

sullied

gravel roads summon great white
clouds of dust that coat everything exposed
in the walmart parking lot as
apathetic teens trace crude messages in the
grime on car windows

the filth suffocates me
like the insects that crawled in the clay
fields behind my house

their wings were encased in mud and sacrificed,
their legs twitched feebly
with the weight of their circumstances—
they made it out, but not whole

Atlas

The oldest memory I have is of my dad and I going through the Henry Doorly Zoo's aquarium tunnel when I was four years old. We were only in Nebraska to finalize the divorce, and pack the last of our things into an old rusty trailer that he'd tow for the 400 miles back home.

I remember the hammerhead drifting above me, how I clung to the leg of my dad's frayed jeans. Grinning crookedly, he reached out a hand towards the ceiling, pressed his calloused palm flat against the glass, and said he was holding it up, all by himself, just for me.

my sister helps me bury a body

After I found him lying motionless on top of the coconut substrate
after I fished his body out of the tank, claws and spindly limbs
dangling out of his gray speckled shell, and cradled him in my hands,
after I walked into her room without knocking first
and showed her his tiny corpse, my chin trembling,
I asked her to help me with his funeral.

She gently wrapped him in a paper towel shroud,
sealed the Ziploc coffin, used her hands to dig
a small hole in the orange-tinted muddy ground of our backyard.
The dirt from under her fingernails got onto my shirt
as she held me after, and told me I did my best,
that I kept him alive longer than anyone expected,
that some things just don't belong in Missouri,
no matter how much you want them to.

first kiss

He wove his fingers through my hair and yanked
me towards him,
a head-on-head collision
in the Buffalo Wild Wings parking lot.
I tried to swallow
the stick of mint gum I'd been chewing,
but it got stuck in my windpipe,
fresh wintergreen asphyxiation
competing with the acidic
vomit propelled into the
back of my throat
at the smell of his
mountain-dew-thai-curry-sauce breath.
His barbed wire teeth
tore my mouth to shreds, skidding
on the trail of slime
his tongue left
while eagerly wriggling
against the lips I kept sealed shut.

Schrodinger's visitation agreement

She had promised she'd be here at six, and it was almost half past, so I knew that soon, her car would turn the corner at the top of the street, and she would wave to me as she parked in the driveway, and I would be standing right there, and she would hold me tightly, tell me she's sorry she's late, that she would've come as soon as she got off work, but she was talking to a friend, and she just lost track of time, and then her car wouldn't start, and maybe she would've been here sooner if my dad hadn't moved out to the middle of nowhere.

I closed my eyes and listened for the knocking of the engine. The cold gnawed on my fingers a little harder and the concrete underneath me stole any heat I managed to gather for myself, but it was alright, because it was almost time, and she would be less irritable if I waited patiently for her, if I took my worry and broke it down into pieces small enough to hide under my tongue. I wish I could stitch the corners of my mouth into a permanent smile, so she'd never have to see me as the ungrateful thing I am.

A Sestina for Snow

She died on a Sunday, around one
in the morning, on a cloudy night with a new
moon, only dark sky above, no shining light
to illuminate any hesitation, to make her doubt
the finality of her actions. I'm still here, left
to wonder if a little refracted sunshine would've changed her mind.
But mostly, on the good days, I try not to give any mind
to her absence; one
week blends into another and I'm left
staring at the calendar, trying out positivity for the new
year. On the bad days, I doubt
if I'll ever be able to forget the delight
I took in her presence, how light
and giddy her hand in mine made me feel. It reminds
me of the time without a second of hesitation or doubt
she took my panicked phone
call at some obscene hour of the morning, when she knew
she was the only person left
to care if I was alive or not. She never left
my side in the ER that night. The fluorescent lights
gave her a migraine, but she stuck to my side like we were newlyweds
and not just two queers out of their minds.
I had no one
but her, so at first when she died, I fell down
into despair
unable to imagine a future of being left
alone.
Now, months later, I stood at her grave in the daylight,
trying not to mind
how new
the tombstone is. I knew
the dirt would be freshly turned. Memories of the funeral tumble forward; I'm doubtful
she would mind
that I left
before she was buried around twilight,
and drove home to drink overproof rum until the clock struck one.
I go home now too, grief freshly renewed, and still, I only sleep on the left
side of the bed, doubtful of my ability to rest—the moonlight

illuminating her absence reminds me too much of my loneliness.

Poet: Emerson Gray (he/him), Group #3

Assigned Faculty: Elizabeth Hoover

alternate reality

In another universe, parallel to this one,

there is a world where she sleeps in my arms, peaceful and warm,
our limbs wound together like a rosary snaking through my fingers.

There is a world where she blasts satanic dad rock with the windows down,
her hair whipping around her face, her temples free of stigmata.

There is a world where she rids herself of shame, no martyrdom necessary
for the sins she believes herself to have committed.

There is a world where she heals.

There is a world where she lives—
a gentler world.

It's just not this one.

body, remembering

This skin is too small for everything it holds—
it strangles the lungs and the liver and the heart
in this overfilled carcass that one day
may feel like mine again,
but not yet, because now,
I'm trapped in the way my teeth are chattering,
not-quite-bone rattling against themselves,
like the mason jar full of loose
change that perched precariously
on the edge of his nightstand,
shivering as the bedposts
knocked repeatedly against it.
I hear the echo of coins rattling,
and wonder if, after it was all over,
it also longed to shatter
onto the dorm room tiles,
all its contents spilling out
in a coppery stream—
if it also longed
to be empty.

love-psalm

My knees pop and crackle like a fireplace
as I kneel at her feet on the carpeted floor. I flinch—
my body suddenly feels too crooked, too misshapen to be here.
She smiles like redemption, croons *keep going, baby*,
and guides me towards forgiveness, as she guides herself down
my throat. She does not separate me from my cripplehood—
she holds it, tenderly, just like she holds me, and I am burning, sanctified
by the heat of her gaze and the blessed sacrament of consumption.
The hollow of my cheeks becomes hallowed ground,
nevermind the crooked slant of my teeth
and the ever-present ache of my jaw.
My existence narrows to her fingers,
clasped together like she's praying
with the rosary she makes of my hair,
and salvation comes, easy as swallowing.

Beyond Tivua Island, Fiji

Gazing out to sea – wind
blowing his long hair,
billowing his shirt.
I wonder at the waves
with which his brain meets surf,
takes in the incoming oceans
of the world – tinted coral today.
Where might this solitary
traveler find his gift,
know his purpose – he seems
to possess a confidence,
a readiness for adventure.

And perhaps in him I see
a reflection of my younger self
possessed of eagerness to explore,
to nudge the world in directions
of peaceable coexistence,
of celebrations of lives diverse.

The man with five decades
headway wishes this younger man
the gift of exploration,
the gifts that grow from doors
blown open by dashed expectations,
the gift of self-discovery,
of acceptance and of gratitude
for sea visions without horizon,
for earth from which to stand
and see into spheres unknown.

Poet: Dwight Bitikofer (he/him), Group #3

Assigned Faculty: Shane Seely

Heart's Delight, Heart's Desire, Heart's Content, Newfoundland

Heart's Delight, this travel
Heart's Desire, this exploration
Heart's Content, a place I wish
I might have stayed
at least a little longer.
These towns by Trinity Bay
called to me from a map.
They symbolize this journey:
curiosity, connection with a story –
towns holding tales of their own,
a history and present moments

- some with delight
- some with desire
- some a place of content,

the right place for residents
and for those like me,
travelers passing through –
travelers with hearts that long
to be opened wider
to celebrate delight
to express desire
and to live content.

Dream Time

Urulu, Australia

Dream time stories march
across arid red dirt land,
encircle spirit-tailed landmarks

these dramatic red formations
that leap from flattened earth,
storied with pockmarked legend

river red gum, acacia, bloodwood
desert oak put down roots
where water tells its story

baptizes storytellers
who become carriers of legend
breathe notes of digeridoo

in dream time we all have
stories hidden within
the journeys we've been given

dream time invites the journey
into discovery, into new story,
wandering deep into imagined past.

Poet: Dwight Bitikofer (he/him), Group #3
Assigned Faculty: Shane Seely

The Last White Iris

This last white iris aromatic
on a wet spring morning
a testament to an old friendship
a visit ending, time treasured
a season ending, noticing our ages,
a hope for at least one more
meeting of hearts
before our decades of seasons
curl and wilt in a teary
remembrance of blossom.

The House

I style my mansion in fours

Drip walls by hundreds in
cocoa-dipped cotton

Never have I seen a home divide so
surely

I have never seen such a demise

*

When I walk through the halls I bite
my tongue berry

Red is the color of my inquiry

The man at the end crooks his finger
to a hook

I follow the claw to its point

Dating Profile

Wake me up and I'll call you
a cannibal wait wake me
up and I'll call you
pretty Little Goose New Bruise
get my feet on the

floor and I'll catch you
a squirrel wait I'll catch you
later in only my drawers wait panties
 oh no
oh no send me down hey guy send me

down I'll get your knife oh shit
your wife (your
wife?) your *wife*? oh no buckle down wipe
my brow tend my bread hold my
hand spank my face speak my ass lick
and lick and lick and lick and lick and lick and lick my wounds

drown your tik tok and I'll grow you a moon

Protectors

we learn to protect when we

break in repetition

protecting also

the breaking

black ink gatorbacks of

pain

smallest sister's body

held in arms

behind doors

what sanctifies marriage

between agony and

memory

glee and resurrection

birds and their crestfallen

nests

what sanctifies campfires' edges

when they crease our eyes in

split/second admissions

what does it mean

to protect

what does it mean

to protect

Poet: Bailey Schaumburg (they/them/she/her), Group #3

Assigned Faculty: Elizabeth Hoover

The No-No Room

In the no-no room
our soft chords belittle

The room we papered in Wrath

In this case Wrath is a thousand wee lilacs
identical uniform trapped

A metaphor maybe of a weaker lesser love
of a baby never had of a guzzled pint too many
of a boys trip to Vegas of your hateful mother's hate of
me of stop calling me a whore of a too-creased
fitted sheet of has that onion been rotting in the
fridge all year of the house is burning of you are
burning of I am burning of what burns in me burns
in you of honey did you bake that sweetest lemon
cake of good job honey of don't condescend
of quinoa in the cabinet of take me to the gravesite
of that donkey is neglected of can I be its friend
of you are a dumbass of but don't you get the joke
of don't condescend of your spine's earthen smell
of don't condescend
of how this is the end of our waxy floral galaxy
of you are wilting
of I am the emptiest field

the second

as soon as I had my first
just two days old
and sent to the NICU
after blood (mine
from the 2nd degree
tear) was found
in his stool, once
I brought him home
nourished for days
on sugar water
vein tapped
from his forehead
(a unicorn
the nurses called it),
from the moment
he was full
nursed all day
feeding in clusters
finally asleep but attached—that
second—my mother-in-law asked
you know what that means
don't you
he is getting out of the way
for the next

Echolocation

why talk to it
it in utero when
just as easily I can
think to
this fetus
send waxy synapse
echoed amnios where
the unborn's kicks reach
to the dog's head
above
ear a-twitch

sure put your hand to my stomach
not stomach, abdomen
and feel this womb's
hard shell
press the listening
with the heart of
your palms
.
tap it out
read it back,
it, this time, a proxy
it, a beat a line

failure to thrive

that an infant can arrive
satiated and be pre-
sumed dead eventually
the doctor will pronounce
that the child has no
manifest destiny
pulled up the ties and
the tracks no drive
towards capital unlabored
and this decision to not
intervene is miraculously
not a billboard between
the lions den and injury
lawyers what is the need
anymore to know if a
passenger is pregnant
scared and alone alone
here is a metaphor and
thrive a fake abortion clinic
in St. Louis, Missouri

ball of wax

what parts
of a city stay the same over time
unlike the soul we know
dna to be divisible
but descartes said something
remains even after it is
melted poured
into the mold
of a seashell
lit again

if they weren't inside of us

we would spray for them
we would be able to get one at the atm
we would write it off on our taxes
we would offer an 11% rebate at Menards with receipt
we would be able to subscribe for auto-ship
we would request discreet packaging
we would set out a bowl of them
we would grab a handful on our way out
we would order one for his 13th birthday
we would laugh about it
we would laugh
we would

* First two lines from Sarah Silverman

Books thicker than earth

I am weary of books thicker than the earth.
-Pablo Neruda

In their thickness
books harbor
earthquakes
which weary
humankind
because of what
they recall
to memory,
unspeakable
and bright.

Fire

When ashes are all that remain
who questions the fire?
When night revels in its moon
is the day jealous?
When the day lauds the sun
does the night sulk?
Fire burns night and day.
Sun fades. Night ceases.
But never fire.

Merciless

The Bootheel's sand and dust
along with coal smoke
crawled into the depot
where my grandfather was depot agent
and telegrapher.
The telegraph key sang
like a sorrowful woodpecker
tattooing a tree with holes.
Cypress lurked
in shadowy water
praying for the return of swamp.
Instead, religion took root
and consumed the air
and the history of air
with unrequited hunger.

Prayer

Ask nothing of God.
Expect nothing of God.
Consider yourself
a leaf.
Listen to birdsong.
Let weather caress
and punish you.
Unfurl and tremble.
Accept your graceful fall.
The red and yellow tumble
across stones of air.
Ancestors painted ochre horses
to draw near to them.
On the stone walls
the bison and the hunters –

*shadows
formed from fat and iron
like you*

– speak in thankfulness.
Their appeals
for horses and bison,
for the great herds,
were mute murmurings
meant for comfort
without expectation.
Ask nothing of God.

And me?

And me,
where was I?
Focused
on the weird acts
in the weird theatre.

Things started occurring.

Legion
upon legion
of the beleaguered,
the dangerous,
and the delusional
sprang from the earth
that instantly regretted
their birth.

We tried laughter.
They pretended
he could be his opposite
instead of shade and shadow.

The months came running.
Then the days.
Then the minutes.

Every last person.

In the end,
I could but love.

And you,
where were you?

In the end,
could you do any more
than love?

Roots

*And how do the roots know
they should rise up toward the sun?*
- Pablo Neruda

Plunge into darkness
ye roots.
Ignore the light.
The thick smell
of rotted leaves
and worms
sustains.
Do not rise.
Above,
mere blossoms
await.

Tears

I carry memory's valise.
It is small enough to fit under my seat
on a train or in a café,
yet large enough to consume a room.
In winter it is cold as an alphabet.
In summer it sweats with regret.
The clasps have the patina of tears.
The leather is like a photo of children
in which you can see the adults
they will become,
though not of their own accord.

10

Ten.

A line and a circle,
a tree and the moon,
a path and a door,
an arrow and a journey,
a hand beside a face,
a stream and a drop of water,
a distance and rest.
A circle of time,
a moon of portent,
a door into my heart,
a journey into age,
a drink for thirst,
a rest for the heart.

The Pretty Ponies

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

High stepping
like vaulting fairies,
Ends of mane and tail
like windblown silk.

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

The pretty ponies
mock you
with those who labor
on just their pretty tails.

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

The pretty ponies
are more beautiful than you,
anyone you know,
or will ever see.

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

The pretty ponies
are jeweled galaxies
beyond reach
in the regal sky.

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

Their hair,
shorn by blind men,
costs more than
the breath that wakes you.

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.

Their muscled flanks shiver.
Eyes flash.
Coy necks arch.
Bells sound..

Oh, the pretty ponies dance.
The pretty ponies dance
as never you will.

The sea's laughter

*Do you not also sense danger
in the sea's laughter?*
- Pablo Neruda

How does the sea laugh?
Is the tide laughter
or is a stony shore necessary?
What does the sea find humorous?
Is the sea laughing at a man
standing on the shore?
Does the sea smirk
at the intentions of fish?
Is there ribaldry
in a boat adrift
on a current of hunger?

Toothache

“Put some homemade tobacco in a corncob pipe. Light it, and draw the smoke over the tooth.”

-The Foxfire Book¹, p. 245

In dreams, burned things manifest, so be sure not to capture them.

Observe their movements, their words.

If it is a human figure, note its clothing.

Ask it no questions, for it has already fragmented.

Focus only on synthesis. Tell it who you are,
who you'd like it to be with you.

Invite it to fill the gap, if indeed your ache can be seen.

If the ache's cause is invisible, let your dream be a canvas:
What did you burn to get here? What did you break?

¹ Note: Each poem in this submission begins with an epigraph taken from a chapter on home remedies in *The Foxfire Book*, an anthology of Appalachian folk wisdom published in 1972.

Earache

“Put a few ashes in an old rag. Dampen it with hot water and sleep with your head on it.”
-*The Foxfire Book*, p. 238

Dream a dream of ashes, of endings that condense then smolder,
of leaves that have now become starters, already gone to seed,
of ashes that have become soap, making endings from their beginnings.
Place the rag close enough to hear the changes left inside, the burning yet undone.

Nosebleed

“Lie down and put a dime on your heart.”
-*The Foxfire Book*, p. 243

As you die, you notice the boat adjust as it floats into the river.

What do you think you will see overhead?

Who indeed will take your dime?

How much distance will the captain assign for your trip?

Are you floating downriver or just to the other bank?

Was the dime the captain’s fare or a payment for what’s next?

Blood-Builders

“When the sap is up, take the green bark of the wild cherry and boil it to make tea.”
-*The Foxfire Book*, p. 231

While the tea is steeping, invite a beloved over to share a cup.

Wait for their arrival while sitting on the front porch, nothing to occupy you, save your thoughts. on
regret.

Your blood needs building because it flows with raw materials yet to be assembled with others.

Survey those materials and make a list, loosely in the front of your mind.

When the beloved arrives, motion them in silence to the uncondimented tea.

Recite your list of blood-building materials until they ask you to stop and pray that they never do.

Croup

“For a baby pour a mixture of turpentine and white whiskey into a saucer and set it afire. Hold the baby over the smoke until he breathes it deeply. This loosens him up.”

-The Foxfire Book, p. 237

Now that he is loose, fold him in half enough times that he fits into your pocket.

Take him to the farmers market. It is Saturday and he loves to watch the dogs' coats gleam.

Buy him a trinket to hold, perhaps a berry or two.

Can he see over the hem of your pocket?

Give him a peek out, and allow him the run of the pocket.

He needs a lightless place to feel safe, though he loves you more than darkness.

Bleeding

“Apply lamp black directly to the wound.”
-*The Foxfire Book*, p. 231

Notice the light streaming out from the edges of the cut skin.

Think of the light not as particles but as waves and ride them into deep space.

Take some time alone out there and consider your surroundings: nothing, all of it.

When your ready, lie on your right side, prepared to arise as if from sleep.

Notice the skin, how it has not healed, though you carried it with you.

Across the galaxy, it was always yours.