



January 2023
ISSUE THREE

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SALLY BAKER • GUSTAV PARKER HIBBETT
CLÍODHNA BHREATNACH • ALI FITZPATRICK
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PROPEL MAGAZINE

ISSUE THREE

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CONTENTS

Introduction by Editor Rebecca Tamás	1
Imported Gods, <i>Jekwu Anyaegbuna</i>	3
The year we fell in love with moss, <i>Sally Baker</i>	5
Natal Noises, Fatal Flaws, <i>Muskaan Razdan</i>	6
En plein air, <i>Clíodhna Bhreatnach</i>	7
Lunar Cycle, <i>Gustav Parker Hibbett</i>	8
al-Asrar, <i>Ali Fitzpatrick</i>	9
ALLEGIANCE, <i>Jiye Lee</i>	10
Poem beginning with a line by AR Ammons, <i>Caspar Bryant</i>	12
The Frog Wife, <i>Livia Franchini</i>	13
Ed Boys, <i>Kate Duckney</i>	14
How to Leave, <i>Ciara Maguire</i>	16
Tamil Stars, <i>Gayathiri Kamalakanthan</i>	17
How Do You Spell [] in Chinese, <i>Tim Tim Cheng</i>	18
In the distances of this country, <i>Rojbîn Arjen Yiğit</i>	20
Warehouse, <i>Tom McLaughlin</i>	21
Blood Plum, <i>Andrew Hykel Mears</i>	22
الانار , <i>Mohammad S. Razai</i>	24
Enter moon, the mystic, <i>Laura Blomvall</i>	25
love white hot like god white hot like grief white, <i>Shayna Kowalczyk</i>	28
tenderness, <i>Shakiah K. Johnson</i>	29
Contributors	30

INTRODUCTION

Reading the submissions for *Propel Magazine* has been an honour, and it's also been one of my hardest tasks of the year. The difficulty I found in whittling hundreds of poems down to twenty speaks of the brilliance of the poetry being written right now in the UK and Ireland. I was excited to see the form in constant, thrilling flux through these submissions — writers finding new possibilities for what poetry might be and become.

It put me in mind of the advice to aspiring writers given by the endlessly inventive American poet Bernadette Mayer, who died in 2022 — 'Work your ass off to change the language and don't ever get famous.' I can't say if the poets in this issue will take the latter part of Mayer's advice, but they are clearly taking the former. Poetry is as alive, as relevant, as mercurial and as necessary as it has ever been, as the following pages clearly demonstrate.

In the submissions for this issue, it was fascinating to see the ways in which poets are confronting their heritage, ancestry and culture(s). Many are interrogating the porous boundaries of identity — be that between different tongues, spaces, homes or selves. These poems demonstrate how much Anglophone poetry is enriched and made fuller by the influence of languages not its own, and by the flow and conversation between them.

Another thing that these submissions made strikingly clear was that 'Nature poetry,' which for a some years seemed a little fusty and out of date, has come roaring back. Poets are attending carefully to the material world around them, as well as to the weight of environmental collapse and the climate crisis. 'Nature poetry' as was has really transformed into 'environmental poetry,' work that explores the threads that bind us to the living world, that draw our attention to our embeddedness within it.

These are poems that face the world as it is now, but which also carve out ways to change it. Thank you for reading.

— Rebecca Tamás
January 2023

IMPORTED GODS

Jekwu Anyaegbuna

We will never serve the foreign gods who
will force us to starve our African gods.

Those black people who worship such
imported gods on Sundays and Fridays
often pelt stones and fire at their African
shrines and gods and ancestors.

We are cocksure that those strange gods
come bundled with cannabis from Italy

and England and Saudi Arabia, and
it makes the worshippers thoughtless.

They are daffy and weird, screaming like
wild animals in labour, as they

pray and worship, quoting madness from
their (un)holy books.

They always prefer to speak Latin
and English and Arabic because

it is easier to behave and sound stupid
speaking a foreign language.

They visualise white skin during their
midnight prayers, but their knuckles

and buttocks remain jet-black at
daybreak, their faces turning even darker.

They claim that the white gods are wiser,
holier, that the imported wine, blood, moon,

star, beads, cross, books, and bread can
work together for the salvation of Africans.

But it is taboo to revere the gods that whiten
and water down the brains of black people,

those venal gods that turn the eyes and
thoughts of Africans westwards and eastwards.

We will never serve the foreign gods who
will force us to starve our African gods.

THE YEAR WE FELL IN LOVE WITH MOSS

Sally Baker

We made our bed in its mounds and all our furniture was covered in mossy baize. We swam through velvet-lined tunnels, swagged ourselves in greenness all winter. It was the green of pond algae, the painted shed at the bottom of the old garden, kale, tourmaline, the needlecord skater's dress I wore in 1979. It was the emerald brilliance of moray eels, of tree snails; pea soup green. We were moss creatures, felted deep in woods. It was the first plant on earth, at least four hundred and fifty million years old, its rhizoids like a forest of stars, rootless, absorbing moisture and minerals from rain, surviving in the harshest of climates. We became bryophyliacs, singing hymns in the sunken moss cathedrals, while light through the leaves flickered over us in waves, like signals, as if we'd been blessed. I believed moss could live forever. You told me about the Barghest who haunted the valley, could turn you to stone with a look.

NATAL NOISES, FATAL FLAWS

Muskaan Razdan

I took my mother's tooth, I needed bones. She pushed me
a month early, she needed joy. An understanding
to take what's needed without asking, without needing to,
even before birth. Crouched on a couch, she crochets
veins to protect me. I become hope, before a body. Fattening her
heart with promise. A foetus learns language in the womb. Silence
meant rage. Piercing my placenta, forming cysts of suppression.
I replied with itches against sheer skin. She soothed me. Clawing herself,
creating upward trails. She said, for you I'll pray

(Amniotic fluid reverbs her voice)

I learned,

for you I'll prey.

EN PLEIN AIR

Clíodhna Bhreatnach

Peach clouds & furze in my field of vision;
the cliffs, the gulls, Kinsale! Who frescoed this sky
with weekend, blushing perfectly, & I would die
for this green green grass —

would it die for me?

See how my heart is like a swimming pool —
how cool a splash each look at something beautiful —

even the private golf course can't

colonise the view, so I turn to look:

my tiny friends against the static blue;
my boyfriend stooping in the purple dulse;
over him humped cliffs of golden barley;
how enormously orange the sun convulses
to a sliver of itself, & how night is so clear
I become a pure eyeball for the constellations
& the moon's cream gulp. No dreams of emails
come tonight. No floating text, no faces bleared
by blue light & thumb. In the morning the sun
sears Saturday to earth. A small black crab

sidles out of sand to eat my boyfriend's
feet, as onto knuckles, onto lap,

onto blanket, onto sand, a whitely
dripping ice-cream. No clouds, only sky;
a pink burn amalgamates the freckles
on my boyfriend's neck and my eye turns crystal
out of joy at all these vivid totalities,
such as this blue unbroken sea of no armadas
today, but maybe tomorrow, & glittering,
like a diamond that cuts the calendar open.

LUNAR CYCLE

Gustav Parker Hibbett

My father texts me every full moon, and it almost always goes unanswered, because I don't know what to say. It was him who showed me how to excise sentiment, not by teaching but example, lest it interrupt the work I had to do — the math test A's he wanted turned into A⁺es, the dismissive threat to send me to what he called *Problem-Solving Camp* every time I couldn't figure something out myself — and perhaps I'm bitter that he's the one sending sentiments I don't know how to reply to. Such that I am the cold one; too practical, too stressed. Inaccessible. They who have no need for feeling unless it comes convenient. Who taught themselves to jar it, to open only when it serves a purpose. Who leaves these texts unanswered, month after month after month. Who. Who is, I am coming to believe, a bad child. Who turned, the way a rubber tyre turns, away and away and away. With success as a function of distance, who fell for the hum of wheels on asphalt. Who can sometimes only sleep on moving buses. Now I live across at least 5000 miles of land and sea, and still I never call. As a child, I used to think the full moon an occasion, an event that merits wonder. Waxing, waning were like myths or sacred processes. But I guess I thought this oversentimental, or maybe time moves faster now. Now the full moon comes here monthly. Returns before I'm ready to appreciate it. Texts come before I'm sorry for how long it takes to answer them. I used to fantasize about the moon. Sometimes lover; always saviour, who would drop into the window from the black sea of the sky and curtain me in grey. Now I work part-time in a café far too fast for any human small talk, and I write like I am losing something. Like a business. Like progress, or a road across a bridge across a hollow childhood. Like I want to call home, but. At the fixed speed of 60mph, a car's tyre turns about 800 times a minute, such that any given point on the tyre makes contact with the tarmac every 75 milliseconds. I can't find a word to stem the space I pour between myself and others. How long does cement take to dry? From this fixed point on the tyre, the stars are white and yellow lines. The moon is full again. Another text; the road is passing underneath me.

AL-ASRAR

Ali Fitzpatrick

Parked in the middle of my street, anchored
by your citadel, distant, bathed in light,
we removed our sallowed skins unhampered
and kissed with breath inflected by finite
touches and teases and remnants of gin,
of rizlas gracing the edge of a tongue,
of hairs dusting pathways from ear to chin.
I'd have offered you myself to be wrung
out and consumed - devoured even - 'til
I remembered the calm of me, herself,
a curious constant renewed of will,
un-haloed but hallowed, crowned without wealth.
And so, as two forms, distinct, we parted,
a more intricate weave than when we started.

ALLEGIANCE

Jiye Lee

My Year 11 students burst out after class—

Teacher! Would you marry a Korean or a British dude?

Teacher! One for the rest of your life: Kimchi or fish and chips?

Teacher! Who would you support in the World Cup—England or South Korea?

I laugh at their audacity. *Don't make me choose!*

And though the school bell has gone, and the teachers are trickling out of the office, I stay back in the classroom alone, mulling over what felt like a pop quiz, that trick question you're repeatedly asked

as a child—*Who do you like more, Mum or Dad?* Each time those nouns dropped onto my palms I could not tell which weighed heavier. And now, I'm staring at the whiteboard like it's a blank map, thinking *what does it mean to love a country?*

When my uncle picked me up from Incheon airport, he lectured in the car, *You're so lucky to be born in a nation whose mother tongue is English, but to have your parents' ancestry. Isn't that why you're here? Curiosity for the motherland?* I never asked to be born in a country

other than his. As if that were a kind of privilege. My parents left their birthplace for greener pastures, but they didn't know they'd be waging a war against me. Who knew that Tracy Beaker, the butt-pat jingle of Asda Price, and 120 episodes of 'My Family' would make such a difference?

And now I wish I'd joked back to my students, *If Korea and Britain were two men, then my whole life I've been caught in a love-triangle.*

Only, which one have I been chasing? Have either of them been pursuing me? Yesterday, I forgot the English word for 차라리,

could only retrieve the term *Ggo-beki* which means
a double portion. Maybe because it relates to food, and aren't I always
ravenous? Sand down my teeth. Shrug off the growls. Each night,
The Yellow Sea rattles her tongue in my sleep. *Go home. Disappear.*

Go home. Drown. But there are no ships at bay.
My co-workers envy my western education, but they don't see me
drowning underneath my smile. I hear the soles of my students' sandals
slapping up the stairs. Got class again in ten, but I'm still here figuring out,

can a patch of terrain be air-lifted to safety? Can a country's skin
be peeled back to check its vitals? I know for a fact
no republic can spit out its dead. Each side inhabited
by a tally of broken bones.

POEM BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY AR AMMONS

Caspar Bryant

Since words were introduced, Things have gone poorly for the planet

Rivers and oceans met each other and did not mix. So too stars, which discovered they weren't each other. Entirely.

Beetles played monopoly with the biggest landlords *and won* with their 400,000 described species, metamorphic pupal stages, and their trillions of forenames, surnames, middle names, and marital names.

Things piled up in crab-buckets and dictionaries. You were found listed under *distant*. I have more or less money now.

All one breath broke and distributed itself across pairs, triplets, the real absence of lungs. I wrote less.

The butterfly population boomed, throwing millions of flower species into hyperpollination.

Colours grew complicated and took longer to think about. They sound Like runaway marbles on cobbled streets. You blinked twice

And found a name for everything, ran from the station shouting *TAXI*, shouting

DRIVE, shouting *MIDDLE-CLASS CONCESSION TO CONVENIENCE*.

At the beach howling

PLASTIC PLASTIC and *PLASTIC GARBAGE* at the Ammonite, you give in, you crawl in,

Humming in the shell-walls shouting *SEA*.

THE FROG WIFE

Livia Franchini

After Millhauser

Like peeling back a poinsettia blossom
or a concept of iceberg proportions

Language can be thick with flesh both
that; & very deep & very cold

A sugary rope, same taste
in the teeth as pink mouse

Somebody's babies
They cross the street and you let them walk on

Once they make it to the other side
you spin around looking for their parents

The children disappear from view
And you've lost your train of thought

Chewing on the long beard of language
its granular bristle full of Os

It is a strange city you live in
buildings as grey as Dumbo
& before you know

You are a burning hot dot
And you have forgotten to take your son home

ED BOYS

Kate Duckney

Poor cousin boneless!

That night was so loveless. As I remember: Pink static over the cul-de-sac,
trophies metastasizing behind glass, animatronic waiters in vivisection,
and not even the lower halves of adults waistdown to watch over a thing.

The nightfood appears and is evil and white. You'd eat the lasers around a crystal
at this point - but law here is sin, a pigment, which is in the daft moon
and the dogcatcher and the donut, turning in its display case.

And the cankerous boys.

It is said you're a boy. You're curious about this, and leave
your white socks on the shag carpet, say little prayers beneath the poster
of the purple guitar. The puberty of the second dimension

and its aisles upon aisles of crummy asphodel:

Your brother's coming home from Argentina.

Your brother's coming home from the Alpine slopes.

Your oldest brother, he worked on a rig, your megalophobic heart

In practice, always for him. This is what you pull on, like the trail
of tokens from a mechanical rat: *highscore me, I believe I'm in heaven!*

Then the night re-sets; you forget the sight of a dog
but never the sound.

You won a waterbed, I remember. I could leave you there with your luck up
full of that sherbet moon, that doggy laughter

and a lilac wash of heads all staggered within you.

Is it so crooked to dream of an ending?

HOW TO LEAVE

Ciara Maguire

worry, often; keep a glass of milk next to the bed for when she gets home; find yourself lying in flowerbeds for a moment of relief; realise that water is always shifting; sleep on the floor when it all gets too much; walk across the city at 5am when it is still too much; lock the bathroom door for a moment of relief; arrive to work an hour early and leave an hour late; realise you can catch the sunrise this way; realise there are worse places to watch it than from the fourth floor of an office building; go numb every morning; make a game of burning your own arm to check you can still feel; watch the infected burns turn the same yellow as the sunrise; go to a nightclub and find a corner to sleep in; kiss someone else; tell yourself it was a mistake; do it again; drive out of the city; keep going; say nothing; seek out crosses; seek out images of god; seek out objects of protection; let her win; let her lose; try to find meaning in any of it; notice the cat has pissed in her trainers and say nothing; absorb the yelling; become a conduit; wash her trainers; create a narrative in which this is your one great love; keep your eyes shut; let her face become anyone else; when autumn comes cut your hair off; feel a renewal; when winter comes remind yourself you could leave; don't; let her grip on your arm tighten; let words fall out of your head; become a fridge; slowly defrost; watch the world glow orange; take a pill & fight the first man you see; leave your shoes in the street; find beauty in a small town church hall; start a fire; put it out; what did you expect; let the sky unfold; let blood fall out of you in strange clumps; ask your friends, is this normal; ignore the responses; become plankton; float idly through each day touching nothing; touch is where the trouble starts; become a moving target; let yourself be hit; rearrange your own reality; run; let the milk go sour; never follow through; spend a week on the floor with someone else; anyone else; keep running; become the sun; leave

TAMIL STARS

Gayathiri Kamalakanthan

When I was little, I absolutely most definitely wished on all the birthday candles and every single milk tooth I rested my head upon, night after night story after story woven from the body of my Amamma who conjured glitzy tales of sages and rats and Kings and childgods and headless lions, that I would one day be a glittering wide-eyed diamond-decked Tamil

filmstar in black and white. I would traipse leisurely as in filmland, down one side of the imperial staircase, watching myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror, face fully made-up for only a breakfast – idli sambar sodhi and sweet tea – my gem-studded thongal swishing against my side-braid, my unambiguous bosom heaving against my blouse like Padmini or Saroja.

Like them, I'd dance – not delicate but with the vigour of Lord Nadarajar, Ganga rippling from locs on Shivratri. I'd jump roll tumble squeal spin double spin triple spin! like these thick-lashed shining deities of the screen. Rewatching films now, Amamma's voice rings clear in my mind. I see her thumb hover over the OFF button, *okay kunju, just 5 more minutes*. Then the remote, in its perfectly fitting plastic, is placed back on a shelf I can't reach.

They are all dead now.

But in bed we used to draw the curtains together, me and Amamma babbling on about our favourite filmstars, never as real as we longed them to be. But ahh! there you are now, glinting where window meets sky, as defiant and alive as your children below.

HOW DO YOU SPELL [] IN CHINESE

Tim Tim Cheng

After Susie Dent's tweet on the etymology of 'trees'

I hug trees with my languages. Those slow bodies of truth. I kiss books that simmer in action. Some words kiss me back.

A teacher said ideograms are often stories. When vision dims at

[sunset 夕],

a name 名字 comes out of your mouth 口.

At birth,

[words 字]

arrive like a rooftop 𠃊 for the child 子.

If the sun is too bright

[to read 看],

you use your hand 手 to shelter your eyes 目.

Some creation myths are lost on me though:

[one who...者]

extends from juicing sugar canes.

Who acts out of sweetness now? What if words sweep me away more often than housing me? Can't we just stay close enough we don't need to call each other? Speaking of things my hands can do...

I don't need such figments now. I'm busy thinking about the sugar cane juice we had in Vietnam, the freshest from a street vendor you didn't trust.

Before I met you, language had never been this visceral. When you are gone, I grow inwards like bark, losing myself in the library of everything.

I knew time never lost track of me the night I read *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. In a planetarium, Eco watched a recording of the night sky during his birth. He thought it was the best origin story one could die in.

I looked out the window from our cross-city sleeper bus. Beyond my upper bunk bed parallel yours, stars were unnumbered—like the dandruff on your punk t-shirts—above dense, dark trees.

IN THE DISTANCES OF THIS COUNTRY

Rojbîn Arjen Yiğit

my moon is tomorrow
time is three hours
in difference
now we sleep
in the others' zone
I am in between language
amphibious and tongueless

I only just want to
complicate you
heat you like an agnostic
it is hard to not have faith
at the breast of a fig tree
my ears clamped down to
the pillow

tell a whisper
a small something
self-persuasion of you
loving me
talk to me hostile
about Istanbul
lick the buzz off my skin

sweating red
my canines on your
ear and any lobe you fancy
the sun comprehending glass
hours after we have come ourselves
flitting sharp january angles
moaning out for the fig tree

o the distances of this wretched country

WAREHOUSE

Tom McLaughlin

for Derek Jarman

To sleep inside
a greenhouse in
the centre of
an empty space
while the river
flings its patterns
on the ceiling
is to lean your
body against
the brickwork of
the suburban
bedroom that housed
your teenage years
until you feel
a wall give way

To fuck behind
a pane of glass
with a stranger
or a friend while
raised high on a
wooden platform
while the midday
sun douses you
in piercing light
somewhat dims the
memory of
nuns who always
came at night to
interrupt *the*
lovely feeling

Glass walls hold me
with such grace that
when the phone rings —
febrile in the
morning halfflight
radiating
in waves of pain —
I do not think
but plunge my hand
clean through the glass
and hear the sound
of my childhood
crash around me
in fragments that
lodge in my skin

BLOOD PLUM

Andrew Hykel Mears

smoother than the deer, its pressureless depth,
that emerges edged with green and ascends
to a steam-shadow, lace on the tread of dawn.
Smoother than the deer so drunk with calm;
smoother than its future cry like a blown dart streaking-true
among the spread of trees—sharply throbbing—
and through the closed-up throat of the day.
The plum—a cultivation of desire—is not
compelled to speak and only cedes
a cool transparent thud,
there, in the softness of the rain.

So lies the plum, a listening tongue,
tuned in on the worm—a catchy number
for grabby chicks, their pink gastric mills—
on leaf litter's countervailing billow;
on the mushroom who dawns from an ant-husk
and spores, a dozy breath like french-dressing left
to split over winter on the shelf.
Sky lanterns lit and dropped into the sun.
How does the plum really feel? Stalked.
What does it believe? Its flesh, the circle, the stone.

, at last in a fruit bowl, on any given sill
listening for the weather, unable to hear a thing.
Radio idents in a distant room
do their work on human connection.
It's silent outside. Black trees wind the air,

dance-revert-root, snap like the mind
—giddy and small—like a radiant seed
flying from a central stalk.
So lies the plum as the boiler clicks on,
its brightness buried as if startled, awed,
by a threadbare voice swift and separate from this world.

انار

Mohammad S. Razai

The autumn stretched like our neighbours' smokestacks into the choked sky dotted with clipped feverish kites. It was that time when the smell of burnt oak tingled the noses in Kabul, scratched the hatted heads and hacking chests shook the lanterns. You coughed your lungs out as the leaves kept falling silently wraith-like. One late afternoon we passed by the bared birches along the uni street, the field grown tense from piles of auburn, crimson, *feuille morte*. I almost lost you — dazzled by the old vendor's pomegranates, انار their lambency and lusciousness — among the pale violet burqas, I kissed your gnarled hands, your ringed finger brushed against my lip all but tearing my open mouth.

ENTER MOON, THE MYSTIC

Laura Blomvall

After LA LUNA in Bodas de sangre by Federico García Lorca

ENTER

She's hoarding hope in her halo, vertical
with want when summer dusk leans off to sleep.
One cloud a mask, another a wedding veil.
To keep you safe, Cloud whispers, climbing upwards,
wind lifting her skirt. Togetherness seeking
shade under olive trees by the dry stream.

o

Flies scour the air with wings, carving a bowl
to measure heat, its hermitage. His horse's
organs dried without knowing resurrection.
Only hurt of human speed — how it pollutes
leaves. Moon alone seeks soliloquy in trees.
Tonight, there'll be his blood to warm her cheeks:

MOON

« I'm allowed to harvest my desire. Then
what, if I have at him? I wrap his hairs
around my rays, my nail-feathered curves grazing
his neck, clean gauze over wound. *Beat on
that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp*

dart of longing love. Weep for my loneliness
in heaven's necrosis, trapped in the orbits
of Gravity's reins and neighs. How he rules
and rules, old dictator, dragging his heels
through Galaxy's dim stage. There is no
escaping him, his age or closing door.
I gather men's bodies with the last rites
of my tides. With lack I mirror their sick
hearts and veins, kiss eyes closed sans tongue to lick
the stamps. *Here, here.* What's Afterlife's new address —
now Earth's far fallen, where to send their gaze.
I want to find ways to say what I need.
A spider's leg that weaves new corners in
Ophiuchus, who hides the sins that froth
from the Earth's tilt backwards. *I'll say.* I'd like
to stare at his eyes forever, but I know
they'll be missed at my feet. *;I'll say!* Let me
send them to Starlight, scatter hope in shape
of a hoof, corpse-rouge on my brother Sun's
cheeks. As full as him I'll lie down this time, gripping
wrists of Darkness, my bedpost, my vow, halo's
edge where I conjure no-mores with a *Hello.* »

, *THE MYSTIC*

*It must always be in this cloud, this darkness;
only by love he can be grasped and held.*
When the end of the world blooms in hearts
and children's veins have eroded to air,
Virgo's work of egg sacs begins to hatch

within Night's folds. Universe is cold sweat
in Moon's sheets, a creased pillowcase of planets'
jasmine. 'I'm not so afar I won't catch
the illness of airborne light. From the stars
I shiver — height being my lung.' She casts
long shadows, an ossuary, an eclipse
of *before* and *after* in the clock's hands.

LOVE WHITE HOT LIKE GOD WHITE HOT LIKE GRIEF WHITE

Shayna Kowalczyk

two wholenesses plump and impenetrable.
my skin is thick as grapefruit, warming pockmarked
in the winter sun. her head bobs sweetly. am I
unmoved? I think idly of rupturing & scorching the earth.
'how do well-adjusted people fall in love?'
I google, 'how do securely attached people
fall in love?' but there is no initiation. newly,
I am as mellow as duck feathers: as soft, as kind.

I discovered love as
revelation: the urgent baring of things. soon, I was
targeting pliable hearts in ragged confessionals
on the midnight curb side. I, a lightning rod of shock
& raw feeling. love, like pouring. love, like
I am an emptying vessel and here floods every terrible thing
I have ever felt and you, innocently, have never known to feel
you are welcome / receive me / save me / receive me

she stretches languidly. healed,
I am studiously disinterested in violence. I gaze
at my woollen gloves, the vacant skyline.
I used to be fortified & vulnerable; now I walk unconcealed,
wholly untouchable. there is no electricity in the
honest confusion of being alive. our arms swing
childishly. I close my eyes. there must be a way
of learning to love her without first
destroying myself at her feet.

TENDERNESS

Shakiah K. Johnson

i

there's a hardness suffocating me
squeezing and crushing and positioning me
backwards until i am breeched

ii

growing comfortable in this space
the familiarity of pressure combined
with warmth and subduction and the fear of change

iii

my skin red and torn and sitting wrong side up
covered in fleshy armor rubbed raw from callous
wrapped up in tendons before
i rip free and catapult out of this vessel and into myself

CONTRIBUTORS

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