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# Pale Hairs Reach Between Us

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Writing

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## Table of Contents

I.....	1
<i>Apocalypse Fragment: 2000</i> .....	1
Goldfinch .....	3
Questions I Have About the Ancient Irish Practice of Showing Fealty to a King by Sucking His Nipples (According to the National Museum of Ireland).....	5
Birmingham.....	7
Cornelius .....	8
I Take Loneliness for a Walk.....	9
From a Safe Distance .....	10
Untouch.....	11
Transfiguration Objectives: Cat .....	12
Prayer Song .....	13
Glass Hummingbird as Queer Symbol .....	15
It Can Only Be.....	16
Is American Suburbia a Very Lonely Place? .....	17
Resist Pathologisation, Consult Astrology Twitter.....	18
Ghost of Cornelius.....	19
How a Snake Moves On .....	20
Stockroom C: Children’s Accessories .....	21
Recess.....	22
Home.....	23
Resistance Song .....	24
Talking, Head.....	26
II.....	27
<i>Apocalypse Fragment: 2012</i> .....	27
crying is sexy .....	29
Compulsions.....	30
Modesty .....	31
After You Visit I Throw Out My Anti-Aging Cream.....	32
Gallery as Framing Device.....	33
Considering Similarities Between Long Hair and a Lover .....	34
Care Instructions .....	35
Pale hairs reach between us .....	36

What Are You Drinking .....	37
Transfiguration Objectives: Tree.....	39
Vision of Christmas 2024 .....	40
Re/Produce .....	42
The Slow Shift.....	43
Last Lunch Break for a While .....	44
Psychosomatic .....	45
X5 to Edinburgh Due in 7 Minutes .....	46
To The Max.....	47
the person huddled in my gut.....	48
Valentine’s Eve.....	49
The Beach.....	50
III.....	51
<i>Apocalypse Fragment: The Singularity of Thought</i> .....	51
After the Funeral.....	53
Choppy Water .....	54
Glitch .....	55
Panic! In the Vitamin Aisle .....	56
The Three-Armed Woman .....	57
A Goblin’s Invitation.....	58
Imagining a Window Behind the Tapestry Above My Bed .....	59
Soft Focus.....	60
Sleep Study.....	61
Bernie Sanders Dies in Office.....	62
Pandemic Alphabetic .....	63
Wisdom to Know the Difference .....	64
Notices of Eviction .....	66
For Once I Remembered a Line I Composed in a Dream.....	67
Sadness Is an Old Cat .....	68
Spring .....	69
There Are Multiple Photos of Hermit Crabs with Doll Heads for Shells .....	70
The Future.....	71
The Ghost Ship .....	72
Acknowledgements.....	74

## I

*Apocalypse Fragment: 2000*

*I woke early one April morning  
to soldiers in my driveway.  
They had muskets,  
tricorn hats, long red coats.  
I shook my parents awake:  
Dad, the British are coming!  
He went out in slippers,  
they asked him for rum.  
They were dentists,  
teachers, bioengineers.  
I didn't understand  
why people waited years  
to re-enact even the villains.*

*We took out-of-state visitors  
to the park in Concord with the war history.  
My favourite was the film:  
ten minutes of a Minute Man soldier  
showing us his home,  
describing the battle's impetus  
and his preparation to fight.  
We brought relatives so often  
he became another uncle.  
I loved the flickering oil lamp  
on Uncle Soldier's straight-faced hope,  
light and shadow deciding  
whose world was going to end.*

*We moved in December '99.  
On my first day of school  
someone told me I could cut her  
in line to walk to gym.  
I pretended not to hear her  
for five whole minutes*

*repeating you can cut me,  
you can cut me  
because I didn't understand  
and anyway, my scissors were in my desk.  
The term at my old school was 'budge'.  
What did I miss  
staying one spot behind?*

## Goldfinch

Independent living is deciding  
not to go to the dermatologist  
because the last one never told you  
the antibiotics for acne  
would cause yeast infections.  
At least now, your grandmother  
can't ask for a third time  
what's wrong with your face.

Here at her funeral, your gaze returns  
to the tattoo that honours her,  
which you weren't sure you should expose  
but it's too hot for tights.  
In this stone and broken-fan church,  
sweat stings the small  
red bumps under your arms.  
You hadn't shaved in years.

The pastor, who three years ago  
made antisemitic jokes  
right in front of you  
at your grandpa's memorial,  
goes on about her piety,  
as if that was her most interesting quality.

You want to see yourself hanging  
from a branch of progressive women  
while you sit still and try not to scratch.  
You remember your mom's stories  
about equal housing demonstrations

and your grandmother's pride  
that no one in her family was fat.  
You remember the lobotomized great aunt  
you never met. You wonder  
which parts of you would have been sanitized  
and when you should tell your parents about them.

While your cousin makes a speech  
about what Grandma used to say,  
you flex your calf to twitch

a black wing on a yellow body,  
creating the thought of flight,  
remembering how, staring out  
her kitchen window,  
you both liked the brightest birds best.

## Questions I Have About the Ancient Irish Practice of Showing Fealty to a King by Sucking His Nipples (According to the National Museum of Ireland)

Who invented this practice,  
and what was their justification?  
Was it a king who, suddenly realising his power,  
wanted to see what he could make people do?  
If so, what else did he ask for?  
Did it start when a king got caught  
in a compromising position  
and had to create a quick excuse?  
Or was there some really keen subject  
who just wanted to make the king feel a bit more royal?

If a king did invent it, what did his subjects think?  
Was the sexual nature seen as radical?  
Did the kings openly derive pleasure,  
or did everyone pretend that wasn't happening?

Was it only the men who had to suck the king's nipples?  
What about his relatives?  
Did children do it?  
Were there queens,  
and did they get the same treatment?  
Were female breasts sexualised the way they are now?  
If images of the ritual survived, would Tumblr ban them?

How exactly was the ritual choreographed?  
Did dozens line up to do it in succession?  
How long did they have to suck for,  
and how vigorously?  
Both nipples, or just one?  
Did people compete to be the most enthusiastic?  
Was refusal an act of treachery,  
and how were traitors punished?  
Did anyone rebel by using excessive force, such as biting?  
Was it individualised for each king  
according to personal preference?

What were the sexual norms of the ancient Celts,  
and was there any room for deviation?  
Did they play with power like we do?  
Did anyone role play as kings with their partners,

or was that also treasonous?  
Did anyone get off on treason?  
What kinks did they have back then?  
Did the top/bottom dichotomy exist?  
Were these kings the original power bottoms?  
Who liked refusal so they could give sterner orders,  
and who wanted their pleasure withheld?

Who put a stop to the practice, and why?  
Did it die out slowly, like a trend,  
or end by royal decree?  
How many years did it live for?  
How do we know it happened at all?  
What records survive? Are they trustworthy?  
Is the whole thing one person's power fantasy  
projected onto those who can't respond?

Will it be your power fantasy  
the time you get laid?  
If you had to suck a world leader's nipples,  
who would you pick?  
(You can't say Justin Trudeau.)

## Birmingham

These canals prove it:  
you and I used to exist.  
There's the convention centre  
where you crossed the stage,  
black bead traversing  
an abacus. Photos showed  
a chalk-stained jumper  
I no longer own,  
the jaunt of the cap  
on your forehead.  
After, at the fancy  
burger restaurant,  
no one in your family  
asked me what I did.  
When I said this behind  
the closed door of your childhood  
bedroom, you thanked me  
for colouring your view,  
asking you to notice.

All this happened  
no matter who told you  
not to see me today,  
regardless of when next  
I'll be in town.  
I wonder if I'm visible  
in the layers of transparencies  
you've mapped onto this city  
or if I'm just a streak  
in the composite blur.  
I was wrong, thinking  
I wouldn't see you again  
because you were too busy  
fixing windows.  
Miles of rain can't flood  
these canals of you.

## Cornelius

I found a mouse behind the clothes hamper  
in the closet of my bedroom  
in a rented flat I share with someone  
who once tried to preserve the skeleton  
of a finch he found on the road.  
My flatmate says snap traps are best for mice –  
if a live trap gets them overnight, when the heat is off,  
morning finds them hypothermic in their sweat  
and condensed breath, and you have to release them,  
blood barely pumping, to be slaughtered  
by the resident mice whose borders you've  
forced them to cross. So I smeared traps  
with my flatmate's peanut butter,  
caged the urge to run my fingers on the spikes,  
and lay them in the corners of my room  
that exuded the most rodent energy.

When I returned from a weekend in my ex's city,  
Cornelius, the mouse I named  
when he hid under my bed  
and I slept above him, who made  
nests in my dreams all night,  
was there in the trap,  
grey and still and small  
like I sometimes wish I could be.  
I made my flatmate dispose of Cornelius,  
who didn't even get a forest burial,  
just a split-second drop onto crisp packets  
and the Hoover filter's viscera  
filling the bin. I went for a drink  
with someone whose surname meant 'mouse'  
in another language. She was alright,  
but the space we shared felt so unlike a home.

## I Take Loneliness for a Walk

Its thin legs lead me past the first house  
R lost a bid on. There's a whole spice cabinet  
of could've-beens in that kitchen.  
Children not yet born  
will attend a different primary  
and I'll learn their names with the masses.  
No five-minute slipper walks  
at three in the morning, no cat door  
shaped like me. Here, have this bag  
of loose nails you left in my stomach.  
I don't want loneliness  
hurting its paws.  
It yelps. A squirrel  
darts between sleeping tyres.  
I never saw J in the end,  
circumstance spilling our pints  
before I could pay.  
I hope his old cat is still living.  
He deserves that.  
I wash my hair in the mist  
loneliness shakes off. I'm fifteen  
minutes from home in a foreign state.  
If I let it off the lead,  
there's no telling where it'll run.

## From a Safe Distance

Like a tight fingerprint unravelling,  
the hurricane curls around itself,  
a cauldron stirring over DC.

The watching astronaut  
continues listing similes  
– *toilet flush, rosette* –

a better game than picturing  
fanged windowpanes snarling  
on the house she grew up in,

than hoping the dogs'  
favourite toys got packed,  
that everyone had snacks

for the long drive out.  
She knows her family  
are probably safe

though the house may long  
wear scars. She worries  
for the neighbourhood robins

– *tutu, cotton ball*  
*that a dog has shredded* –  
and for those without cars

or elsewhere shelter.  
She floats  
in her big metal eagle

watching the *spider,*  
*marble, god's eye*  
sink her home.

## Untouch

I walk to the water,  
check no one's looking,  
wave at the land across.  
I want to decontaminate  
in the Forth like a mikvah,  
swim along the bridge  
parallel empty buses.  
I try to smell you  
on the breeze, but it's just  
fish & ships. I know  
you can't see me.  
Our lives, even stilled  
exceed touch quotas.  
I try to smell your dad's  
fags, hear him cough  
across the water. What must  
the seagulls think of me,  
my cohort of solitary  
chipless beachgoers.  
So selfish, all on our own,  
no tributes for the keepers  
of waste, roostless gods.  
I hold the water like a rope  
leading a group of children,  
let it tow me away  
from your wave back.

## Transfiguration Objectives: Cat

To scratch at doors  
unashamed of desire

To summon softness  
of words and hands

To trust the sun's advice  
on where to sit

To curl like half-bloom petal,  
a safety of my own making

To enforce boundaries  
with teeth

To be sharp in pleasure  
and pursuit

## Prayer Song

Fake Jewish Girl still doesn't know what the Shema means.  
 Even after friends' bat mitzvahs and family funerals,  
 she only knows the tune and where the *ch*'s go.  
 Fake Jewish Girl doesn't know  
 the Hebrew letter for *ch*,  
 or whether it's on the dreidel  
 she spun between young fingers,  
 not learning the rules as she trained  
 pink plastic to pivot straight.

Rules, she understands, carry a chair  
 she can't sit on, carved by mothers.  
 Her mom tried to follow them:  
 bought a nice mezuzah for their first house,  
 left mantle space for menorah  
 next to Christmas candles—not her fault  
 her daughter didn't have these things,  
 or know the word *mezuzah*,  
 buried somewhere in the attic with a Polaroid camera  
 and an unworn necklace from the 70s.

Her father's bar mitzvah portrait smiles  
 from 1975 at the end of the upstairs hallway,  
 brown curls springing from kippah,  
 or yarmulke, Fake Jewish Girl  
 doesn't know the difference.  
 She once heard her dad tell a stranger  
 no, he's not Jewish,  
 in a chat about a family trip to Israel,  
 unsure of the question's purpose,  
 can't be too careful,  
 all these swastikas and smashed up graves,

and Fake Jewish Girl never knows  
 what news she'll wake to,  
 if her family's plot will make front page,  
 whether her own grave would attract vandalism,  
 or how grey a world to set her death in...

Worse fates than a horizontal headstone  
 flicker in her peripheral, but

she keeps her head down,  
uncertain if she's qualified to look.  
It feels a little like a friend's bat mitzvah,  
trying to fit her mouth around words  
she never learned, reciting  
the one prayer tucked in her memory:  
*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*

## Glass Hummingbird as Queer Symbol

How fitting this pain  
as ink assaults thin skin

rainbow's end  
over vein motorways.

Blood vessels break  
as the tattooist mimics glass

drawing sheet wings  
and needle beak that chip

only if I pick the scabs.  
Colours wave around the bird

a flag that stings  
when my skin tries

to twist out from under it.  
I clench my teeth

remind myself denial  
had its own kind of pain

a nectar this creature  
sucks out of me.

## It Can Only Be

As I drafted my speech for your wedding  
thirteen years early, you laughed  
and sang the Jared's Jewellers jingle  
while the cat circled us and you blamed her  
for intermittent farts.

Now Jared lives with his boyfriend,  
Panda's in the Big Field of Yarn,  
I've moved longitudes away  
and today you wore a long white gown and a smile  
so unlike the frowns you'd make in the mirror

or the knife-sharp grins  
when you scribbled on my school art projects.  
I saw the photos and wondered  
if, after all this time, you felt  
like a prizewinning sculpture,  
wondered what mundane tasks remind you of me

(mine are plucking my eyebrows,  
putting peach salsa in instant mac and cheese,  
trying on bathing suits).

We haven't spoken since you found  
my poem about your illness,  
the first that made someone cry,  
but the truth is I was happier  
when you were in hospital  
than the months I spent jumping  
from rock to rock in your imagination  
avoiding the lava.

You once said of course  
we'll go to college together,  
but even then I wasn't so sure.  
Later, you punched me in the stomach.  
It wasn't the first time.

## Is American Suburbia a Very Lonely Place?

I remember sitting outside on the night of my sixteenth birthday, fairy lights hanging in the hedges. It was hours after everyone had left. I sat on the low wall of the patio in my black dress, new haircut starting to frizz. I could feel the rain coming, the glow of the nearby city staining the sky. I remember pulling it towards me, wanting to rain as badly as the clouds did. We shared the same saturation. When those soft beads finally fell, they broke on my arms with the pleasure of perfect sadness.

Late on a weeknight a bunch of us loitered by the middle school, comparing our age to its emptiness. The boy I would have sold my organs for landed badly on his ankle, wolf-jumping off the fence we'd planted flags in. I sat with him on the gravel, holding his leg like a stunned rabbit. The pulse in my hands felt otherworldly, something I could twist around his ligaments to hold them in place. I closed my eyes, heard his bones fizz neon, let my fingers sing his nerves to sleep. When he stood, he walked without limping. The wet ground glimmered under his feet.

Danger simmered the air that summer, something old seeping from the cracks in eggshell houses. The streets wore emerald chandeliers, washed daily. In the breaths between showers I'd walk barefoot, trying to erase the modern age. The graveyard of a prehuman forest twitched under cars and colonial mansions, and all I could do was beg the rain to blot them out, release the old growth from its shimmering mirage. With everything gone I could rinse off the hunger, aimless urgency, sense of a shadow self waiting to do something drastic.

We hunted together, that pack of us who'd climbed the school fence. We shared feelings like cigarettes and chased down what made us afraid: the hollows of each other where thunder echoed, everything we couldn't heal by touch. We found desperate songs and sang them prayer-like, knowing they were ours by right because something had to be. We said *magic* and meant belonging. We said *destiny* and meant survival.

## Resist Pathologisation, Consult Astrology Twitter

It's the moon again, two days waning  
and taking patience with it.  
I masturbated twice today. I plucked  
a bald patch on my chin and requested  
a list of places I wasn't welcome.  
I sent the list back with comments.  
I laughed, I couldn't stop laughing,  
I shivered with laughter to prove  
how much space I could fill  
standing just next to the outline  
my parents kept pointing to on the phone,  
saying *when will we see you again*  
but by *see* they meant *recognize*.  
There's no Thanksgiving in Scotland,  
though I am thankful every day  
for the shelter I've found beneath  
long-dead volcanoes, even today  
when the carrot cake is grainy  
and our bodies are sensitive to milk  
and serotonin and the sharp lines of words  
on screens. For days the moon  
had our hair in its fists, gripping tighter,  
yanking our heads, backs arched  
in the ecstasy of exposure.  
Now we face the letting go,  
the redistribution of humours,  
huddled in blanket shells while that big  
white pill drips out of our system.  
Today I caught a bottle of ammonia  
making promises it couldn't keep.  
I put it back, left Tesco  
with stolen hummus.  
My parents think they're losing me  
to laws I plan to break.  
They keep their blinds drawn,  
don't see the brightening light,  
hollow space shrinking  
like land in a hungry tide.

## Ghost of Cornelius

your tiny claws tap rain  
on my windowsill

when summer sprinkles snails  
on my bedroom's exterior  
you scale them like a rock wall

clang raves in my radiator  
hang your dusty tail out just to tease

letter by letter  
upstairs footsteps squeak your name  
a telltale spelling bee

lint droppings cover  
my carpet, pillowcases

when I put on slippers  
my toes go right through you

every gust whistles your elegy  
hours of turning won't warm this bed  
what right have I, Cornelius,  
to call it mine?

## How a Snake Moves On

Think of it like  
a discarded, ill-  
fitting self you  
emerged from tender,  
shiny faced with  
new dexterity.

Imagine a child  
picking it up,  
this brittle archive,  
paleolinguist  
deciphering  
your scroll.

Swerve diagonally,  
keep your head  
forward. In  
your new skin  
record the  
taste of air.

## Stockroom C: Children's Accessories

I found my first love's basement  
in the stockroom when I went looking  
for dinosaur rainboots, size 12.  
The walls phased to dark  
wood panelling and I saw  
the stack of mattresses that held us,  
propped forward by cushions,  
legs too short to dangle off the edge.  
I saw the chewed recliner  
next to the TV serenading us  
with a baseball rom-com,  
me in my soft grey t-shirt  
with silver beads insisting that we *live*,  
jeans flared like my front teeth,  
my neck and shoulder learning  
the inquiring pressure of his hand.

There must be a species of dust  
native to nowhere but these  
two basements, colonies caught  
in Pangaea's divide. I forgot  
I'd stored its scent on a shelf  
in a small backroom, waiting  
all these years to be requested.

## Recess

My thoughts hang  
on your monkey  
bar ribs  
swinging by their knees  
callused from gripping  
hot bone

They summersault and fall  
on taut muscle,  
shuffle their feet  
through soft fat chips

to your spinal fire pole  
where they climb  
like caterpillars,  
burn their hands  
on descent

They slide down your arteries  
scramble back up  
to ventricle forts

spin dizzy  
on blood cell tyres

until  
the bell rings  
and they're summoned  
back inside.



Home

[REDACTED]

of maintaining effective immigration control the legitimate aim

[REDACTED]

is so wholly lacking in substance

[REDACTED]

## Resistance Song

Fake Jewish Girl sits at the seder table  
 throwing sounds into a stew of Yiddish resistance  
 where everyone else knows the tune  
 in other tongues. In this cabal of immigrants,  
 patrilineals and atheists, she alone  
 has never sung the Internationale,  
 but at least there are others who fumble  
 fingerpainting their plates  
 with drops of sweet wine.

She sips her Manischewitz  
 with the same caution she uses  
 to say *Pesach*, the final *ch* like a cap  
 she can't screw on, but she knows  
 the letter's name now: *ches*,  
 like *kiss* with more phlegm.  
 She imagines her three Yiddish lessons  
 as kisses on her history's forehead,  
 but she doesn't know  
 how many ancestors back  
 she'd find glad skin.

Instead she reads books  
 about Jewish revolutionaries,  
 considers tattoos despite the ban.  
 She carries antifa stickers in her purse  
 in case the need arises – says *in case*  
 like it hasn't displaced the air  
 breath by breath, Pittsburgh bullet  
 by excuse from so-called comrade.  
 She reads the names of time-delayed victims  
 who thought they'd escaped in the bodies  
 of their mothers and grandmothers.  
 She forgets them, but their vowels  
 stick in her veins.

It hasn't changed, the fear  
 of someone spilling them.  
 So she might as well learn  
 to spell those names in their own soil.  
 She might as well grieve them

like she'll one day grieve her father:  
sitting face to face with the grey  
of the new world, resting  
for the work to be done.

## Talking, Head

A white man's tinder bio says 'Life during wartime'  
and I think, what do you know? (What do I know?)  
He tells me I'm the first to get the reference.  
When 'Once in a Lifetime' was my anthem  
indie softbois queued to tell me  
how intriguing I was. Now they tell me  
I make a good lobster, or  
it's okay actually to have nazis running around.  
It's good actually, you need a balance.  
I could tell them to go balance on the stump  
where their understanding of sociopolitical power structures should be,  
or their micropenis if I were into body shaming and believed  
dick size measured human value.  
In my first tinder hookup it wasn't  
the size that bothered me, it was the lying,  
I mean why even bring it up,  
I wouldn't have cared if he hadn't said anything.  
I gave him the head of a lifetime, never saw him again,  
still read his anti-racist facebook posts.  
What do I know about war,  
me the coloniser, post-9/11  
whole life looking at the two-way  
mirror, constant conflict kept from me,  
this is for you, they said, look how free you are  
now shut up and put those signs away.  
But of course it's right in front of me,  
heard about Boston? Heard about Tulsa?  
Heard about Minneapolis or [insert city name here].  
Twitter makes me sad so I scroll through fetlife,  
but none of the men liking thin  
tied shaved white women cheer me up.  
No party in life during lockdown.  
No fooling around either, though apparently  
no one's told the neighbours.

## II

### *Apocalypse Fragment: 2012*

*An ancient calendar was resetting itself  
 and all the white people got drunk about it.  
 At my parents' Annual Non-  
 Denominational Holiday Party  
 Gabriel the psychiatrist's kid  
 stood on the footstool,  
 a basement ringmaster for exiled  
 neighbourhood children.  
 Gabriel sounded his portents:  
 They come and go like pineapples  
 in a pineapple tree.  
 He would send us all to Rich Chocolate Land  
 and once there, translate our blood.  
 No one knew who they were  
 but if the world really was ending  
 only Gabriel understood the mechanics.*

*I would have cheered on Armageddon  
 if it meant getting closer to  
 the out-of-towner I'd invited.  
 That his home country was  
 halfway through the next day  
 didn't stop me trying.  
 I thought sex was the best  
 way to be interesting,  
 scripted intimacy a rip  
 in whatever membrane kept people  
 from seeing me. If enough men  
 inscribed their secret voices  
 in my cortex, I'd have  
 some kind of Rosetta Stone  
 for other people's minds.*

*My first dictionary-  
definition experience  
took place three months prior.  
I asked all kinds of nonsense like  
Did you take the condom off  
and Do you want to stay the night.  
No both times. Both times a hint  
of furrow in his brow.  
We'd laughed about his giant  
wooden moustache for ten straight minutes,  
a moment that required  
no translation.*

crying is sexy

leak all over me baby I wanna feel  
your sadness throbbing on mine  
press your face to my body with wet  
snot running down every crevice show me  
blood filling flesh eyes red straining  
to spill gasp erratic let me suck in  
your screams wake the neighbors baby pound  
all over my walls grab me in fistfuls  
salt my skin with your aching don't stop  
till I'm soaked through ruin my sheets you'll feel  
so good baby, so human

## Compulsions

I want to feel sad about the skeletal  
wings I found on the night-soaked

pavement walking home. Instead  
I'm sad I haven't seen you in your

studded choker since the day we met.  
I moved it so the spikes were centred

on your birch neck. We shared  
a need for alignment. I think

I want to fuck you in that choker  
so I can adjust it after and say

it's the only thing straight about you.  
When we kissed, I kept the smudge

on my glasses as long as I could,  
until my hands got bored and rubbed

your grease into my clothes.  
I missed seeing you everywhere.

I liked the colours you left on my neck,  
the buttons it made me do up. I sent you

a photo of the lobby at work, the owls  
from the nearby sanctuary, robotic

swivels tracking me. I wanted you  
to see where I am. I miss the jagged down

on the back of your head. I wanted  
to send you a picture of the wings.

I wanted to unpile them, line them up  
parallel, fill in the missing bones.

Modesty

*Ignore me*

I say with one foot

on the dresser, too tired  
to walk to the toilet.

You study my walls  
while I slide white cardboard

inside me, where recently  
your fingers met this mess.

I explained its erraticism,  
to expect tinted slickness

on any given night:  
*I don't always want*

*to announce it.*  
I said it for the sake

of unbroken moments,  
but what, now, is left to spare?

You asked what I  
was comfortable with.

I answered  
*anything.*

## After You Visit I Throw Out My Anti-Aging Cream

for hours you spider silk

webs near my eyes

trapping bright

six legged things

that crawl from my chest.

you age me

in the best way

minutes fold into my belly

turn in on themselves

like kids in a wave pool

emerge exalting every

exhalation.

I hope I wake up

old with you

cheeks like knots

in furrowed bark.

## Gallery as Framing Device

Art is not for understanding.  
It triggers suggestion

implication, connection  
neurons firing towards each other

stretching for memories  
and falling into gaps

pushed open by the angle  
of a line on canvas

the frayed end of a suspended rope.

*It reminds me of  
I get the sense that  
Doesn't it feel like*

We gesture toward knowing  
like amateur thespians

and as we talk and point and coo  
(let us go no-

where just yet) we shine  
torches into each other's

dark spaces, admire  
the discernible edges of paintings

hands of sculptures  
fumbling for the light.

## Considering Similarities Between Long Hair and a Lover

The improbability of its existence  
as my hands harvest data on lines,  
textures, responses to stimuli.  
How can this entity be attached to me  
and so separate? Why should it desire  
what I do not? From where  
does its power to change me originate?  
How distant a pillowmate can feel  
makes me want to twist it up, cut it off,  
banish the mystery, the work.  
If I look too long, the ends split.  
Touch tells me it's never  
been healthier.

## Care Instructions

I worry about Felix once a week  
when my phone prompts me to water him.  
His roots protrude from the soil,  
perpetually damp, yet I continue  
adding water (where would I be  
without instruction?)  
He needs a bigger pot.

I've known this for a year.  
A beautiful woman told me  
not to repot in winter.  
It's November now.  
Every excuse is a dead leaf  
at his base, smothered  
in the tight white pot  
Tesco sold him in.

I trust capitalism less  
than I trust myself, which is  
less than I trust the rules  
set by the slam organisers  
who gifted me Felix,  
my second-place prize.  
I no longer trust the tattooed psychologist  
with a red river of hair  
who said she wanted to see me again.  
I know I want to see another sprout.

I know I'm letting him down  
but he retains kindness like water,  
doesn't need much.  
I brush the dust off a leaf  
and spray his soil again.

Pale hairs reach between us

in the space separating our arms  
as our hips carve the bed  
like glaciers. Everything soft:  
duvet, the vowels of our breath,  
her skin I don't yet know  
how to touch, and my heartbeat  
a baseline under woozy synth.  
Hers too, maybe, but I've no script  
for first contact.

I sink slowly in the swamp of wanting,  
not new but newly mapped, until  
her breaths crystalise in letters, a twisted vine  
she tosses through our half-foot distance:  
*give me your hand.*

The consonants graze fingernails  
on glad skin, her loops and whorls  
otherworldly on my knuckles, fingers limp  
as she plays my piano bones.

When she retracts, the little hairs  
on my arm hold the sense of her,  
charging the re-formed margin  
that pokes at our soft borders.  
I keep breathing, somehow  
staring at bright light spilling  
from a door I always thought, if opened,  
would blind me.

## What Are You Drinking

‘Of course loneliness is intrinsic to the human condition’,  
 I punctuate by sipping my second pint. The man  
 I’m talking to, a teacher, pulls out  
 his phone to search the antonym of *lonely*,  
 unsure whether there is such a thing.  
 The phone offers *together* and *social*,

but neither cut it. ‘You can be social  
 and still lonely. Loneliness isn’t conditional  
 on being alone. We’re all separate things  
 from each other, that’s the problem.’ The man  
 agrees. The phone’s definition of *lonely*  
 gleams with the ice cube poking out

of his drink, the small earring singling him out  
 in what feels like high society,  
 this crowd of smart beautiful people, all lonely  
 but no one showing it, conditioned  
 to maintain conversations about things like men  
 misunderstanding women, things

like German pre-capitalist cultural identity, and things  
 like still life, like not getting out  
 of Chernobyl because radiation was safer than men  
 committing ethnic violence. I map the social  
 landscape of the room: nose rings, conditioned  
 beards, round glasses, degrees, a lone

book deal. I talk to her about the loneliness  
 of being Jewish in Edinburgh and knowing nothing  
 about Judaism. ‘Identity isn’t conditional  
 on practice’, she says. I tell her I’m going out  
 with a girl for the first time. She says society  
 won’t read her as queer while she’s dating a man.

I say I’ve been dreaming about a women-  
 only planet. Here, I alone  
 haven’t read *Herland*, but socialising  
 with people who have, if anything,  
 makes me feel less the odd one out.  
 ‘Is there a female condition?’

‘Let’s not classify *woman* as a separate thing from *human*. We’re lonely enough without being socialised to make our humanity conditional.’

## Transfiguration Objectives: Tree

To ornament my body  
like an evergreen,  
needle my skin with new  
and lasting joys,  
watch them heal like glass can't.

To sparkle on display  
in living room windows,  
a tiding of warmth in the cold.

To gather generosities,  
shelter them until  
their destinations.

To smell, to someone, of home.

## Vision of Christmas 2024

The hummingbird I picked at age 9  
hasn't taken its place on the tree  
since my parents saw it tattooed  
on my arm, so I snuck it home  
on an off-season visit.

Now the lights on my Scots pine  
animate pinks and blues  
viscous in the bird's frozen wings.  
It nests among the other glass  
—a pear, a palmetto,  
a huddle of snowflakes—  
in the tree's upper inches  
where Momo the tabby can't reach.  
Lower branches wear galaxies  
of sparkling plastic,  
bits of string and paper  
from childhoods past and present.

One year someone gave me  
a hand-carved Star of David  
to fit the top of a tree.  
Lit from below, its shadow  
casts a paper crown  
on the high ceiling  
matching those now slipped  
from our heads.  
For Chanukah's first night  
we light long candles  
and eat latkes with our turkey.  
Instead of prayers  
we give thanks for family  
and daylight to come.

After pie, those with children  
return them, clutching stuffed toys  
and radical picture books,  
to beds in other flats  
in other parts of town.  
Those remaining sip mulled wine  
on sofas by the gas fireplace,  
my lap a mattress for Appa

the fat calico, watching  
the tree's glass glimmer  
in the flamelight, this crafted  
haphazard display.

## Re/Produce

You squeeze my ears like pears  
in a supermarket, measuring

the give of flesh, the yearn  
for second harvest. You

generous shopper  
welcome bruises and dirt

embracing that which mirrors you  
and that which does not.

I could write of bitten fruit  
but the metaphor's juices have dried

in your knuckle creases  
the reopened cracks of my lips.

You puncture me with tentative  
fingernails, peel my skin

in one deconstructed whole  
arrange it on your plate like art

that evokes the fundamentals  
of movement, space.

You return me to a state  
of fuel and creation.

I make you,  
you make me the vehicle

through which you make me.  
Regrowth, consumption

and again, this hothouse  
orchard bed a site of science

you whisper. I shudder  
on the vine, ready to fall.

## The Slow Shift

Today I'm alone in the men's department  
and the fitting room wears your deodorant.  
I peek into stalls and you're in all of them:

shirt warm against my cheek  
in your sun-stained kitchen

curls unfolding in my hand  
while a film wears itself out

pale in morning's dark sheets  
while we click open to the day.

I close myself in that room  
block out the watching fluorescence  
inhale so you swim circles in my lungs  
like the ones my fingers start to make.

You hold me while the curtain bouquets  
in my fist, while bleached pop music  
and transactional beeping  
score our permeation.

Your scent sticks inside me  
and I hold it there  
squeeze you into every cell.

When I buckle  
a flutter of you in the mirror  
evaporates back to scented fog.

I lick myself clean  
pull the curtain back  
button all the abandoned jeans  
crowd them onto rails that smell  
of metal, new denim, the dust  
of sunless hours left to go.

## Last Lunch Break for a While

Wet leaves slide me into Stockbridge  
and your gloved hand, which you withdraw  
when the ground resumes its grip.  
You tell me your cobblestones:  
the beauty of well-run meetings  
and your life laid out ahead of you,  
the toe-width cracks you trip on  
trying to make it all happen.

This place is so pretty it's embarrassing,  
big roundabout eyes  
and cheekbone clocktowers.  
Next to your peacoat and quiff  
I pretend to belong.

We sit in a sandwich shop  
where the loo quotes A A Milne  
and E E Cummings,  
instructions for being in love.  
Eating my dressed-up sausage roll  
I think about what we each carry,  
how you massage your arms  
when we talk.

I don't finish the roll.  
I'm too full of frayed wires  
and you're needed elsewhere.  
I walk you back,  
making fists in my pockets.

## Psychosomatic

Did I not see the beetroots  
you sliced when we spoke,  
large knife flinging red truths  
all over my stomach and neck?  
I can't wash off these  
itchy sugar questions –  
do you have them too?  
Or were you apron-clad,  
knowing what you'd make?  
The more I lick these wounds  
the more they stain me –  
do I remember how  
your sweat tastes?  
How will I measure forgetting,  
the metabolic process  
of discarding your waste  
and storing the nutrients  
for when they'll be useful again?  
How long will this rash  
stay on me, and how  
will I look when it fades?

## X5 to Edinburgh Due in 7 Minutes

Picture the chiaroscuro of your black nails in my back.  
You look like you're into photography and I want to know about it.

Your faded denim jacket on the back of my pink  
bedroom chair, dark blond hair on my pillowcase.

I wonder what your underwear looks like,  
what you're dreading this week.

I bet your voice sounds best when it's coiled in my cochlea —  
are you Scottish? You look Scottish.

These blue tights and black Converse weren't for you  
but I'd wear them again on our date to the craft beer pub.

Are your nails always black? Are the gloves fingerless  
because you smoke, or did you want someone to notice?

With my silver interlaced, our hands would make a disco.  
Dip me back, baptise me in bedsheets, the fabric of your life.

Show me the embellishments, worn patches, stitching.  
Take your headphones off. Let me wrinkle you.

## To The Max

I read your name on road signs  
that chastise my urgency.  
You echo over waterways,  
slither through supermarket shelves,  
stand with me in lift mirrors and vanish  
when I turn. Your absence  
spangles daily life, your ghost  
is a household brand name.  
It's comforting how you see me  
and say nothing. How I could  
drink a bottle of you.  
I didn't expect, when you left,  
your presence to be so capacious.  
How strong you must be  
absorbing my soggy little half-selves  
and filling my pores. I ask  
if the work gets tiring.  
Your silence turns all the way up.

the person huddled in my gut

if i squeezed i could force her / up my oesophagus into the hard / wet world where she'd sit /  
egg-shaped on the pavement naked / hair over face like leaves / protecting a bud / she'd have  
a name of vowels / a damp wood fence with gaps between the beams / people would say it  
accidentally / she'd say it back like it was their name too / perhaps extruding her would cause  
/ a vacuum between my consonants / like emptying a room of what keeps / its walls apart

## Valentine's Eve

We complete circuits resting  
hands on shoulders,  
knees on denim thighs.  
Voices flicker, then hold  
a steady glow.

A decade ago,  
the joy of this moment  
would have dimmed  
against the feeling that of course  
I would lie on a bed with a boy  
scratching Beatles duets in the stillness,  
of course this is what love would be.

At 25, harmonising 'Because'  
wears no costume of idealised self.  
There's a warm grey fuzz to it,  
the smooth surprise and comfort  
of stroking a cat on the street.

*Love is old, love is new*  
love is everything  
that led us to this,  
our breaths  
clicking into each other  
like fingers.

## The Beach

I awake in the surf of your breath.

The waves

slide toward me on their bellies

shrink back

like children playing a game

I can't decipher.

The sand wriggles with small

shelled things

at home where time has smoothed

detritus beautiful

knowing their fate with idle grace.

Their trails fade

as mine have, flip flopped valleys

on dry beach

risen back into the landscape

and later,

footprints picked like coins

by the sea's

hands—your hands. Your world

laps at my limbs, says

*come, get your hair wet. The needling  
salt sutures too.*

### III

#### *Apocalypse Fragment: The Singularity of Thought*

*At the end of the world there is only  
one thought. I dreamt about it  
last night and when I woke  
you were on the wrong side of me.  
I said so in my head and you answered  
Yes, but all thoughts are already the same.  
You didn't wake up.*

*The end of the world is white  
and formless, bodies  
long since discarded.  
The flash of it woke me and everything  
felt disjointed: a rustling sound,  
the duvet leaving  
one foot exposed,  
your back covered by skin.  
The air stood taugth  
like it had jumped into the room  
by mistake and was looking  
for a way back out.*

*I woke not knowing what was mine.  
I thought of asking you  
but instead went to the toilet  
to sit in a body whose functions  
I could master.  
You rose on my return,  
then fell  
like a tape rewind.*

*In my dream we were talking,  
me sitting against the wall,  
you crashing into sleep like waves*

*and sliding back again.  
I was showing you something,  
but it's gone now.*

## After the Funeral

I dreamt I was on a bus across the aisle  
from a woman in her late twenties,  
the youngest Supreme Court Justice,  
who had just announced her resignation.

The bus was dark and forever.  
We sat at the front like spelunkers  
beginning their descent. The Justice  
wanted to throw herself in

hoping for an emergency exit.  
I stood in her way, begging her  
not to resign, crying like in dreams  
where men with guns chase me.

I screamed about moral obligation  
as light drained out of the bus.  
She pushed past me. *I'm sorry.*  
*There's nothing for us here.*

## Choppy Water

The light on your headphones  
blinks like the North Star

perched on a coat hook  
while your cat nests

in my shins on the camp bed.  
A streetlight

floods my open pupils  
through the curtain's fault line.

If I close my eyes  
or disconnect my back

from the mattress  
my axis tilts

like a bucking ship  
so I lie still

charting the ceiling  
the only blank space left

in this flat you share  
with your wife.

I stumbled here wielding  
my own set of keys.

I put on your clothes  
as pyjamas (your wife

left them out for me).  
The cat cut a space for herself

in my limbs, planning  
to stay here all night.

## Glitch

I lie like a dead girl in your arms  
while you twitch

a marionette pulled  
by sleep's weak hand.

You leak a lake  
of saliva in my hair.

I'd swim in it if I could,  
record your snoring

and listen  
on the morning ride home.

I stay awake measuring  
signs of continued existence

afraid they'll stop  
if I roll over and look.

## Panic! In the Vitamin Aisle

How do I feed this body what it wants?  
That exposed wet muscle in my skull  
demands sugar garlic spice  
provoking corrosion,  
acid shellacking oesophagus.  
Do I skip coffee and  
sink through experience  
or sip and forfeit circulation's  
outer territories,  
grow fuzz under epidermis?  
If I could pop awareness  
from its casing, shed sensation  
like hair and uterine lining,  
I'd get one good night's sleep  
before it grew back hangnail-  
first, cutting into itself,  
skin pilling  
like a jumper in the wash.

## The Three-Armed Woman

The three-armed woman can't decide  
which arm to tattoo first.

The three-armed woman has incredible wanks.

The three-armed woman marks papers efficiently,  
although she can only read one at a time –  
two arms type comments  
while the other holds the Diet Coke.

The three-armed woman  
never hears strange men  
talk about her tits.

The three-armed woman has a very happy dog.

The three-armed woman eats veggie burgers  
without the patty falling out the back.

The three-armed woman flips off  
whomever she wants.

The three-armed woman has never tried to juggle,  
and donates to a mutual aid fund  
each time someone asks.

The three-armed woman reads clickbait  
about octopuses escaping their tanks.

The three-armed woman hears strange men tell her  
what she should do with the extra hand,  
and she punches them in the face.

The three-armed woman is a superhero  
in the eyes of most small children  
and also her friends, though when the latter say it,  
they mean in the everyday way  
of kindness and impossible strength.

The three-armed woman gives really,  
really good hugs.

## A Goblin's Invitation

Join me unwashed with the curtains  
drawn. Roll in my sheets  
and I'll lick the bedcrumbs  
off you. Feed on loose hair  
to avoid leaving. When the stock  
depletes, harvest  
from the source.

Fall away from language,  
responsibility, posture. Gather  
my grime in your jagged  
nails. Nibble me to sleep  
with your bones for blankets.  
Peel off my scabs, stick them  
on the wall to measure time.

Rope your moustache  
with mine. Crack  
your dribble mask with blunt  
vowels. I'll gift you  
a palmful of sweat,  
name your eye crust like  
a rock formation, a landmark.

## Imagining a Window Behind the Tapestry Above My Bed

Light filters red through the tapestry while I sleep, only  
the finest elements of stairwell fluorescence  
caressing my eyelids, the ends of my hair.

The real curtain on my real window is dark, fog-like. I used to enjoy  
that game of solitude, driving in the thickest nights  
sending silent invisible nods to other players. Now

I want someone to make out my shape through the veiled  
screen that does not exist. I want to be checked on  
in the ritual confirmation of object permanence  
(‘ritual’ in the old sense of appeasing a god).

The tapestry guards against performance.  
I’ve outgrown shimmies  
to hidden cameras, winking  
at my googly-eyed lampshade.  
My muffled silhouette is  
only for reassurance.

A sleeper projects limbs like sonar, stops turning when they hit  
the right consistency of lump.

I don’t spring back like I used to.

## Soft Focus

Autumn's teeth get sharper  
every night. We lie,  
two columns on a page.  
Your cat compacts herself  
in the middle margin. A child  
might one day take her spot  
(I commit to this  
vision where it's she  
who's replaceable). I save  
the mental snapshot like a tourist  
scrambling to fill their camera.  
Isn't this nice. What a lovely  
family portrait. Maybe  
it'll be our Christmas card.  
I stage this dream  
for sleep to drop me into.  
You snore.  
The cat stretches a leg  
without waking.

## Sleep Study

No one sleeps  
how they think  
except me  
flat backed  
with cheek  
against pillow  
no sound  
but the inward  
scrape of air  
all stillness  
except  
the tide of breath.

A man once  
told me to shush  
his snoring away.

Instead  
I kicked his legs  
until he turned  
humbled quiet.

I told him  
I couldn't sleep  
touching someone.

He agreed  
then nodded off  
holding my hand.

No one sleeps  
how they think.

He accused me  
of stealing  
blankets  
in the night.

Impossible

I said

I don't move.

Each morning  
I'd wake first  
shift the covers  
back over him.

## Bernie Sanders Dies in Office

Heartbreak songs remind me  
of people I haven't kissed yet,  
templates of failure-to-be.

I call this optimism,  
conjuring beginnings  
via terminus.

In dreams I am harassed  
out of jobs I wake  
hoping to apply for.  
I get on stage,  
can't read the words in my book.

Rain at the peak of a five  
mile walk, kitchens full  
of mice in every flat.

Inheritance paying the mortgage.

I name pets by picturing  
their little garden tombstones,  
so tranquil, right next  
to the strawberries.

## Pandemic Alphabetic

As borders close  
Dawn elongates, furrows gold.  
Her insects jostle knowledge  
letting minutes nip out –  
*¿por qué?* Reason,  
science, theatre.  
Understand very well,  
xenobiologies,  
your zeal.

## Wisdom to Know the Difference

I CAN CONTROL the movement of air  
as it crosses the borders of my body

I CAN'T CONTROL my shoulders'  
upward creep, the rate at which  
muscle petrifies

I CAN CONTROL the texture of my chin,  
peel dry skin skirts off spots  
like a lover, send hairs  
to the firing squad

I CAN'T CONTROL my dreams,  
whose hands I cry when touching,  
which parent I lose first

I CAN CONTROL the wait time  
of a crumb-laden plate  
for its Berry Blast rebirth

I CAN'T CONTROL how someone's  
stubble in a photo  
scrapes the middle of my chest  
or my reflex to press it closer

I CAN CONTROL the flags I plant  
in the sand of the far future,  
the job applications I complete

I CAN'T CONTROL the record scratch  
steps of Gustavo, new mouse king  
of my bedroom (all hail)

I CAN CONTROL whether  
I'll see someone again  
by withholding emotional statements

I CAN'T CONTROL spring's faulty oven,  
the disposal and recovery of blankets,  
distance between tear and rain  
on any hazy, poisonous night

nor when that poison's nails  
will hook in my throat

I CAN CONTROL how many fish fingers I eat in the meantime

## Notices of Eviction

Little seahorse, this coral  
isn't yours.  
Your fins can't stop  
me sinking you, and smooth  
red walls leave nothing  
for your tail to grip.

Light bulb,  
you'll burn me  
if I twist you into place.  
Darkness too breeds life:  
one-celled plants  
already root in my gut,  
assembly line robots  
spinning me toward existence.

I teem without you,  
old chewing gum,  
tasteless adhesive  
engineered to tire me.  
No mythical  
hunkering years  
in my system.  
I'm spewing you  
any way I can.

For Once I Remembered a Line I Composed in a Dream

*Sounds like Mother: callous, terrestrial.*

Like books thudding on a wood floor,  
some sort of nourishing hardness.

Capricorn mother never knew  
why my soft hands bled when I moulted,  
offered grass to chew. Clumsy claws  
still scrape it from my teeth  
when I lie in bed, enough senses removed  
to feel each intrusion.

I can't sleep without my nails  
full of gunk. They harden  
at my sides while I'm supine,  
snoring, sounding like Mother.

## Sadness Is an Old Cat

Some days sadness sleeps in a quiet  
corner of the house  
not wanting to be disturbed.

Some nights she wakes  
and climbs right into my lap  
not minding her claws.

I've taken to changing  
how I meow at her,  
coaxing her to mimic me instead.

I feed her irregularly.  
She minds sometimes.  
She always eats.

spring

volume of a flower

squirrel ing time

essential machine magic s birthday s

like difficult moon s

beneath dog language

science & summer curl

imagine a month together

skin fiction

empty breeze

## There Are Multiple Photos of Hermit Crabs with Doll Heads for Shells

I hold the world with gloves of Elmer's glue.  
When dried, it makes things smooth enough to touch.  
At night you peel it off of me in flakes  
revealing patch by patch my newborn skin,  
a wrinkled mammal squealing desire's  
most basic alphabet. And this is how  
I sound to you, without the extra noise  
of loose threads cluttering my seams. You trace  
my name along the junctions of my nerves;  
the accent makes it yours, a trapdoor name  
I fall into, relieved to be offstage.  
You hold me in the dark. The buzz of steps  
above us tunnels in my fingertips.  
The world you put inside me lifts its nose,  
begins to clean its face with tongue-soaked paws.  
Across my palms, my open lifelines itch.

## The Future

I clutch the future to my chest like an overflowing  
three-ring binder with a low-quality celebrity photo  
from the internet slipped into the cover on which  
I've pencil-scratched my initials next to the initials  
of everyone who's stolen my eraser  
or made jokes only I could hear.  
But the picture is a mortgage on a two-bedroom  
and over it I've carved the names of children  
I've decided not to have. I forego  
the satisfaction of peeling the inside pocket  
and releasing the swell of miscellany  
I've yet to punch and file behind a coloured tab:

Blue for Book Reviews

Orange for Job Offers

Red for Proof of Residence

I scurry round corners hoping  
no one makes me drop it.  
I'd lose everything.  
I'd be late to class.

## The Ghost Ship

I am sailing on the Ghost Ship,  
cirrus pinball pinging off daylight stars  
stringing pearls on the neck of the sky.

I am on interstellar waters,  
lawless, invisible. The Captain's lips  
are pinker than anything on Earth,  
her teeth break the space  
between my particles.

As the atmosphere slackens,  
thoughts loosen from their wraps,  
passengers and crew all wisps of rigging.  
Mostly we forget the hull's translucence,  
preferring the firmament's proximity  
to nightmares lurking below.

The odd airplane scrapes  
like the fin of a blind shark  
hunting too close to the sun.  
Each small collision only  
spurs the ship further out of focus.  
Adjust your telescopes all you want.  
I am untouchable here.



## Acknowledgements

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