

A scenic view of a forested valley. In the foreground, dark evergreen trees frame the scene. A river flows through the center of the valley, reflecting the surrounding forest and the sky. The riverbank on the right is a rocky slope covered in fallen leaves and debris. The background shows a dense forest of evergreen trees under a clear sky.

S/W O R D

S/11: WINTER 2021

Contents

- 1 *S/11 Cover*
- 4 *Introduction*
 ~~S/WORD~~ Editors
- 5 *non sequitur .004*
- 6 *non sequitur .005*
 Doug Bolling
- 7 *GIRL DON'T COME*
 Jack Garrett
- 19 *SPOKEN WORD*
 Norbert Kovacs
- 20 *home invasion*
- 21 *casual bystander*
 Jon Kemsley
- 22 *Not beautiful birds.*
 DS Maolalai
- 23 6
- 24 11
- 25 13 – *plantation visit*
- 26 14
 Michael Prihoda
- 27 *Tamarind*
 Christopher Rabley
- 30 *Walking my neighborhood*
- 32 *“I never hit anyone with a 2 by 4 before last night”*
- 33 *The First Step is the Steepest*
- 35 *“in what language does rain fall over tormented cities”*
- 36 *It's my Move*
 dan raphael

37	<i>Cloud Ogler</i> Joel Russell
43	<i>THE WATERCOLOR</i>
44	<i>A CENTERPIECE</i>
45	<i>THE DEAD CAN HURT, TOO</i> Brendan Todt
46	Contributors

Introduction

We have always been already broken.

Eleven years ago, we started ~~S/WORD~~ with the idea that sometimes we are slanted, sometimes upright. A nice, unround number, two lines that never intersect. A fitting place to bend.

S/11 will be our final issue. Nothing lasts, but we hope good art, like all that we have received in these pages, will linger a little while longer. Pause and play. We press, on and off. Candles in binary.

To all our readers and makers, thank you.

(Some reassembly required.)

non sequitur .004

a profusion as of
 broken rain
two parrots atop the spire
a flying buttress barely there
 a murmuring
as words spin before
they loosen into
 a past
quickness afterthought benign rubble there
I see you in that 3rd balcony
a mirror maze
 your listening for a stir of moments
you the composite of a hundred pasts
 you a darling in folds of
 Proust

once a snowing over a desperate valley
the lovers there aloft on whirl of cables
 barely ascending

 a ladling of
 the fallen fruit
 a future
 beside
 itself
 in
 your
 locked
 library
 a feathering
 a forgetting.

Doug Bolling

GIRL DON'T COME
(In Three Voices, Loud)

OPEN OF PLAY. DAMSEL'S REMAINS ON BARE STAGE.
TWO SODS LOITER NEAR, STRICKEN.

ONE keens:
Eeeeeaaaaahhhh.

OTHER counters:
Blub.

ONE stagger:
Clumpa.

OTHER swoon:
Mmmmzzzzz.

Say ONE:
Weary? Lounge, counterfeit.

Answer OTHER:
Rabid? Scamper, Spot.

BOTH WERE LOVELORN OF THE DEPARTED AT THEIR FEET.

Sob.

Snivel.

Languish.

Pine.

Requited wast? Say not.

Quite rightly quited, sot.

Proof.

What, goss rag snips?

Words of mouths.

Loops of tape?

Eyes with tongues.

Risible facsimiles.

Plain paper. Habeas Corpulence.

In time, this. In space, that.

Horns Blow. Up stand.

He says She says

scribbled on the bedsheets:

la vérité, monsieur.

*Là, very tainted, monkey. Je pense que
tu penses qu'on le pense que
je n'ai jamais passé le temps
sous le toit de la morte. Moi, ça,
c'est quoi que je pense, ça, moi.*

Sous le toit, toi, tant pis.

Songs of promise sung me she,
predeceased, hear:

♪ "You have a date for half-past eight tonight. . ." ♪

That was one she warbled me, one.

She warbled me too.

So warbled us three and all in one.

Three in one all?

C'est ça, ya squeak.

♪ "Some distant bells start chiming nine. . ." ♪

Yes, we loved the music, but under and above
we loved the word. And we livered it.
Croutonic was she at the pop-weekly
Beat-All. Toasted croutonic.
Sobriquet half up the masthead.

Whence you the floor wiped.

Slick with your grovel.

Additional to she than that.

Expatriate.

Mean tell how was it?

How was it.

Thus. Before she croutoned toastily
was she *Beat-All* postie-bird,
was as it were corresponderer.
Each to other did corresponder we.
Complementary close was I the hers,
she the his, *i.e.* mine. Again: if I be he
(which such needs be) he was the hers,
hers was the me. And so.
To she: letter. From me: letter.
Again. From me, to she: letter.
Again. She from me, me to she: letter.
Again. Me She Did Me Did She
And I: Letter.

Litter. A river of.

You made the TV Indian cry.

Starkers our souls we showered.

Soppy godsodies.

Like Muff and Jet.

Our storms wetted less celestial regions.

What, fetid boglands?

Sub-equatorial.

Unfold the map.

Topographic, to scale.

Each and several deadline nights at *Beat-All*
she banging the word prostituer a capsule out
about some wet lanks' new jangle, wee wee hours,
fagged, frayed, adjectivals Roget'd,
wheels her sit back fingers splayed
and requisitions me tray her a thimble of nip
which mopping done I do, cheers then.
A drop slobbered her face sudden darkling
remarks: "I forgot to remember:
One plug or two? Two plug or one?"

How, plugs?

Bullets, pentagrams, fleur-de-lys
in neat rows at the head.

Semiotivating?

What follows: the system at *Beat-All*
for wrapping capsules in a figure,
videlicet: one plug, two plug,

three plug (rare such) or cipher.

Naughty figure that.

Be rude then.

Ta. So you're saying what, she hadn't
capsulated the lanks in a tally?

Astute, soberingly so, proboscis hammering,
elegant, in full livery, dogs glossed, in a word.

On get.

Did. She, delta dampering on leatherette chaise,
avoirdupoising whilst reservoiring the guzzled nip,
cantilevered options cross the blankety-paged abyss:
"Plug? Plug Plug. Plug Plug? Plug."

Évidemment a tweeny this capsule.

Fâchusement. Formerly famed
these lanks she, flaxy and wannish
she favored and they fit the slippers.

Plug-and-a-half then.

Précis, mais Beat-All didn't credit half-plugs.
A problem of—

Typography?

Probably. Days gone this, mind.
Said being said, to lace up Gordianally,
as the hour did wee, her indecipheriveness
threatening to wet leatherette,
I made a proposiphany: "In a saucer underfoot,"
I dangled, "pitch the dregs of nip and mark

how they collect."

As befell?

No whiffs or butts.

To descry her here, anima-lacking,
features floor-pressed, I were languorous
not betokening how in the nonce her lovely
maw and sniffers ope'd. Thus, did that Dicky Dicks
Beat-All capsule carry plug plug not plug
and their sophomore licorice crisp go triple zinc
enabling the lanks to get an *autobus Belge*
avec douche et bidet for bad diet hard turd touring.

Bent. Sinister.

Dexter the Tender Piledriver.

Notwithstandish, seems to anoint you
for weepy words over Dicky Dicks'
rigored bits, not hers.

How, say. 'Twas a mome for us,
toutes seules, two to tea, howsoever
Dicky Dicks there buffeted be
by fruits windfallen.

Let ears bloom, cauliflower.
Stage-taking you peremptorolorily
cast yourself as devotee of the passed-away
most confectionately for her croutonishness.
In my lot, *mirabile dictu*, such Dicky Dicks
pended peripherally at best, limp exotics
curlicueing the fringes of the tapis,
whilst our designs snaked centrally,
round-abouting she and me in a clench
of the warm muscly that snuggleth
'bout its bone.

Your drift is untoward.

Yet like ophthamol in kayak
for the cataract.

De trop asea, pilot me in.

Attention, petit bateau. HERE
lie . . . *does* she yet THERE
lay . . . *did* she being WHERE
lived . . . *had* she to you HAVING
lied . . . *should* she for there LAYING
I . . . *would* she . . . have . . . me.

Does oratory you ill beseem:
text you swallow, elipses scream.

Dot. Dot. Dot.

IGNOMONIMINY. Up call her
I to *answer!*

AFORESAID LADYLOVE STIRS
Mmmmmmm. Wha?

Soft, whence the succubuttish plainsong?

And dodgy vapors, ouf!

Yawn. Belch. Snuffle.

Fair zombie, ho! Quicken does
the moldering maid!

Fleshly rises Eve, oh stink!

Scratch. Fart. Pee-pee leak.

Ascends our lady of perpetual spank,
at we bereaved doth squinny!

What, no cherubim a-gambol?

Shame have they too, waifs,
nix jiggling bums for geezers—

Shite thy mumbler, she speaks.

Fanboy? 🖐️

🖐️ Swamper?

Right.

What then?

See-See-See-See—

See you him, he?

Him?

He.

Who stands to you athwart?

I'faith.

Distinctly.

Did— with—you— he—
flow home the scump?

Charm me so from *après-vie* to query?

Sine qua non, the very.

Amen. Yet have you no, either you,
to ask me like the azure heavens are,

where I bend with God from cloudy couch
to tiddle two of you like winks from pouch?

Laterally loll our meaty skulls,
gone angel.

Alarum not your spectre erectus' speech?

Alarum further prospect of reply.

Right, well. A peck salaam
on damask drained flews?

Your answer be trailer?

As Q to P.

Kissssksskssssskkkk.

Cha, might've goo'd your lips a dot.
Parched so, they scraped.

A dozen pardons, diet of salt,
but what I late crave, blame you.

Do. But dishing of Lot's wife,
your mate gone mute?
A buss cheers too from stage left?

Willy-nilly. *Klilililiiiiisblililililishbb.*

At's it. Juicy, drooly, leave a mark?
Score one for sog, if not for symmetry.
I love architecting.

Drops easy love from dead lips
ducking answers.

Patience. You'll die soon enough.
Then we'll rattle on in concert.

A point she has, that, she.

A point that pricks, lo.

Blenches.

Ballzyallsacs. If I anti-sanguine grow,
thank 'schatological noodlings not,
the point's beside your prick, besnipped.
If I blench (or blanch or blear),
whilst bleak your broaching breath bereft,
I blench at pending parturition,
like daddy with a week's poop pacing
wringing mitts on wait-room maggies
craves his nigh-born squaller:
so I, your reply.

Your matter please once more?

Again?

Une fois, and how and where and when?

Then, THEN or *then*,
THERE and/or *there*,
How HOWSOEVER,
with HIM, *he*, did YOU, *she*,
flow home the SCUMP?!

There then now, no: the breach . . . be cinched.

Tight?

Pinched.

Pursed?

Puckered.

Miracle. The lie on a plate eat.

I never made a claim for scumpy flow.
If scump sat off hot sappish else did go.
As our correspondence thicked,
found us figured stick to stick
o'er pot of ink, took we to supping
other each for tea. Her envelopes
did steam I *à la* twice repoachéd stewfruits
yielding luscious mucilage flaps,
her sticky licks *tartare*. With trusty double
helices from crusty spit and drool
might I reconstitute her whole.
Straddling me (idiomatically)
she underwent my *langueing*,
oh I *langued* her like I'd tyke-like
langue a greatling brick of chocolate:
till sickened, I and chocolate both,
I from sate and she from being chocolate,
all smudge and toothmark.

Mauled, fondness' bottom bleeds.
Yet can't begrudge a starveling brat
his *bonbon*.

Come Come. You chewed my substance;
you but supped my soul. With such shall
you till judgment play ping-pong? Look:
the courtside wraith keeps not the score;
she sings.

♪ "You have a date for half-past eight tonight." ♪

A love song.

To which of we?

Lugubricious boyzies,
ye bleat as if you've scat chocked in your gobs.
All songs are love songs, this one sings love stuck:
hope and hanker in marshmallow aspic,
the edge never dulled by carving.

♪ "You wanna see her. You wanna see her, oh yeah.
So you wait. You wait and wait. . ." ♪

Sublime. Let sleep me. All goes.
Sun blinds then hides, the dirty ball
turns over. Tuesday week *Beat-All*
will spill again with wordsies
re: the wettest lanks and jangles.
Pick it up, you two, hold close,
lick your inky fingers, page turn, listen. . . *music play*.

Jack Garrett

SPOKEN WORD

We hear some word spoken in the dim room. Only we had been there, so we do not know who might have said it. We grow still, listen, and hear the word a second time. It does not reach us distinctly, but we gather the basic sound of it, its firm consonants. We listen and wait. We think that since we have heard it twice, the small bit of speech must be important. However, we admit we do not know for sure what it is--a noun, a verb. We tense, weighing these peculiar facts.

We hear the word said again, now in a low ripple. We try to piece together its parts and pronounce it. Do we get it right?, we wonder, looking at each other. The voice that had spoken resumes. New syllables reach our ears. The sound has more nuance than we had heard but is faint still. This fact, after our long patience, frustrates us. We realize it will take some dedication to catch the whole word the way the mysterious voice speaks. We wait in the dim room and listen.

We try to figure what exactly we have heard. Part of it sounded like a long *r*. Another part, a quiet *th*. What have we heard, in fact? As we ponder, we hear the word in a cutting tone we had not earlier. From just the part we catch (for it is spoken quickly), we can tell its character is more emphatic than we had believed. We are left fumbling what to think. But our curiosity over the word sets us back on course. There is some essence to the small bit of speech that we like even as it defies our grasping. We keep alert for the voice; we stir even at the stray noises in the room.

We anticipate hearing something soon. The wait becomes a pleasure as we guess and figure when we will hear it. Then, we hear the word faintly. The sound is like a charm: we believe that we can understand this whisper in the air. We feel freshly confident of its nature. We repeat the syllables that we can catch as if to know their meaning for certain.

From the shadows, the word reaches us once more. Has it come in answer to our voices?, we wonder. We believe that if we listen, we will learn the answer.

Norbert Kovacs

home invasion

above a narrow garden
that rolls down to the open sea
hang a fleet of heavily armed spacecraft
first the locusts, then the risen dead
now this –
I edge backwards to pull out the cable
and the sun dies and the people disappear
on both sides of the street
and there is the roar of huge engines

Jon Kemsley

casual bystander

the letter arrived
in an unmarked envelope
with a polite invitation
to swim in several rivers

the ceremony was delayed
because I couldn't find a tie
I had no idea who 'they' were
and the radio was no help

I stopped to pick fruit
(mostly rotten) out of a dustbin
just to have something to throw
when the time came

Jon Kemsley

Not beautiful birds.

they are nesting
in the building's
shared carpark. they are
pigeons – not beautiful
birds. two in an alcove
just next to the AC
split units. two
by the gate control,
over the bins. it makes me
feel quite good
to see them
build space there.
watching a flower
come up between grey
pavement slabs. I walk
the dog past them,
walk past them
myself. step
around birdshit
like burst toothpaste
packets. check in
every morning
to see how
they're doing,
like a baker
with a fresh loaf
of bread.

DS Maolalai

6

screams of reason-

the panic weight,

men

were targets

of

significant

bullet.

if...

and if...

the yelling throat—

Michael Prihoda

11

fog thick
on the valley.

morning was
defenseless.

a reputation
forsaken

for coarseness.
i'd learned

my way
north.

Michael Prihoda

13 – plantation visit

“we’d be
remiss

if we
did

not offer
you

a slave.”

no one talked.

a terse

dialect
was the plural

of wilderness.

an unpainted
ruin

with profits

the long shame,
gazing at...

blushing at...

Michael Prihoda

Tamarind

At school, in Queens College, Nassau, Bahamas, I couldn't concentrate on what was written on the blackboard or in my fifth-grade textbook. I got by, on intuition and listening to people around me. It was exhausting and my mind wondered constantly.

I daydreamed: gazed at the morning sun printing soft on the teacher's desk, at coconut trees casting lattice shadows—most only partially ordered—on stone slabs in the quad; I heard the swoosh from the copperleaf bush as it slid sultry on aluminum windowpanes, the rattle from tree tops when the wind blew, like shekeres shook fast.

*I was lazy and I was dull, deaf and slow,
I was in the trees, with the birds and breeze,
In the sun and sky,
Stuck on a high*

I once overheard my mother, a botanist, describe the tamarind tree: it is a leguminous tree, part of the pea family. Its branches attach to a single trunk which form into a dome usually fifty feet high, has pinnate leaves, meaning they attach to either side of a twig. Its flowers display swatches of red, pink and yellow, have five petals and four sepals. It grows best in full sun.

After school, we met at the tamarind tree. That was where Mrs. Albury picked us up—me, my brother, sister and her two sons—every Monday at 3:30pm in her new, 1977, Chevrolet station wagon.

At the end of school, I was always the last to leave. It took a while to sort through my desk, piece together assignments and due dates. Folders packed neat were in an instant retrieved and reviewed, over and over. I sat alone save for a solitary fan above my head clicking dense, blades lumbering tempo grave.

I walked to the tamarind tree. Through quiet halls anxiety pricked, along the lifeless quad I felt a pull, and in bare dusty fields I sunk. On the walkway, soft-hot tarmac seared the soles of my Clarks and stung the balls of my feet; I saw the sun slink guilty, felt the sharp from blistered pits capping long jump runways. At the

school crest—a lighthouse and two shells surrounded by seven conch—I ran.

Lela, my nanny and who looked after me since the day I was born, told me that the tamarind tree could withstand drought better than most trees on the island. The fruit is used to treat diabetes, poor digestion and is good for the heart. Lela made her own tamarind paste which she put in her special beef stew as it made it taste "full".

Mrs. Albury's station wagon had a rear door which, side hinged, swung like a gate: I always sat in the cavernous seat that faced backward. Short, Mrs. Albury sat perched on the front seat which she rolled all the way forward—it was a settee made of hot fabric dipped in a chocolate. As we turned right down Eastern road, we picked up speed.

I daydreamed the tarmac rolled beneath was a high-speed belt, strips of white paint pulsed as if laser beams shot at traffic undulating in unison; I pretended rows of tall palm, stocky croton and hibiscus guarded pink walls, that royal poinciana and overgrown bougainvillea, flashing broken strokes of red-orange, yellow, white and purple, were peacock displays in a high speed junkanoo parade.

Before school, in my pajamas, I stared at the paint canvassing my bedroom, lost in its yellowness. My mind wondered fast. Why was it when I grabbed coconuts to twist them off the tree, they were always cool to the touch? Why did the bush (tropical forest) opposite our house encroach so fast? Who was it clearing that opening deep in the bush and planting cassava in neat rows? My brother and sister, already dressed and in the car, called out my name.

Ephraim, an old man who we would drive to church and lived in a one room shack with a dirt floor, told me Obeah, a man who could heal, controlled spirits and sometimes did evil things, and other spirits lived in the tops of tamarind trees. This explained why very few plants grow under it,

Mrs. Albury pulled off Eastern road into our neighborhood, Sans Souci. The car's engine moaned as we climbed the steep hill, past the cement house painted dull, to the summit where a different air cooled, and where I could see the bay.

I daydreamed Blackbeard sat in his tower and signaled ships onto reefs, a white seabed blanched turquoise hid conch, meditating in steely glaci; I imagined a giant broom had swept the sea marbled; waves marched stiff in hollow squares; sloops slid and dipped, motorboats knifed: in the distance, a burnt-yellow rinsed the sea, sun and air luminous.

One day at school, my sister glanced at a notice board and realized I was in a swim meet that afternoon. I had no idea. The water in the pool had been churned thick and slick like an oil and was warm. I heard the roar from my schoolmates as I turned my head and gasped, the rumble from my nose when I blew out air under water. Roar, gasp, rumble, roar, gasp, rumble...!

Mrs. Albury turned right onto our street and passed by my favorite tree, the gumbo limbo.

The gumbo limbo is a species in the torchwood family—its trunk and branches are shiny copper and peel constantly. The leaves are pinnate and grow in a spiral arrangement, and according to Lela, can be used to help treat upset stomach. A long time ago, when Ephraim was young, people planted the gumbo limbo around their houses as a windbreak, it can withstand hurricanes better than any tree on the island.

At home, I stopped doing my homework, trekked into the bush and sat under the lignum-vitae tree and daydreamed.

*I was lazy and I was dull, deaf and slow,
I was in the trees, with the birds and breeze,
In the sun and sky,
Stuck on a high*

Christopher Rabley

Walking my neighborhood

all these houses I walk by repeatedly
wondering how many, how long,
internal traffic patterns, weather patterns, variable densities,
what's dissolving in them, what's growing
plots and hobbies, blank-faced hours, walls that slowly skitter
when it's raining nowhere but in that room
air holes, light holes, surreptitious drainage
a garage that's now storage, a roof that's almost ripe

rooms that live, dine, bathe
a room no one owns
making room, room to roam, taking up space
taking down walls or notes
whether a flat or multiple stories

signs of dogs, trespassers, past homes,
future plans, what all matters,
visible and invisible securities, a window
watching me, a door who only knows one word

un-sidewalked curbs anchored by
vehicles that haven't moved in years
a window not designed to open
underground garages, fall out shelters
too deep to access, pipes going up a chimney

the surprise of fresh paint, the expected loose siding
a new color of grass, a tree that swears the sun hasn't risen
for years, where two unimproved streets cross
where the only stop sign's in the middle of the intersection
no yields, no lanes, only slow children play here
some dead end signs lying or misunderstood

helicopters under the ground, clouds too shy
to be seen, the alarm starts before the engine

enough car doors closing to emulate morse code
satellite dishes ready to fire back, programmable fences
homes there's more taken away from than delivered

a for sale sign fallen randomly from the sky
the weekly letters from folks who've never
been here but want to pay me well
to be houseless

dan raphael

“I never hit anyone with a 2 by 4 before last night”
(siegel-schwall blues band)

can't slap myself hard enough
run into a wall without slowing down,
putting up my hands for protection
who knows what a violent stranger would do to me

like when we were on the 5th floor patio
of my mom's building and she asked me
about jumping off (in her mid-90s, constant
pain & loneliness) i told her she probably
wouldn't die, just have more pain and less mobility

the slowly ticking bomb of ageing,
this one way hour glass, when a grain of sand
could become a kidney stone, a spot of glass
slowly eroding, a hint of moisture evolving
into mold, into hunger

so much traffic in me, rush hours only at rare times
of excitement or exhaustion from going too fast for too long
the opposite of the external rush hour
you can't hurry breath, don't want my heart
to jump the rhythm rails

my ability to increase my speed is offset
by my slowly diminishing weight
i am not a jumper--someone would have to push me
out of an airplane if i wanted to sky dive

as my chute blossomed i would start rising
then most of my body falls away
like the first stage of a rocket for
slingshot acceleration
with a whole universe to breathe
i may never exhale again

dan raphael

The First Step is the Steepest

more flying than falling
why wind and gravity use different axes
wind from the earth
the larger the building the more it tugs at people
tree wants its fruit back

the odds can be a million to one
but there comes a one
a million seconds is just 11 and a half days

a mouth for language
an eye for science
the happiest feet are the bare ones
hanging out of the window of a moving car

to talk through the turmoil
a rumor of tremors
waiting for the dots to connect
a pencil with erasers on both ends
a straw I have no idea what will come out of
this 2 by 3 foot cloud just beyond my grasp

or am I flying inside out
above a geo-tornado's skittering whirlpool
the terrain highly inelastic
but such an event its horizon lets nothing out
and if i get close enough to the edge to see over

as wind is just sideways gravity
as rain can have so many attitudes—
joy, ambition, curiosity but never confusion or doubt

chess board, fret board, an imaginary 2by4
perched on a dead branch
til a step is a swim, tacking on gravity

like a yoyo that forgot its string
finding a world to go around or through

the next step, a door in floor, 4 wheeled windows
roof ready to flap away
as if the earth a giant bird
about to shake us off its back

dan raphael

“in what language does rain fall over tormented cities”

Pablo Neruda

rain dissolves languages, rain feeds, rain wears away,
breaks through—so patiently—all restrictions
it was the wettest time, it was the driest time
so much hunger and so many available ingredients
strawberries year round, hunger year round
in the summer we save on light and heat
in the winter we see how cold and dark we can stand

the land reflects those who live on, cities as tormented and neglected
as we who live in them, cut off from the necessary food of
face to face contact and shared air, as the land is tormented
by largest building, massacres of trees, rivers evicted from their banks

not later but now, breathing with one lung at a time so the other can rest
i'm allowed a half hour of news 3 times a day, not close to meals
times I want to walk through the wall no matter how high up I am

what's left in me, what can sprout in a new realm, a new normal
we fall without hands to brace against ground that won't feel us fall

pandemic pandemonium—culture against pan,
the god of many, of art & celebration, breaking through despair,
dancing coz I still have legs and the music inside me seldom stops,
an infectious laugh, a viral revival of vitality as health comes from within
pan a word for bread in some language
won't pay the bills, fill English speaking stomachs
a panacea panic deadpan panache

dan raphael

It's my Move

warm is a warning, heat requires commitment
a gentle slide to summer or a vigorous descent
to be swift but still visible
head shake as if an illusion
just enough dots to fill in
from familiarity, from a random whim
like a roving restaurant it takes several tries to find

neither the pacific or the cascades will get any closer
to turn my yard into a green sphere of fresh oxygen
will take several years, a couple improbabilities

or to suddenly forget English and be a tourist
with the wrong kind of visa, every exchange in currency
takes away a future meal, my clothes blend in
but my body doesn't

to vacate, evacuate, not be from here
not know my way around, a kitchen with
two pans, two pots and a kettle, stores with higher prices
and unknown brands—not how far I travel
but how long it takes to get here where time's changed
not hours but years and textures, chrono-dynamics
as if i'll be back here in 20, as if someone i know
swam here as a kid

maybe next trip i'll leave myself behind
take clothes i've never worn before, act like
i have more money and fewer fears
or maybe i can rent my own house for a week
and see what I've never seen, miss
what I've never had, hear what this place
says (or won't say) about its usual parasite

dan raphael

Cloud Ogler

This lady who is always looking up at the clouds. Shes always laying on her back in a field looking at them. It was in the lot behind Walmart.. I'd see her when I'd walk back from work in the morning I work the 3rd shift stocking shelves at walmart, and I get out at 7:00 am. When they'd let me out leave early I'd see her going to the field as the sun came up.

I assume she watches the sun come up on the clouds I assume she watches the clouds because she's only out there during the day which is when clouds come out. I have a crush on her but she might be too old or have kids you never know.

I clocked out and got a snack from Meijer gas station.the cashier register thought she laid there all day because he never saw her get up accept to go home as the sun went down.We decided not to talk to bunches of people about that cause theyll bother if they knew she was there. We think she might be somewhat 'out there,'"

Her hairs is dyed badly black and matted. She reminds me of Phil Spector but hot. She sits in the sun all day while still being white as a ghost with a little pudge. She has thin legs and a beautiful belly that shows a bit through her shirt when she lays down. It looks like a heap of oatmeal spilled onto the floor. She wears sweatpants that are too small. They smell probably she wears them every day no matter the weather.

"No they don't smell, " she told me when I asked her if they smelt. She also said, "Also you are skinny." I felt bad from that and she said this without looking away from the sky too. Also I discovered she sprays herself with SPF 50 sunscreen in order to keep her skin like milky white doves.

"What are you doing later?"

"Stop bothering me Im watching clouds"

"Do you want to go on a date"

"No, I don't even like boys only clouds." I went home then and didn't sleep cause I was so upset at her for saying no to me (I go to sleep in the morning because I

work nights). My brother was watching TV loud because he is a dick. That did not help me with not sleeping! I smacked my wall like “Shut up with the TV, okay?!”

When went to work night shift at Meijer at 11:30 I stopped by the gas station again to get an caffeinated beverage because I was tired and t was the same guy as before there I talked to.

“I wish I was a cloud!” I told him him after saying how she liked clouds not me.

“Do you think she meant she would like you better as a cloud?!”

“It could be.”

“Or not. It could be you dont ever have a chanve of her ever wanting you how you want her women don’t love men they pretend because they cannot have babies on their own. Also, they want to go places when its dark out without being scared. They only make babies with us because they are scared of men and so when they make a baby its 50/50 boy or girl and if its a boy then they have a small man they can take it out on by making him feel bad until he grows up with no self esteem to say no anymore to anything and is her baby puppet of her whims.”

“why did you say all that I think girls theyre are awesome”

“A happy thing indeed it is to die unwedded virgin”

“Whose hurt you in your life?”

“And If what you want for her is to notice you, why do you not go up there?. The vent out back has exhaust-steam going all the way up to the clouds from down here. Go up that like its is some stairs.”

“Okay.” I said. I went up to the access panel in the air duct and got inside and it was hot and dark and I banged around the sides a lot before I could find the exhaust. I got to the steam come out of it and walked up it as a stair to the sky.

I arrived there but a party was going on and a bouncer wouldn’t let me in. I shook the pearly gates by their bars and yelling “just let me in” but he said, “No. Do you have a membership?”

“A membership?”

“Yeah, a cloud or bird membership? “

“all right” I went back down and talked ot my friend about that.

“Well,” he said, “how bad do you like her/ want to impress her?”

“enough to relinquish my corporeal body”

“Good bro glad to hear it bro cause that’s what its going to take.”

“What could you mean?”

“You must leave your earthly abode behind and S U B L I M A T E onto another place of existence .”

“no but how? I am too big/ wet/ full of orgabs to burn very easily into smoke”

“no but listen I will have to kill you and put you into my smoker and dry your giblets out in the smoker and take their essence back via party balloon and send you up the vent here. I have a smoker.”

“bro youd do that for me”

“yeah man unquestionably but you are cool if I cut you up into giblets?? I have this meat smoker I built in my back yard but its more for bacon and stuff so I’ll have to put you into smaller giblets first ”

“sure okay”

“and next thing you know he brained me with a baseball bat.”

THE END.

and next thing you know I woke up and as a billowy blossom of smoke blowing up a balloon and the guy let me out into the loud vent-fan behind gas station (it made a hilarious farrt sound!) I walked the exhaust steam stairs to heaven with what would appear to be my cloud membership. It was easy to climb I was so trim!

“haha my man youre basically a cloud get in here” said the bouncer/ st peter.

“Im a cloud?”

“Yeah almost Definitely cloudy enough for my book: I count it.”

“Okay.” I said past the pearly gates and it was a big party in there dancing loud music and lights and some drinks too. Were all having a good time.

I hung around for a while and chatted it up with some people I’d been meaning

to see like my grandma my uncle my dog (yes I know this is controversial but he was there dogs do go to heaven) and Dante de Allighieri. dante wasn't that interesting because he only spoke Italian so I pretended to be interested and laugh when he laughed but I pretended to get more punch and hid from him in the restroom. I had trouble locating John Lemon but perhaps it required a longer look. Where all of a sudden I remembered to do my mission.

I was nervous I looked down at the gas station and my small friend gave me a small thumbs up. I was like "gotta go for it." I couldn't hear what he said (too far away) but and probably said "don't chicken now" I looked over the cloud-edge by the grills field. It was still nite so I had to wait longer.

Then its 2 am and everyone left for the night. The bartender was cleaning up and I asked him if it was cool if I stayed awhile and he said "absoluure; the party never ends" I laid on my belly looked down with my elbows on the floor of the clod with my face in my palms watching for her.

The ground below was dark and dusky and thus I knew the sun would come soon. I last-minute had to look for something to check my hair in my reflection. I found one but couldn't tell what my hair looked like in it it was too cloudy it was made of clouds. I guessed I looked pretty nice and or handsome (I guessed this way for confidence.)

I lean over and there she is on her way to her spot. Her spot in the grass was patted down in her shape of her like when deers bed in the woods and its patted down like that. She laid there and ogled at the Clouds from the ground. Which was me! She smiled and I did. I said, 'hi' she said 'hi' and it was then I knew that if I asked her out on a date she would maybe say yes.

THE END.

Joel Russell

THE WATERCOLOR

I have to remind the boys to lay their new paintings down flat on the table, though I know my wife will be home soon and they will rush to show her and lift up the thick paper and ruin these things they have just made as the paint is drawn to the floor in drips and streaks. This is all you will ever need to know about being a parent. That the paint is never truly set. We tuck them into bed each night, but they are all the while filling in with their own color, streaking and dripping. Every moment the ground is drawing them closer, stretching out their bodies, making them taller, making them smarter, more cynical, more like us and less like themselves. The tears I see are no more than the colors that are not yet dried bleeding outside the fragile lines of their bodies. We do not want to lie down forever. We must risk it, and stand, and run.

Brendan Todt

A CENTERPIECE

The boys draw shapes in pollen on the table. I have just removed the sunflowers we cut and brought home. I am not as afraid of my death as I used to be. There were moments amid the wide sunflower fields I could not see them, though they are always too loud to be lost. One wets his finger in his mouth and with pollen draws marks on his brother's face and calls it war. It's hard to see death in this, in the pollen and the color. I will replace the fresh sunflowers with an arrangement of silk aster from the basement. Then a cracked ceramic pumpkin. Then something wintry but green. One boy finds a yellow mark in the mirror and says he is cut. He says he is bleeding out sunlight. He says I must shut my eyes and hide, or he will blind and kill me.

Brendan Todt

THE DEAD CAN HURT, TOO

Even the fake silk flowers appear to die, here, on the table, placed in the center, put on display. I haven't touched them in years—really touched them. The wire stems slack. The silk petals graying and dusty. I put them away and retrieve them only by the glass vase every year. We have fooled plenty of visitors into thinking they are still alive. In-season. Out-of-season. Outside we grow real tulips along two sides of the house. One side emerges and dies earlier than the second, and afterward the bald stems stand petal-less for weeks. The children want to pull them, they want to help, and we have to bat their hands away like bugs and explain to them they can still damage the dying and the already dead.

Brendan Todt

Contributors

Doug Bolling's experiments have been published in *BlazeVOX*, *Posit*, *Streetcake*, *Juked*, *Swamp Ape* and *indefinite space* among others. He lives in the greater Chicago zone and is working on a collection.

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DS Maolalai has been nominated eight times for Best of the Net and five times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019).

Michael Prihoda lives in central Indiana. He is the founding editor of *After the Pause*, an experimental literary magazine. His work has received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Anthology; he is the author of nine poetry collections and the flash fiction collection *The Hypochondriac Society* (Weasel Press, 2021).

In addition to "Tamarind", Christopher Rabley has published multiple works, namely "Speak to Me" and "I Can See Her", both in *The Citron Review*. Born in the Bahamas, he attended preparatory school in England and later graduated from University of Miami School of Law, where he served as Editor-in-Chief of *The International and Comparative Law Review*. He is the father of three children and lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

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Joel Russell lives wherever he happens to park, or at a friend's house if his van's getting worked on. He likes to apply for jobs during the day and write at night.

Brendan Todt lives and teaches in Sioux City, Iowa. His poetry and short fiction can be found in print and online. Most recently, his work has been featured in *Pithead Chapel* and *The Ekphrastic Review*, where his poem "Because the Living May Be Worth Something, Too" was selected as a "Best of the Net" nominee.