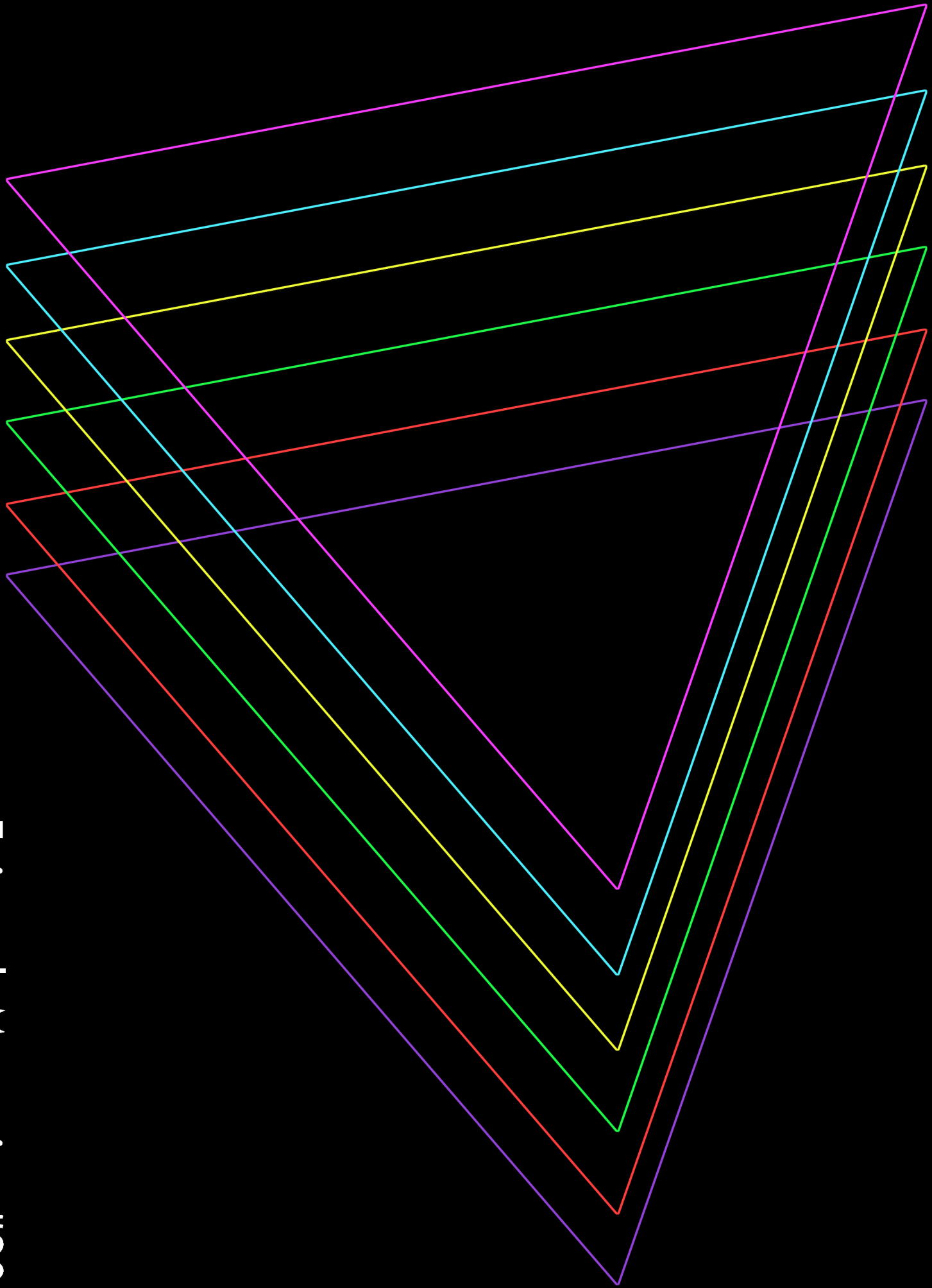


Epigraph Magazine #20



EPIGRAPH

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Containers / Cori Bratby-Rudd

Cement my face
once closer to the ground where I found the banana slug
poking it under terra cotta.
This place of little feet pattering
a lawn once small now worlds.

Snail tentacles touch retreating
in my home that smelled of sponges
and snot marshmallow glued fingers.

Even now, when I want
my mother to hold me, I clutch
the yellow put in a jar
 for later.

[m]align[ancy] / Ray Ball

you are pyrolysis
all char & coke
& vermilion

I [trace] the vascular
structure of stone fruits[']
pits stained cinnabar

you dream acres
straw & switchgrass
oil shale lines

the cross ties
[I could wish]
a desolate ochre

we are soot &
tarry [,] smoke[:]
a toxic preserve

clawing at the grounded moon #22 / Darren C. Demaree

surely the repetition of cells some of them rebels born to overthrow the body into the ground makes us like the moon of the moon with the moon now that the universe has risen to put the moon down on ohio surely the repetition of growing potatoes so that we can plant those potatoes back in their original field will give us back our potatoes with a little more ceremony it all feels like a blitz now anyway why not redefine the parameters of birth and death why not sing what should be whispered

clawing at the grounded moon #23 / Darren C. Demaree

i've begun collecting the tree-notes to pile to roll around in to set on fire when the
sun swirls to bolt-stop our cool winds it was once so much fun to imagine the
spectral plane now the heat will chase it onto our laps

clawing at the grounded moon #24 / Darren C. Demaree

we are loaded now the impact primed our world to orbit the hips of disaster the
body strips the weight to carry the weight it's finally been proven time is linear
fuck time is linear

After Sickness / Ashton Kamburoff

What was my life to me then?

A patch of dirt, a pack of seeds. I wait,
like a thumbprint in the earth for an answer

I cannot take. The sight: a red poppy field rising

late into the year. Their heads turn down-
stream, a collective shutter against cool wind

rising off the river. The almost-dead petals break

toward shore, wanting nothing more than to be
seen. Which is, I think, a desire I know: my life

left behind like the image of a question.

This is Not a Ritual / Alison Rumfitt

We are all guilty of taking part in &
perpetuating rituals/ statistics
are rituals. Brushing your teeth/flossing
is a ritual/ kneading at the couch with
your toolong fingernails, / burying a little
hole in the faux leather / checking notifications/
saying good morning / asking How are you?/
When I say that we are guilty I mean/
guilt isn't the worst thing, it just is/
it is often unavoidable/ it is often sitting
on your shoulders / it is often sucking at you
/it is often living on your ceiling leeching away
causing structural issues to the building
itself/ and of course you can be guilty
in a very active sense too / but this passive guilt,
you shouldn't feel bad for having it
and we're all living our own rituals/
we're all leaving lambs out to dry on rocks/
Rituals is the name of a makeup company
and makeup itself is a ritual/which many,
myself included sometimes, partake in/
not leaving the house until her looks are
satisfactory, until they don't hurt/
when I wore makeup more regularly
I would sometimes apply foundation
four or five times to get it right/it would not
blend to my dry skin cracks well, you had to layer it
until the skin could not remember which was itself
and which was the foundation/and the eyeliner
was not symmetrical / how can you kill a man
lopsided/the line of the lipstick a broken
bend/sometimes I still mess this up/ in a fit
of despair I smudge the red across my chin/
fuck it I think or say fuck it/ but then I wash my face/
I always wash my face/ I always did and I always will/

and in the initiation we say Truth/ we have our

software analysis
pressed close to our chest/

I could have been anything that I wanted/
but I didn't become anything that I wanted/
and admitting/ I should have prayed harder I admit/
is the first step to overcoming/
and overcoming is like overflowing
is like bursting
/

and it's not that I don't like you it's just that the harvest this year
has been very difficult and we all have to make our little
sacrifices

to find oneself initiated into society almost by accident
never having asked for much / is a most extraordinary and sickening/
sinking thing/ I didn't ask for this / I could have been a farmhand / I could have
inseminated pigs for money / yet here we are in the city beneath
a streetlight that won't stay tuned to frequency
the sound / of sirens instead of buzzards
there are urban rituals of course/ lacking the glamour of those rural ones/
which are all so based around a desired problematic wish for
connection to the natural world, to the spirits that might or might
not reside in trees/hills/etc/now there are no spirits of apartment blocks
not as far as I know/
there is such a thing as a crossroads
which should still be approached warily
even if a coffee shop stands there
/how do you trust their coffee/
that they won't give you whole milk
when you ask for oat/ I don't trust them /
I don't trust them/I could have been anything and I became this and now
I;m coming of age/ give time for spring to come/
kill enough insects on the altar & we might stop climatechange
in its tracks/or at least slow it, give us a little time to cope
and think through what needs to happen/
and what we need to /what do I need/ what do I mean

INTERLUDE...SOME RITES OF PASSAGE:

- 1) "Breeching". 'till the early 20th century all infants were dressed/
in skirts/ this made it easier for them to piss&shit, just let it all
flow out the bottom of the dress / when the children reached
an age, sometime around 8, the boys were dressed in trousers
for the first time. They were finally boys. Before that,
they were just these little girls.
- 2) The first period is also a rite of passage ritual. Maybe cultures have extra rituals on top of
this, to celebrate the bleeding / like hanging the sheets from a window/or dressing
her in red
- 3) Circumcision. IN America circumcision is almost a matter of course. But in Judaism and some
parts of Islam and other smaller religions/it is a coming of age moment either done to babies
or to boys just before they begin puberty. I was circumcised but that is because my body is
not a temple/and I was in a lot of pain/and I needed to be rid of the pain/I needed it gone.
- 4) /Mandatory military service/
- 5) Graduation/From school/or from university/or from wherever you are learning life skills/
- 6) Of course I've only been talking about rites of passage for young people/but rites of passage
can occur at any point in your life/you should watch out/be careful they're coming/
buying your first house/which will never happen/not to you not to any of us/

like a listacle dream/ you are fawning at the dock
like a listacle dream
one thing
after the other
all totally seperated but on the same topic

for ease of clicking/reading

like your not quite old enough/
when will I be old enough?/
when will she be old enough to know the truth?/

and what even is the truth anyhow?
why call a poem 'this is not a ritual' when it is so
o b v i o u s l y a ritual/
no it isn't healthy to have writing be
your ritual/to let it be the only emotional
outlet that you have/
but who can stop you when you've comeofage?/

Bind the animals together and let them float down the river/
hoping for full nets/and always make sure you throw a fish
into the fire/for warmth/tie one stem of grass in every field
to keep the fairfolk distracted/knock on the window
every time your husband goes out to hunt/carve a circle
in the glass of one window in your house when you move in
if you want to live/be happy/prosper/so on/never kill
a rook/but always kill a jackdaw on sight/if you go looking
for things in the fields then you will find/things/
in the fields/and what you find is not our fault but yours /
yours only/now does the reaping of the fat-stalk necks/
the cross buried in the earth/which can only ever be grasped
in subconscious hands/ then only not for long/
lasting a couple of rough seconds/burning into the skin
on her rough palms/ that have seen twenty year's work now/
that are so used to extreme sensation/ yet this cross/
this burning/ this is new/unbearable/like an absent dad like a dad
rotting at the bottom of a well/like nothing in the daytime/
but bright and white come evening/This field is fucked.

Like nothing in the daytime and the field is fucked/
This isn't a ritual/it's an act of guilt/
and I don't know how old I am/and I mark the days
by the colour of the leaves/I could have been anything
I could have been a field mouse/but I became this sorry wreck/
let none ask why the cross burns/let none burn the church down/
a net of birds tied together with string/ looping in front of the sun/
I could have been anything/I need you to listen to me/
I could have been anything/just look at what we've become/
relying on so many different Gods just so we can eat/
find shelter/live to next year/how do we keep track?/
which God is for which looming terror/
and what God do I pray to so that the leak beneath the sink
doesn't get any worse/and flood the kitchen/what do I
do to make that God happy/what do I sacrifice to it/
to ensure it won't hurt us any more????/

Her father drowned at the bottom of a well. They did not realise he was down there until days later. His corpse had begun to decompose, and the people had been drinking from the water in which it lay without knowing. The citizens here believe in reincarnation but not like this.

Jökulhlaup / Benjamin Kessler

Interrupted by some lank birdsong—
house finch or scrub jay or dark-eyed junco
on the feeder beyond the window—
I occupy an interstice of awakening.

Wisps of dream eddy outside
my vision and I paw out,
binding bedcloth warren,
the inertia of sleep weakening.

Be still, loath body, lest be my healing heard.

Only felt are the silken lips of rose petals
beneath my nails—furrier of spring, half-moons
of blood—the washing through of phantom fingers.

I want to call you.

But I can't reach the phone, can't
unseat it from its metal cradle and hold
it with weedy grip.

To do so would mean unsettling.
Supine, then prostrate
on the thin foam board, that outdoor sleeper.

I make an allowance.

The closing of one eye, then another, fuzzy
light cut by slat blinds blooming dark
behind my lids. I sleep again. I attempt
obligation, sublimation, reclamation.

I'm ready to go, not now.
I'd like to go, not now.

Ode to Crybabies / David Kirby

I have the most valuable of human gifts,
says Mario Puzo, *that of retrospective falsification:*
remembering the good and not the bad. Thank you
for saying that, Mario, and thank you also for writing
The Godfather, a ho-hum book, to tell the truth,
yet the basis for two of the best movies ever.

What you say works the other way around as well—
in fact, I know more people who remember
the awful rather than the sublime, though
I realize that, by saying this, I run the risk
of putting myself in the same category as those
crybabies. I call my cat Crybaby because she cries

all the time, though her real name is Patsy,
nor is she really mine, for she is the neighbor's cat,
but the neighbor has a dog, so Crybaby spends her days
with me. What do her cries mean, though?
Babies cry because they're hungry or have soiled
their pants, but it's impossible to say what

an animal means since we're not animals:
the geese by the pond seem to be leveling
false accusations when they hiss at us,
but experts say the sounds they make are welcoming,
like the gestures dog make when they wag their tails.
For that matter, who knows why humans cry?

I saw three young women dabbing their eyes
in Paris recently, two in cafés and one in the metro,
and all three were looking at their phones,
though what they saw there remains known
only to them. Paris is one of those cities
where you see women soldiers on the sidewalk,

smiling and chatting pleasantly as they cradle
their weapons, and just as I ask myself, if futilely,
what the other women were crying about, so, too,
do I wonder what topics these urban amazons
are exploring, whether they're debating,
for example, the stopping power of a standard

5.56 NATO round versus that of the 9mm
parabellum or their boyfriends. Or they could be
talking about shooting their boyfriends.
Why, you ask, might we want to kill our beloved?
Well, we don't, not really. Still, when I told Barbara
that my barber said his neighbor had run over

her boyfriend, she cackled and said, *I bet*
he deserved it! Now before you judge Barbara,
let me tell remind you that, one, men are bad,
and two, running over somebody is not
necessarily as fatal as shooting them—
indeed, as almost every classic Looney Tunes

or Merry Melodies cartoon clearly demonstrates,
being run over is largely a matter of momentary
inconvenience rather than life-threatening.
Did you know that crying is actually good for you?
Tears lubricate your eyes and remove irritants.
They contain antibodies that fight pathogenic microbes

and even stimulate the production of endorphins,
the feel-good hormones that are also produced
by sex, exercise, and the consumption of hot peppers.
Happily, there's plenty to cry about. Scientists have
discovered that certain monkeys change the meaning
of their screeches by combining calls into specific

sequences, so that *krak* warns of a leopard,
whereas *krak-oo* is a more general alarm,
and while *boom* means *come this way*,
a *boom* before a *krak-oo* denotes falling
tree branches, and let's face it, there's a lot
of tree branches out there, and a lot of them fall.

Obedience School Dropout / David Kirby

The dogs in the park seek information as they sniff
a fire hydrant, another dog, me. “Who’s been here?” they ask.
“What did you have for breakfast?” And “You –
you’re a cat owner. Why?” There’s no arguing with a dog.
They can be trained, though, which is more than you

can say about some human beings, though I have a soft spot
for obedience school dropouts, the ones who just
fling themselves at you as though you’re the greatest
human being ever – greatest anything, really. Your dog
toils not, neither does it spin. What dogs really like

is to look at other dogs the way babies like to look
at other babies or at slightly older children, actually,
big boys and girls of whom the babies might say,
if only they could talk, “I’ll be like him or her some day.
I’ll know my colors and how to tie my shoes.”

I wish I were a better person. Not that I’m a bad one,
but I’d be better if I knew what “better” meant.
If we could say what we want, says Margaret Fuller,
it would come to pass: when John the Baptist described
Jesus, guess who stepped out from behind a palm tree?

That was in an antique land. Deserts produce prophets,
also tyrants. Let’s face it: Ozymandias was a real
horse’s ass. “Look on my works, ye Mighty,
and despair.” Yet what remains of him? Two vast
and trunkless legs of stone. The unhappiest dog in the world

would be happier than Ozymandias with his frown,
wrinkled lip, sneer of cold command. Just this morning
I saw a three-legged dog in the park who was as happy
as he might have been had he had his missing appendage.
When they are not looking at others of their species,

dogs like to please their masters, we humans.
A dog catching a frisbee is doing a thing greater
than any done by a desert despot. Dogs are simpático.
“Simpático” is a very important word in Brazil,
according to psychologist Aroldo Rodrigues, and refers

to “a range of desirable social qualities – to be friendly, nice, agreeable and good-natured, a person who is fun to be with.” When a stranger drops a pen in the course of an experiment, a passerby is three times as likely to say, “You dropped your pen” in Rio de Janeiro

than in New York because Brazilians want to be seen as simpático. Dogs, who is more simpático than you?

Then again, you have to be. You don’t have that much time: veterinarians say the first year of your life equals fifteen of ours, year two is nine years, and every dog year after that

is five of the human variety. Bad commencement speakers tell us to follow our passion, whereas good ones tell us to find something we like and see what happens next

We don’t have a whole lot of time ourselves, people.

You have so much to say, dogs—speak! Good girl.

A sort of bathroom / Samantha Bares

The door won't shut its peeper-latch. I can hear the poet reading through the walls. This is not the sort of bathroom that lets you feel alone. Why does everyone think they can wear one bright color or none then give up? I wish the soap at the sink pumped out foamy. I want a foam beard today. But foam beards are like lipstick luxurious as a ripe avocado or a good relationship with your boss. You gotta keep reapplying, leading yourself back to a dull room after every bite.

Mirror Pool / Stephanie Valente

“i’ve been waiting for you,”
the wolf said.

“waiting for so long.”

Did You RSVP? / Stephanie Valente

when i'm thin enough,
i'll wear denim shorts + fishnets
i had four seltzers today
there's an aries guitarist:
he thinks he loves me
we dress the same: in endless black
tiny and delicate gold jewelry
i want him to look at my ribs
and feel smallness
instead, he gives me a mary medallion
i pray in his throat, he says
he likes my ass
in july we dye our hair pink
in his bushwick bathroom
i kept his aftershave,
wore it for three weeks straight
like sacred nectar.

Untitled / Kelly Jones

The river fills with sticks and garbage then overflows after the storm so we can't go hiking by it
It is too hot and humid to be early February and I worry everything will bloom and die early
Last night I dreamed I was curled up in bed with an ex-lover I haven't seen in ten years
It seemed so real I was confused to find my spouse beside me in the morning
What if one day I simply slipped back into the person I used to be
My hair is turning grey and I am allergic to hair dye so I embrace the aging
I've been daydreaming of getting something different inked over my first tattoo
As if covering up a mistake will make it go away
When the waters recede piles of trash are just left to rot along the riverbank

Idolatry / Michael Gessner

This is not a political poem;
it is a necessary one.

After reading a poet who talks to trees
I did not think about ecopoetry,

rather what deforestation did
to drive her to become a companion

to trees, to their vascular communications,
underground in the service of their kind,

how the birch sends its surplus carbon
to the fir, how sugars and waters

are shared, how all are kin; even above,
cherry, maple-blood, olive and chestnut,

and I thought of how her language had been
abused and sold to take lives, their lives,

the lives of her culture, the life of language;
dialogue with other human beings,

Now I too believe the trees are listening;
they tell us what we mean; they know their kind.

And then / Jeff Schiff

an oh so oily florid in the face pigeon
think masked cartoon villain
black and white avian wanted poster

fractures a something
or birdy vertigo
telephone wire misstep

or lost in roost reverie
parsing a feathery dialectic
slips

and plummet
think
I did

lopsided sack of drenched bones
heaped
not cooing come to the cage and adore me

through teensy
functionally spaced bars
seed and suet cup

and miniature trapeze
but bounce
and throttle

capon pinball
first off the corrugated tin cover over the Electrolux
then bashed off my roughhewn sink

CONTRIBUTORS

CORI BRATBY-RUDD is a queer LA-based writer, poet, and co-founder of Influx Collectiv(e)'s Queer Poetry Reading Series. She graduated Cum Laude from UCLA's Gender Studies department, and is a current MFA Candidate in Creative Writing at California Institute of the Arts. She has been published in *Ms. Magazine*, *The Gordian Review*, *Califragile*, *PANK Magazine*, *Entropy*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Impossible Archetype*, among others. She recently won the Editorial Choice Award for her research paper in *Audeamus Academic Journal* and was nominated as one of Lambda Literary's 2018 Emerging Writers. You can find her at coribratbyrudd.com.

RAY BALL, PhD, is a history professor, literary journal editor, and writer who lives in Alaska. Her creative work has recently appeared in *Coffin Bell*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Moria*, and *UCity Review* and has been nominated for Best of the Net and Pushcart. You can find her in the classroom, the archives, or on Twitter [@ProfessorBall](https://twitter.com/ProfessorBall).

DARREN C. DEMAREE is the author of eleven poetry collections, most recently *Emily As Sometimes the Forest Wants the Fire*, which will be published in June of 2019 by Harpoon Books. He is the recipient of a 2018 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, the Louis Bogan Award from Trio House Press, and the Nancy Dew Taylor Award from *Emrys Journal*. He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and *Ovenbird Poetry*. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

ASHTON KAMBUROFF's poetry has been published in *Vinyl*, *Calamity*, *Rust + Moth* and other literary venues. He currently works as a railroad conductor on the eastern seaboard.

ALISON RUMFITT is a poet who lives in Brighton in the UK. She's currently stockpiling peaches and baked beans. Her debut pamphlet is called *The T(y)ranny* and is available to order from Zarf Editions. Her Twitter is [@specialsweat](https://twitter.com/specialsweat) where you can tell her that you are in love with her.

BENJAMIN KESSLER's work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Superstition Review*, *Hobart*, and *Portland Review*. He lives and writes in Portland, Oregon.

DAVID KIRBY's collection *The House on Boulevard St.: New and Selected Poems* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2007. Kirby is the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the Times Literary Supplement of London called “a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense.” Kirby’s honors include fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His latest poetry collection is *More Than This*.

A Cajun Louisiana native, **SAMANTHA BARES** earned her MFA in fiction at University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. During her MFA candidacy, she won the Frederick Busch Prize in Fiction. Key West Literary Seminar selected her novel-in-progress as a finalist for the 2020 Marianne Russo Emerging Writer Award, and American Short Fiction selected her story submission as semi-finalist for the Halifax Ranch Fiction Prize. Her work has most recently appeared in *NightBlock*. Samantha is currently a Helen Zell Postgraduate Fellow, working on a novel-length swamp opera.

STEPHANIE VALENTE lives in Brooklyn, NY. She has published *Hotel Ghost* (Bottlecap Press, 2015), *waiting for the end of the world* (Bottlecap Press, 2017), and *Little Fang* (Bottlecap Press, 2019). She has work included in *Susan, TL;DR*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. Sometimes, she feels human. stephanievalente.com.

KELLY JONES currently lives in the Piedmont of North Carolina, where they work as a mobile library operator and arts educator. They've got an MFA in Poetry from the University of New Orleans and they recently finished a second Masters in Library and Information Studies. Because twice the loans = twice the fun.

MICHAEL GESSNER has authored 11 books of poetry and prose. From the most recent, (*Selected Poems*, FutureCycle Press, 2016) The Poetry Foundation chose several for its online archives (2017). His latest publications include those in *Innisfree*, *The Kenyon Review*, *New Oxford Review*, and *NAR*, (finalist for 2016 James Hearst Prize). His reviews appear regularly, and he is a voting member of the National Book Critics Circle.

In addition to *That hum to go by* (Mammoth books, 2012), **JEFF SCHIFF** is the author of *Mixed Diction*, *Burro Heart*, *The Rats of Patzcuaro*, *The Homily of Infinitude*, and *Anywhere in this Country*. His work has appeared internationally in nearly a hundred periodicals, including *The Alembic*, *Grand Street*, *The Ohio Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *The Louisville Review*, *Tendril*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Carolina Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *River City (The Pinch)*, *Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *The Southwest Review*. He has been a member of the English and Creative Writing faculty at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

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