woman,

the mythology of me
seemed to be different from
the script i was supposed to
follow and so i tried hard not
to deviate from the path;

but love is love and that's nothing
to be ashamed of—

i am the rainbow of my grandmother's life,
the light that parts the darkness from the clouds;
i am dreams and imagination and hope
wrapped in the bones of humanity;
but my wings can carry me all the way to the
sun yet i prefer to speak to the moon—

i am a daughter of the moon,
always shining even when i cannot be seen;

i may not be straight but i have always
liked things when they were a little crooked i
always thought it gave them more character.



Dancing Girl Evefyn, Age 9

pigment print by Amy Friend, 'Dare Alla Luce' series



Snake Charmer

pigment print by Amy Friend, 'Dare Alla Luce' series

"Dare Affa Luce" - To Bring the Light

My focus on the photographic medium is not specifically concerned with capturing a "concrete" reality. I often use photography to explore the relationship between what is visible and non-visible.

When I began to work on the *Dare alla Luce* series, I initially responded to a collection of vintage photographs, retrieved from a variety of sources. Through hand-manipulated interventions, I perforate the photographs and subsequently re-photograph them to instigate an oscillation between what is present and absent. Through my processes I address the fragile quality of the photographic object but also, the fragility of our lives and our history.

By employing the tools of photography, I "re-use" light, allowing it to shine through the holes. In a playful and yet, literal manner, I return the subjects of the photographs back to the light, while simultaneously bringing them forward. I play with the light and use it metaphorically allowing for new readings, sometimes through heavy-handed applications and at other times delicately. The images are permanently altered; they are lost and reborn, hence the title, *Dare alla Luce*, an Italian term meaning, "to bring to the light" in reference to birth.

The title of each piece is significant; some titles were taken directly from the notations found written on the photographs, yet those without any indication of provenance were titled to reference the nuances of photography as a medium and the manner in which we interact with these images.

Through this project I began to "lie" about the titles, fabricating new identities and histories as a means of questioning the value of what is lost. I engaged with each image and become increasingly aware of the weight each photograph carries, whether factual or not.

Amy Friend is a Canadian artist with a roster of national and international exhibitions. In 2017, Friend published the monograph, *Stardust*, with L'Artiere Publishing, Italy. She presented her work in 2018 at ParisPhoto with incamera Galerie and was selected for the Elles X exhibition, curated by Fannie Escoulen, showcasing the work of 100 women photographers, from the beginning of photography to today. website: www.amyfriend.ca | instagram @amyquerin



We Are Little Mysteries



Every Night

pigment prints by Amy Friend 'Dare Alla Luce' series

Cassiopeia on the Rocks

poem by Catarsis Ballesteros

Cassiopeia on the rocks—
How she withers when she walks!
Born by seashore every night
And naught but sand come morning light.

I know she's not for me still I
Stubbornly craft another poem;
Gold visions dance under my eyes
And leave me stranded, winded, mourning.

Pricked my hand on the spindle, heedless—
Seeking to be witched by a curse or two
I grew roots waiting for the sunrise
And slowly wilt just to forego you.

Cruelly angelic, clear, unbound;
With the sun tailing her like a hound.

Catarsis Ballesteros is a sapphic artist from Mexico who specializes in painting, but dabbles in music and literature. Growing up around a lot of spiritual tales from their maternal family they developed a love for fantasy and bygone times. Social media: Twitter @hellcat_arsis Instagram @the_stitchbard

Fear & Astar

poem by Phoebe Kalid

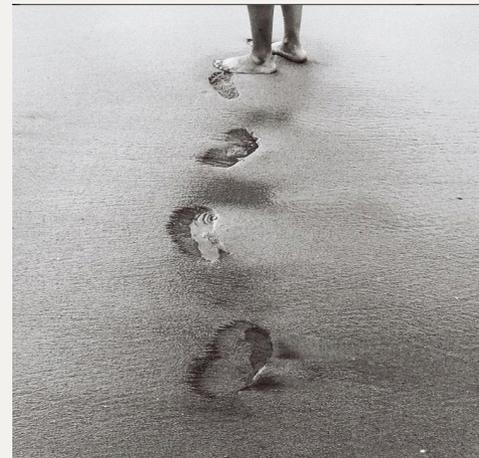
we knew this wouldn't end well,
two overzealous death knells

deafened by themselves.
join me in this soundless dance

*until your feet turn blue. don't think
about who watches you from*

*the gaping abyss, where bliss—
slumping, spent & lame—splinters*

*into shame. satan or odysseus?
their footsteps sound the same.*



Wish

poem by Michael Chin

Make a wish.
Not three.
Make a wish. These words
from an anxious mother, a child
between her
and all those burning candles.
Coffee on her breath.

Wishes aren't about consequences
no one sees meaning coming.
The butterfly effect big picture.

Keep the wishes simple.
Isn't that the moral?
Don't ask for much.
A few bucks, better hair,
a really good cup of coffee.

And before that coffee's done,
look at yourself in the black surface.
Know this is what
happiness looks like—
this reflection dark enough
to obscure wrinkles, gray hair
age and old magic.
Sip it down slowly.
Watch your best self
shrink farther away
until you disappear.

Bleat by Bleat



story by Melissa Martini

I shake the ticks from my fur as a deer, gnawing at the remaining stragglers. I curl up on my own front porch, the light I left on illuminating the lawn. The evening's rain hasn't dried yet and each wet blade is glistening under the stars. Being a deer isn't so bad. On full moon nights like these, I appreciate nature, strolling through the forest and nuzzling my nose against squirrels and rabbits - but hunting season starts in a week, so by next month's full moon, things won't be so calm.

Instead of worrying about what hunting season will bring, I look up: the full moon is bright white, sparkling selenite against a navy backdrop. My fur is slightly damp from rolling around in a field of flowers earlier, but it's refreshing rather than uncomfortable, keeping me cool in the storm's lingering humidity.

Behind me, Cooper opens the front door and takes a seat on the top step. I rest my head on his thigh. He pats my head gently, scratching behind my ears. His fingers are rough - I know this - but against my fur, they feel thick and smooth. He's younger than me by a handful of years, but he takes care of me during full moons - keeps an eye out for bears while I'm a deer and massages my limbs when I transform back into a human.

"You know, Sara," Cooper begins, his fingers trailing from between my ears, down my neck, to my spine. "I think your little white spots line up with every beauty mark on your back."

I bleat to let him know I heard him and acknowledge what he has said, not because I'm in any kind of distress, but because I can't speak. I feel his fingers poke at each speckle, lightly fluffing the fur there. I crane my neck to lick his arm, and he laughs.

We sit together on the porch until sunset, and he holds me as I transform back into a human, my fur retracting into my skin and leaving me buck naked. My head still rests in his lap, cheek pressed against the denim of his thigh. He's sound asleep. I nudge him awake slowly - he might not be a deer, but he still enjoys nature just as much.

The sun rises slowly, an iris of fire surrounded by golden petals aching to reach out towards deep ocean blue. Cooper runs his fingers through my hair, cupping my shoulder and squeezing lightly. I can feel the callouses now against my skin. I reach around to take his hand, my fingers sore from spending the night as hooves. My knuckles are stiff - they told me I was too young for arthritis, so Cooper milks each digit in lieu of prescription painkillers.

Dawn tickles my bare body into visibility, so Cooper wraps his arms around me and lifts me up. I can walk on my own, but Cooper carries me inside and lays me in bed, covering me with a comforter. He cooks me breakfast: eggs scrambled softly, still a tad runny in between the fluffy folds; toasted sourdough bread with crispy crust and a chewy center; and coffee, strong and black, bitter against my tender lips.

My face always hurts the most, changing its shape the most during transformations - my nose often feels bruised and broken the morning after, my eye sockets sore and my lips slightly swollen. The skin on my cheeks stretches itself into a snout, elastic and settling back into place. Cooper plants kisses along my jawline as I eat, making his way to my forehead.

Cooper is a hunter who doesn't hunt. He used to hunt, of course, before I got cursed, but has since changed his ways. He still carries a shotgun, putting on a show during hunting season and protecting me against bears if necessary, but we are both vegetarians now and let bugs out instead of squishing them.

I don't know how I got cursed, or why I turn into a deer every full moon. Cooper claims it's karma - the universe punishing him for his past as a hunter who *did* hunt - and he apologizes to me every chance he gets. He's wrong, though, because the curse sits heavy inside of my heart as if it wants to drag me down into the dirt with it, bury me and force me into a premature decay. The curse is wholly mine. I can feel it in my bones, brittle and threatening to break whether I'm a human or a deer.

I finish breakfast and Cooper clears my plate away for me, washing the dishes as I roll over in bed. He gently pulls the comforter down to reveal my back, lightly massaging my muscles. He presses his fingertips into my skin and I wonder when he learned acupressure - until I realize he's counting my beauty marks, comparing them to my speckled fur.

"So, is your theory right?" I ask, arching my back into his touch. His hands are still cool from the sink water, skin slightly moist. I nuzzle my face against the pillow, the fabric of the pillowcase crisp and clean.

"Mhm," Cooper responds, climbing into the bed and laying next to me. He wraps his arms around my body and closes his eyes. "I'm sorry you have to go through this, Sara."

"It's not your fault," I insist, running my fingers through his mop of blonde hair. He's still in yesterday's flannel and jeans, and I know he struggles to take care

of himself when he's taking care of me. "Why don't you go shower, honey? You spent half the night outside with me."

"You're right," he mumbles, "Do you want to join me? The warm water will help."

"It's okay," I breathe out. I want to bathe in hydrogen peroxide, the sharp scent filling the bathroom and threatening to suffocate me. I want to slowly sit down in the tub and feel the soft sizzle of bubbles bursting against my skin, fizzling until I can't feel anything else. "I just want to rest for now."

Cooper nods and crawls out of bed, heading to the bathroom. I hear the shower turn on, the pitter patter of water lulling me to sleep. I dream of being a deer again, meeting other deer like me - who can speak to me, bleat and bellow by my side into the moonlight. Instead, I'm surrounded by strangers who sniff me and skitter away, smelling nothing but human.

Cooper is cooking again when I awake - mushroom risotto made with foraged wild mushrooms and white wine, served alongside a glass of red. I clean myself up and get dressed while Cooper finishes up dinner, realizing I slept the entire day away. I find a flower petal in my hair and turn it over in my hand, letting it rest in my palm. How it held onto me through the hours in bed reminds me I cannot escape my curse even in sleep.

I pull on a loose night dress and cotton panties, light and airy on my body and soft and silky against my skin. Our home is not large, most of the floors wooden rather than carpeted, a stark contrast for my feet in comparison to galloping in the grass the previous evening. Despite living my day to day life as a human, getting used to everyday sensations always seems to take longer than the other way around, as if being a deer is inherently more natural to me.

We eat dinner sitting across from each other at the dining room table, a candle lit between us, flame flickering in the gentle breeze blowing in from an open window. Cooper stands to shut it in between bites. I lift my spoon to my mouth, the risotto creamy with just enough of a tender bite to it. The mushrooms retained a satisfying snap, savory and slightly spongy. I swirl and sip my red wine, a blend we bought in bulk from a winery downtown.

"Good?" Cooper asks, resuming his seat across from me. His cheeks are slightly flushed beneath his facial hair, a darker shade of blonde than the hair on

his head. It is warm in the dining room, and I realize the oven is on in the kitchen. I disguise a sniff as a short breath, tapping into my still swollen olfactory bulb: blondies, pecans, and a touch of toffee.

"Delicious," I respond, taking another long sip of my wine. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. Just love you a lot." He smiles as he raises his spoon to his lips. He is lying. The guilt that has been building up within his body is beginning to overflow, and his adamant apologies are no longer enough. "Looked like last night really kicked your ass."

"I'm fine," I insist, smiling back at him and refilling my glass. My fingers throb as they grip the wine bottle, still sore. I wince and hope he doesn't notice, pushing through the pain and aching for the wine to numb me just a little bit. "I had fun. Smelled some flowers, chased a rabbit. Kind of like Bambi, actually."

"Bambi's mother dies. It's one of the saddest movie moments of all time, Sara." Cooper sighs. "How is living like Bambi your idea of *fun*?"

"Coop, my mom died over a decade ago." I drop my spoon in my bowl, the neck clinking quite loudly against the porcelain rim.

"I'm just saying," Cooper wipes his mouth with his napkin, "How are you so... okay with all of this? How can you claim that you *had fun*? You come home once a month so sore it seems like you got hit by a car, all because of this curse."

"I'm *not* okay with it, but I *am* making the best of it. I mean, maybe it's not a curse, Coop. Maybe it's a blessing. Like, there *are* benefits: I can tell your blondies are burning and you can't." I use my thumb to point behind me towards the kitchen, to which Cooper mutters a *Shit!* before tossing his napkin on the table and running off. I let my face fall into my hands and puff out a sigh.

The next full moon comes, Cooper crossing off each day on our calendar with a thick, black marker. As I strip down, preparing to transform, Cooper pulls on a forest-green tee shirt and camouflage cargo pants, slinging his shotgun over his shoulder. We make eye contact as we get ready, the air in our bedroom heavy as if an invisible weighted blank lay above us.

He takes a couple steps towards me, closing the distance between us. "You know you don't have to worry about me, right? This is strictly to protect you to-

night.” He lifts and sets down the shotgun strap on his shoulder.

“I know, Coop.” I wrap my arms around him loosely, letting my cheek rest against his chest. His hands press against my bare back, fingers trailing up and down my spine hesitantly.

“Can’t you just stay in tonight?” He asks, but we both know I can’t. It’s a compulsion we tried to resist so many times before, but each effort ended in either me jumping through closed windows and shattering glass all over the bedroom and my body, or headbutting the front door repeatedly until he reluctantly unlocked it.

“No,” I whisper, feeling my skin begin to burn. “I’ll stay close by. Don’t worry.” I begin to transform in his arms, and he holds me until I am fully deer. He carries me down the stairs and then lets me loose. I frolic around our front yard for a few moments before heading into the forest. It’s cool outside, flirting with chilly. I dig my hooves into the dirt, brush my nose against tree trunks, and kick at rocks and grass.

As if I’d been building up energy all month, I begin dashing around the forest in small circles, weaving my way through trees and bushes in a desperate attempt to release it. The rush of the wind against my fur is exhilarating, my thin legs flicking as I gallop. I encounter Cooper, stopping short before colliding with his large body.

“Sara?”

I bleat quietly in confirmation, not wanting to attract attention.

Cooper laughs. “Do you have the *zoomies* like a god damn puppy?”

I bleat again, followed by a low bellow.

“Alright, alright. No need to get defensive, I was just kiddin’ around. Go on, do your thing.” He gestures for me to continue running, but I nuzzle into the palm of his hand instead as if asking for him to pet me. He obliges, gently kissing the top of my head before I take off again.

I finally slow down in a small clearing, coming to a stop to catch my breath. I hear distant gunshots, but I know Cooper isn’t too far behind me, doing his best to both protect me and give me space. I try not to worry, but the thought of another deer being pierced by a bullet and falling to the ground in a dying heap makes my stomach turn.

The other deer don’t acknowledge me as one of them, despite the fact we are all white-tailed and speckled, white spots adorning our backs. When I encounter them in the forest, their ears perk up, frightened as if I am a human. When I try to talk to them, they flee like I’ve insulted them - I wonder if there are different deer languages, and if my curse provided me with the wrong one for my area, but settle on the theory that they probably know my secret and don’t necessarily want to be involved with me.

Another gunshot echoes through the forest, this time a tad bit closer. I can hear the crunching of leaves beneath heavy boots, and while they sound like Cooper’s, I’m not positive. With the next shot, I hear a high-pitched bleat and get a strong whiff of blood, musky and metallic. The soft thump of a body sets the forest off balance, the air around me suddenly thick and my eyes growing heavy with tears.

My legs begin to give out in a defeat that is not my own, but I am too far from the house to curl up on the porch like I want. Instead, I lay where I am, in the center of the clearing, tucking my face into my body and closing my eyes tight. I hear gunshots coming from all around me, the scent of blood growing in all directions.

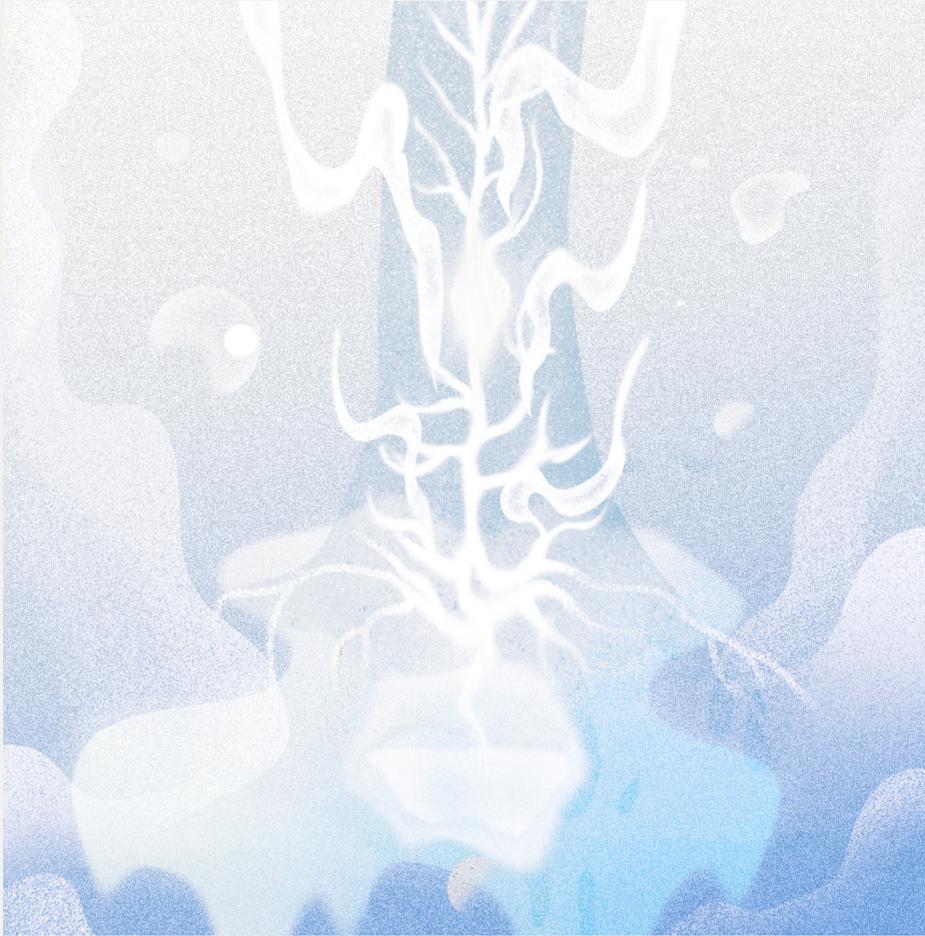
When I open my eyes, I have vertigo. I hear a *No! Get away from her!* before a sharp pinch in my side startles me - I jump up, a heaviness tugging my body back down. I spin around in an attempt to see what it is, but I am dizzy as if I am drunk and stumble to the side. Cooper appears, swatting at my side with the end of his shotgun. He never fires it, but I hear a high-pitched yelp.

A small fox falls from my body, warm blood dripping from the wound it left behind. Cooper palms the wound and carries me home, setting me down on the porch. He rushes inside and comes out with water and gauze, tending to me and wrapping my body up. He’s mumbling apologies as I rest my head in his lap. I close my eyes again.

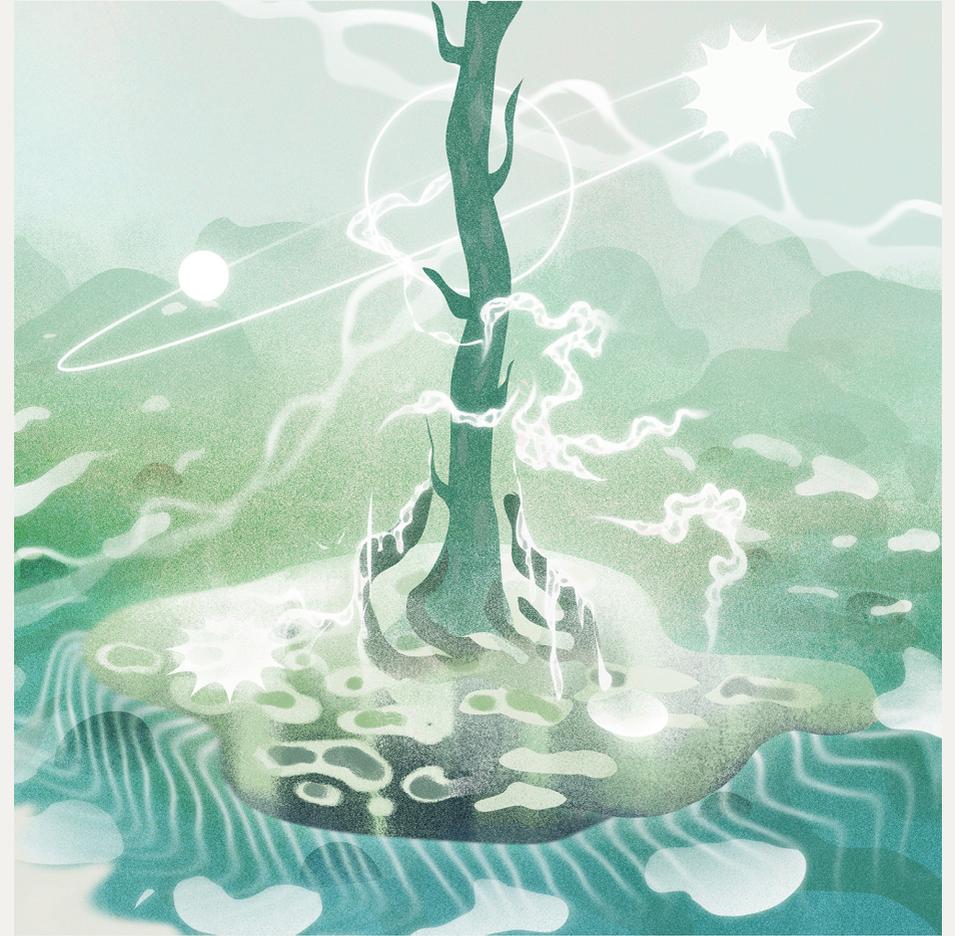
Another gunshot echoes in the distance, followed by another bleat. Cooper cries. Bleat by bleat, I fall asleep, the apologies, gunshots, and bleats blending together into an eerie lullaby.

Note: ‘Bleat by Bleat’ was originally published in *Faded Fur and Stripped Skin* with Bottlecap Press.

Melissa Martini (she/her) is a short fiction writer and Capricorn from New Jersey. She studied Creative Writing in both undergrad and graduate school at Seton Hall University. Currently, she serves as Founder & EIC of Moss Puppy Magazine. She can be found @melissquirtle and her publications can be viewed at melibeans.wixsite.com/home. She has three dogs, all of which are fluffballs.



Souf



Re.

Trees of Life

Digital art by Jingkun Qiao, 2022

Canto_Kun (Jingkun Qiao) is a freelance illustrator and visual designer from Mainland China who focuses on digital illustration, motion graphics, and storytelling. Jingkun's art prefers to show a surreal fantasy world based on her thoughts of life, spiritual experience, and beautiful imagination since childhood. www.jingkunqiao.com | [@canto_kun](https://twitter.com/canto_kun)

Bridget

poem by Bex Hainsworth

*Are you a witch, or are you a fairy?
Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?'*¹

I was born in the thicket under an amber moon.
Squatting like a frog, my mother lifted me
from the shimmering slop, saw volcanic eyes,
pale gums needling with teeth, and left me
in a warm cradle with the Bolands of Ballyvadlea.

I was eighteen when they married me to Michael.
After a childhood spent with soil beneath my nails,
leaves in my hair, chasing after Titania, Morgan le Fay,
Flidais, and Mug Ruith, my caretakers thought the cooper
would straighten me out. He worked with cold, chopped timber;
I was a living tree with earth in my bones.
He didn't know what to do with me.

Our cottage was built on sacred ground.
The deposed mound, old fort, was filled
with mushroom fossils, scattered in loose wreaths
like fingerprints. There was whitethorn in the windows.
I think it was the only reason I came back to him:
our home's mystic gravity. At night, after a rut,
the cup of my womb unfilled, my body fallow,
I would go to the forest, curl up with the brambles
supping at my bare breasts, skin prickling, aflame.
Sometimes, I would wish for a daughter.

I was happiest when he was away in Clonnel.
My sewing machine singing like a stream,
the chickens fluttering around a circle of seed,
I would run feathers between finger and thumb,
ache with a familiarity, ancient, arcane.
And so I made my own way. Michael, when
he came back, was a passenger, luggage. He knew it.

I can't believe it was the bronchitis that did it.
Honestly, I thought he had always known – but then again,
he was a little slow. By then the homesickness had grown
like cold moss over my soul: I was ready to go.
Interrogation, frenzy, the impotence of men.
In the end, I let them burn me and throw my bones
into the thicket. Later, I stepped out of the earth,
as if out of a fire: phoenix, fae, a woman reborn.

¹Bridget Cleary was born in Ireland in 1869. She was murdered by her husband and his family after they claimed she was a fairy changeling who had taken the place of Bridget after she went missing near their home.

Note: 'Bridget' was shortlisted in the 2021 Ware Poets Competition and subsequently appeared in the winners' anthology.

Bex Hainsworth is a poet and teacher based in Leicester, UK. She won the Collection HQ Prize as part of the East Riding Festival of Words and her poetry has been published following commendations in the Welsh Poetry, Ware Poets and AUB Poetry competitions. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Lake, MONO., Atrium and Brave Voices Magazine.



Moirai

poem by Robyn Weaver

Robyn Weaver is currently an MFA student
at Eastern Kentucky University.

Pain builds her walls around me,
protecting herself. Guilt wishes
she had just awoken sooner,
been able to stop her sister. Resentment
hates what the other two have done
to her, tries to knock down

what pain has built, but she sees
the other two
crumbling, can't help
but hold them up. They move
together, one dark cloud swirling.

I have learned this dance. I am turning,
grasping,
trying to change the steps,
but their gravity is too much.
I fall
back into time,
bound to these fated moves.

The sisters are nowhere in sight.

But I have learned well,
so on
and on
and on
I dance.



Franz Kafka is dead

He died in a tree from which he wouldn't come down. "Come down!" they cried to him. "Come down! Come down!" Silence filled the night, and the night filled the silence, while they waited for Kafka to speak. "I can't," he finally said, with a note of wistfulness. "Why?" they cried. Stars spilled across the black sky. "Because then you'll stop asking for me."

Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*