

**Poet:** Scott Berzon (he/him), Group #1  
**Assigned Faculty:** James Kimbrell

## 100 Books

*Murder* appears twice among the titles, so does *stars*. I'm not suggesting the universe is in balance, certainly not today. On the radio, bodies are being identified. Another mass shooting. It feels debilitating. Most days I wake up with *Modeh Ani* on my tongue, a Hebrew phrase to say I am grateful. And I say it on this cold morning, albeit in an airlocked corner of my mouth. Across the room is the expanse of books and light from outer space lands on their spines. There are words of presentness here to use like gauze.

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## Second Overdue Notice

Rather than bold or an oversized font, try giving away the endings. Tell the customer the last horses gnaw through their saddles in an act of defiance. Reveal with no uncertainty that the ill woman gives away her hair, not to the charity for which she volunteered, but to a single bird. Holding on too long is the work of the stars, not ours.

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## How the River Works

On the pull-out map of Rome, the Tiber tunnels blue through the city, a color I imagine is much closer to the springs of the beech forest from which it came. I can pinpoint where I'd sit, given the chance to visit, a place where I could hear only how the river works, nothing more. I'm too old now to consider a jump from a bridge like the raucous Romans who leap into the new year. But I hung from one once, on a dare. The woman who is now my wife was there, as well as a dear friend, and a picture was taken of my bare body above the water. If memory serves, there was cheering for how long I held on, or was it laughter, when I couldn't let go?

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## Beyond the Castle Walls

I'd raise my hand for falconry over war, remind myself that a bird imprisoned gets time to browse beyond the castle walls. I'd accept ridicule for a lack of machismo and for unimpressive garb, so long as the gauntlet fit snug to the elbow, a proper perch. These raptors are among the birds I see with poor sight. I'd risk my loved one dipping into boredom or fancy, to watch its shield of feathers change colors in the sun, harden in rain.

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## Dog-Eared

Who turned down these pages and how many people left them this way before me, some pact among vandals? I've spent hours of false steps trying to tie one dark corner to another, and to what end? This is fiction. Everything is covered in wet foliage. Perhaps disrepair is but the singular link to be found. It's late and raining and I hear the hounds calling out beyond my window. These are their blessings for an easy sleep, and a new hunt at dawn.

## Comment Box

I like to praise the staff, their power of suggestion, their impeccable navigation. I'll admit that once, I complained a library was no place for games, for clacking tiles, and no, not even laughter, and I outed the table of four in great detail. Today, I'm reflecting on the limitations of space, how so few titles get the enviable, front-facing position, the Staff Picks and the Winter Warm-Ups, while all else sit spine-stuck and artless in predictable rows. *Please forgive me, I write, for tinkering with the Wild West arrangement on the second floor.* I picked up that book with the sky collapsing in on itself in bursts of color above the bedrock. I moved it far from the lasso of any marauder trying to reign in the heavens.

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## When to Write of the Heart

When the heart is absent from the index. When the heart is on a highway far from the nearest hospital. When flowers are purchased for the heart. When the drawn heart is anatomical and not two halves in symmetry. When morning stills the heart more than night and stars. When the heart asks for a friendly reminder, and when you can answer the heart in earnestness, that yes, it's time to take inventory.

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## Inexact Elegy

-for Stephen

My mind flashes back to the craggy, Colorado reservoir, as though for the first time—a sudden violation, a stranger waving in the background of a picture. My poet friend was no stranger, but when he was laid out like a long line, I recall my surprise at learning his hometown: Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. He always said, *Just outside Milwaukee* in that same, inexact way a body loses its footing and goes tumbling down the rocks.



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## Midnight Salon

Disrobing is but one part of the horizontal arrangement. Birds, stickers of birds, sit thick against their limbs, a vagrant and fledgling in weekend secrecy. As they separate to different rooms, his father raises a thumb, as if to normalize the descent of the tanning bed lids and the space bulbs that keep nothing hidden. Certainly not wings. Look how they lift up Into the new week like sun spots taunting the mothership.

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Elpis

Solely a human craving, naming that which spins beyond the earth jar. But to call a dark carbon Elpis, or hope, misleads the mind— it rings too close to *Help us*, a plea. Is that how we throw our voice into the skies, like rubbed coins into murky water? Is that what we need when reading Keats and when our heads bow down from drink? What do I know? Maybe hope is the right word after all. Maybe the blueshifting of galaxies is pure mood.

**how time passes when you dream By: Jada Reid**

“when two souls are born into proximity, sometimes they are meant to spend more than one lifetime together”

**Marai:**

**i am used to hearing the spirits call me by name.**

when you see things, you learn what's too much for others to know.  
the subtle change in eye wideness– the shift in their stance.

i knew my mama wasn't going to be okay & i don't know if she knows i knew

i felt it in a dream somewhere. it was glowing hot.  
not warm like from the sun after a cold day,  
but the moment the sun starts to burn your skin  
& you forget that every human needs sunscreen,  
despite what your white friends taught you

it was a glowing hot, like the warmth a wound emits  
as a blade cuts skin open, exposing the internal body  
to the outside world– making them one.

when you see things, but have yet to learn how to respond,  
it's like watching a horror film.  
you get no say in how the stories unfold.

i am just the audience, not asked to write any part of the script  
i watch unfold and i hope that this forgetting brain of mine  
will remember enough of what she felt  
to take those meanings into symbols back to this realm

**people are like points, with infinite lines protruding outward,**

connecting, interweaving & there's a string running from my soul to my mothers  
this band like a string of a guitar  
i will let it guide me back to her, across time & space  
and blood, and nothing about this present moment

will keep me from finding her.

what am i looking for; other than the person i come from,  
the person i am, i cannot be in this world without the pushing  
life force. resistance is just as core to my body as this dna we share.

**my father's mom,**

**or my grandma,** as I can tell they all want me to say;  
tells me i use the word "sometimes" too much  
she says it's a filler word and i can tell she's trying  
to get to know me and all i give her are maybes,  
possibilities of who i am and how never felt like an answer but a series of questions  
to ponder.

*you ever get your hair braided?*  
sometimes. [when I was seven, & my mom still had friends]  
pulling words from someone that doesn't want to talk?  
lani always looks like she wants me to answer in more detail. she doesn't know  
i see her lean in. her ears perk up. but I keep her in the dark.  
i would never allow them to miss someone they will never  
know. 'sometimes' is honest. is opaque  
is, leaves me lingering, thinking about how to make death, a 'sometimes.'

**Lani:**

**i'm walking home from my bus stop when i remember**

Maria moves in today. from *my room* to *our room*  
from *my bed* with a fortress underneath, to *her bed too*.

I don't know much about her mom  
because Grandma doesn't talk about family  
not mine, or hers, or Maria's

i suppose it's my fault i was so attached to having my own room  
grandma told me not to get too comfortable with all that space.  
told me my bunk bed wasn't *my bunk bed*, but my daddy's &  
my uncles. she told me how they used to jump off the top with their blanket  
parachutes leaving purple-red bruises on their knee caps,  
the waiting space to get a kiss from their momma  
the exhilaration of the jump, echoing into a slow patter of the heartbeat

an everlasting sting, where she tells them to stop having so much fun.

Grandma doesn't ever talk about family but one time  
I found a floral box tucked in closet between the bathroom and her bedroom,  
i found mine and Maria's birth certificate and our umbilical chords.  
i shut the box after unwrapping the tissue  
before i really saw what else was in there—

i have so many questions i could suffocate in them.  
the smell in that box was enough for me to not open it again

but Maria is her own box. and she's in my room,  
our room and the questions, how they clog my throat up

why did grandma and Papa split?  
what has Maria been doing all these years?  
how dark did Papa have to be for daddy to look nothing like him?

**maria has curls that kink beyond the possibilities of my own**

which she must've gotten from her mother.

she has her momma's hair, and i have daddy's.  
but she has daddy's eyes.

my eyes are something like dimly lit stars,  
and hers, hers have the whole galaxy

and to remind myself we're sisters, i try to think of us  
as neighboring beings

like two leaves from the same tree, blown  
in opposite directions, only to be crushed  
smashed into dust of such different  
earthly components,

you forget we came from the same tree.

grandma tells me that when mom found out she was pregnant

she started spending more time with her. daddy was homeless  
& my mom seemed to take his place. my grandma felt like she lost  
her son, but gained a daughter

so when she tells me his other daughter is coming to live with us,  
all of the questions of our lineage and hers, resurface like  
something undigested. the acidity rises from my grandma's coffee

the coffee & the grapes with peanut butter mix in my belly-  
the same snack my mom used to crave  
when i was pulsing inside of a body i'd never feel

how is it that your first home can be inside of a person  
you will never call home again?

**“how come you & your sister don't know each other”**

before i started finding answers to my own questions,  
I thought questions were not meant for answers.

you scream to the void & there's an echo  
not a voice responding back to you.

so when Mya got all nosy at the lunch table  
asking me about Maria- I wanted her to stop.

I didn't have any of the answers, just the echoes &  
if it's my life being wondered about / and even *I*  
am still wandering

“you know Lani, i don't think your sister goes by maria”

sisters are supposed to grow up alongside one another  
to intertwine & vine up against the same brick wall  
and yet when people in the grocery store look at us weird

“what do you mean?”

it's like they know we were uprooted before we could signal

to each other. something like: I know you.  
something like: I am you.

but you can't tell a stranger that with a look —  
even though it isn't necessarily a question when we're looked at

it is more of an answer, the frowned brow,  
the squinting eyes, the glance between her face  
and yours

a glance of questions, and perhaps  
judgment—why does your family look like a collage of features  
no thread, no connected lines

“She’s telling everyone her name is Marai.”

**grandma and i awake early on saturdays**  
in this way, it was always just us; our rhythm,  
a dance. she cooks, i clean &  
the record player comes to a soft halt.  
waits for me to turn it over

the scent of her laundry detergent finds itself drifting  
underneath our noses somehow,  
the silence is louder here

Nina Simone’s voice a prayer  
reminding me, this is what we’ve always been—

until my grandma’s voice breaks through  
“Lani, show Maria how to switch the records?”

my eyes stick to Maria’s  
and before she looks away, I see her flinch  
at the sound of her name

my sister leans in towards the records, as if to get a closer look;  
an alien witnessing earth for the first time

**Poet:** Jada Reid (they/she), Group #1  
**Assigned Faculty:** Andrea Scarpino

& i can smell my grandma's lotion on her face long enough to realize:  
we don't look alike, at all. & i wonder if our sisterhood could be  
traced without a DNA. her face close enough to mine i can't help but look  
for sharedness, a trace of him somewhere. & finally—

i find him in the crook of her jaw bone.

Synopsis:

*how the time passes when you're dreaming*, is my in progress young adult novel written in verse where we follow the alternating perspectives of Marai and Lani, two estranged half sisters whose dream worlds of the dead and the living become more apparent and more difficult to keep untethered. As Marai secretly fights to keep her mother from fully dying and crossing over from "the middle place," Marai and Lani's pasts, presents and futures are revealed as deeply entangled energetically and karmically, even though they have only met once. When her black mother gets into a car accident, Marai is forced by the state to move in with her closest living relatives, her mixed grandmother & her half sister, Lani.

The above excerpt is one section (incomplete) with multiple poems, each that start with a bolded line as a title. I am still in the process of developing this story so some of the details may seem unconsidered...



**Sugar Apples from Five Sisters' Miami Farm**

*August 2024*

This morning, twenty-six of them arrived in pristine condition  
each cradled in white-foam net, like gifts from thoughtful weaver birds.

These are not the seedless luxuries of the West.  
One cannot hurry or chew without patience.  
One must know the readiness of the fruit.  
One must twist and pull, holding the heart-shaped fruit in both hands.  
feeling for softness inside the quilted scales, pressing to break open.  
Each segment once placed in the mouth  
the tongue feeling for the hard seed  
and the teeth biting to separate the pulp--  
an orchestra of tongue and teeth  
working together in slow methodical harmony.

Because I wanted to put the sweet bits of childhood back into my mouth  
and deftly spit out the hardened black seeds  
as the custard-like flesh melts  
                    down my throat  
I endured.

This was how the clock was re-winded—  
                    those boiling barefoot summer days  
                    those rain-soaked laundry on the clothesline days  
                    those singing frogs on the front porch days  
sugar apples ripening in my mother's kitchen days

How satisfying to return to my origin  
where every reward is the hard-earned fruit  
                    sprouted from the roots of belonging.

**Count to ten and open your eyes—**

The cousins were hiding behind jasmine bushes / mango trees / bamboo grove / yellow Volkswagen / green hedges between yards / Which scene is unseen / The smallest girl ran after the older girls / Tiny legs/ round belly / high-pitched squeals / There she fell before she could complete the circle / No / she was found safe/asleep / Behind the sedge / she curled into a hedgehog / drifted before dusk /

You carry the ring—

my cousin said / I knew he only chose me because my sister had mumps / Her cheeks were inflamed / engorged / monsoon-furious/ Hence / my white dress with lace trimming / Hence / I walked down the street carrying this plastic ring / Once upon a time / is such a cliché / Rangoon sun was relentless / Which is another cliché / A dog snuck behind my legs and took a nip at my calf /

What wedding contained a feral dog?

The house had a red tiled roof and metal bars on doors / Snakes crept in when we weren't looking / Formed ropes behind the toilet / This was where I learned to check behind / each / door / chair/ commode / bed / tree / shrub / mailbox / neighbors/ walls / telephones / eyes / the dog's food bowl / The house-geckos squeezed translucent eggs out of their glass bellies and left them in between the screen-door as their / condolences /

This is your birthstone—

said the bald rosy-cheeked astrologer / Or was he a numerologist / a palm reader / a psychic? I couldn't keep track / The human-gods we worshipped filed in one after another / Dingy dusty / draggled / dismal / doomed conditioned / His yellow cotton candy teeth /

No one went out after 6 pm—

"The National Convention must succeed" / "Let's defend for posterity of Our Nation's sovereignty" / Gossip becomes gospel with enough repetition / Saw my reflection in the mirror / I was six / The ring slipped off despite my mother/ winding tiny threads around it /

You'll grow into it. Be patient.

Clouds are cliché too / Say / the sky was paper / Water square / Salamander is air / Then maybe you could get away with so many things / For weddings my mother wore purple orchids in her hair / nothing for funerals / Hated hibiscus / bold shameless showy floral sluts / In the purse / she found two white pills and swallowed without water /

Hide the skin—

do not wear it openly in the next life. Skin like garnet, resinous, semi-precious. Decades after World War II ended, my mother eats rice with her fingers when there is no guest in the house. Some things begin out of necessity. Some things continue out of identity. In 1991, I stepped out of the Chicago O'Hare airport. Saw heaps of snow for the first time. There are worlds made of ice. Now I am in one. If you stare into the depth of the garnet stone long enough, you could see a universe forming or dissolving. See how this ring fits my finger now. Promising / hopeful / formed / circular / vitreous / metamorphic /

## Yangon

Beggars shuffle under the dome of St. Augustine Church

with open palms, stumps for legs, skin creased by sun and fire.

Name the misfortune, and see it display here.

Humidity rises to the top of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

Sweat swims down from brows to hungry navels despite months of rain.

Between the halting traffic and tar-rich fumes,

the taxi driver recalls the name of the old cemetery

relocated elsewhere now to make room for progress.

Name the shop selling unlimited number of eggs today.

Name your prayers winding around the queues

at gas stations & automatic teller machines.

Name the smoke from the crematorium

inking the sky.

Name the ashes on long black hair and hunched bold shoulders.

Name this spectacle so no one will forget.

Who else has lost the names?

Surely, not the monsoon clouds

swelling gray long past midnight?

Surely, not you, Yangon, slow-boiling inside

these bamboo scaffolds and steel beams.

Not you, my dears, who would once again throw

cold water on old sins come this April.

Not you too.

**Muse, Burma**

Here, no artist lounges by the old Gun Bridge  
dangling his feet above the swirl of Shweli river. No one  
contemplates the significance of the town's name when  
written in English. The border guards lazily chew the crushed  
areca nuts wrapped in betel leaves, and spit out the red juice  
without glancing at the passing lorries.

Crates roll in from the heart of Yunnan province  
aim for the churning gut of Mandalay. Guns come in,  
heroin goes out. Cheap motorcycles in: young village girls out.  
*Yaba* comes in, *Yaba* goes out. Hands grip the steering wheel  
hands flash the "betel nut money" to the guards with stained teeth.  
All day, the ground collects red splats, a canvas for Jackson Pollock.

## Burmese Way to Socialism

1989

The electricity is shut off again  
not because we forgot to pay the bill  
but because we pay too regularly.  
The utility man knows the household  
that pays the bills can pay the bribes.  
The sun comes and we take dirty clothes  
outside except for underwear and cloth pads.  
My mother stands under the coconut tree with  
a tub full of water scrubbing  
our school uniforms with a carbolic soap.  
The soap turns the water gray  
The soap turns the collars white  
The soap eats her fingers red.  
From the wooden stool my father  
reads the Newsweek magazine the diplomats have left.  
Someone got killed when he tried to cross the Berlin wall.  
Princess Di wore a satin gown  
and took New York City by storm.  
She held babies with AIDS which was the thing  
that's supposed to kill by touch. A storm gathers in the sky  
and my mother runs to the clothesline.  
She fans her face with the state-run newspaper:  
*Crush All Enemies Within*  
Her body a warm kettle  
thickened by Burmese Sun  
My father says he can eat rice with nothing but salt  
because the war has taught him  
how to make a meal out of anything  
What war? My brother wants to know  
Are we at war now? My little sister wants to know  
Don't wars have two sides that carry guns?  
My grandma wants to know.  
My mother pounds chili and garlic with stone pestle.  
My father says he can make a feast with a bowl  
of rice and a ripe banana.  
He says even chalk will taste good if you have a little salt.

## Everything is

*August 1988*

Everything is politics, she says.  
Like breathing and reading, cooking and dancing,  
praying and singing out loud in the streets.

Everything is politics, I repeat.  
Like passing out flyers at the bus stations,  
reading a newspaper printed from an old press  
concealed in the garage of an eighty-year-old patriot.  
Like turning on the light switch and end up sitting in the dark  
hearing your mother mutter, "It's ration time again."

Everything is politics, the dog howls at 8 pm  
to the only evening news in the country,  
read by a state employee, stern-faced and unashamed.

*Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy!*

Grandma walks by the television, ignites the wood stove,  
and unscrews the plastic jug where the orange recycled cooking oil  
sloshes back and forth. She decants a trickle in the pan, swirls it  
like a crop circle, and squints at the moon and says, "Everything is politics."

My father breathes through his nose, and coughs up the air  
trapped in his lungs, listens to the walls echoing the roar of  
the megaphone blaring from the passing trucks.

*We have orders to shoot on sight, if you are found outside between six and six!*

Sitting cross-leg on the bamboo mat, we slap our arms, legs and air,  
in search of the bugs hovering above our flesh, mumble quietly to each other  
that everything is politics.

## Spring Revolution

*February 2021*

The red sun of early spring leaves us in a rush  
as if called by signals only it could hear.  
Another disappearance under our eyes.  
Years ago, my father went to bed and disappeared  
next to the photograph of my mother on the nightstand.  
She wore a yellow sarong at the edge of the ocean  
her lips curved Revlon red.  
This was years before we learned to deliver our practiced lines  
on the phone: "Be Strong. Try not to be so sad."

My mother sits on the bamboo mat  
squinting at the smartphone displaying  
bits of interrupted manuals.  
How to collect memories from head wounds?  
How to water down the news before breakfast?  
How to pray hard between bursts of silent cursing?  
How to sleep with the bangs loud enough to shake the fence?

My father's shadow stands by the open window  
blocking the view of the city in flames.  
All night, time totters through the house  
like a clumsy child barefoot but loud.

## Inventory of A Coup

March 2021

Flowers are banned in Myanmar.  
So are unapproved salutes  
and imports of soaps & shampoos  
toothpaste, toothbrushes, coffee, soda & juices.  
Social media is banned.  
So are writing & Walkie Talkies.  
Condensed milk is banned.  
So are thinking & rethinking,  
staying home, going out, speaking,  
speaking up, speaking out, speaking aloud.  
Poems are banned. So are the poets, the journalists, medics,  
humanitarians, social influencers, peacocks & peace talks  
leaflets & newspapers,  
open access to logic & justice, democracy & decency.  
Slingshots are banned.  
So is freedom of speech,  
of peaceful assembly, of press, of expression, of the country, of people.  
The will of people is banned.  
So are the songs of change, of the wind, of ancient revolutions.  
The words "junta" and "coup" are banned.  
So are the colors red & black, the letter Z, the number 8, or  
whatever else unsettles the mad small-statured dictator  
of violence and normalized deaths.  
Death by headshots, chest wounds, broken skulls and crushed minds.  
Death by shooting, bombing, slicing, stabbing,  
cutting, boiling, burning, stomping and falling  
or by whatever means that temporarily abates  
the hunger of a rabid army.  
Courage is banned in Myanmar blossoming between  
the shelled villages and the wet mountain-orchids.  
It floats with the pollens of central dry land,  
flows through every rivulet of the Irrawaddy Delta  
  
silently breathing.



**The Fatality List**

2021

The six-year-old stopped by a bullet  
had wanted to know the missing part of the story  
her mother had been telling.

The ten-year-old at the edge of her garden  
was craning her neck for a slice of young coconut  
her father had carved out of the shell  
moments before she fell.

The boy who whispered I can't hold on any longer,  
the man on a motorbike unlucky enough to pass by the military truck,  
the poet on the Martyr's Lane before the sun flushed red,  
the teenager in a black T-shirt leaning forward to  
a number sketched on wet pavement---

Who would pore over their names  
the way my mother pours water  
over her jasmines drooping under Yangon heat?  
Every day  
every day the list grows heavy  
with the burden of carrying more names  
even as the shouts of Doh-A-Yay, "Our Cause, Our Freedom"  
floods into the tyrant's ears, with the force Of Cyclone Nargis.

The absence of conscience is equal  
to the presence of bodies  
broken on the streets,  
their unmade bones, disassembled muscles, blown bits of dreams.

The absence of his conscience is a cup filled  
with a child's spilled blood.

## Departure Lounge

2023

Waiting for the last flight in Yangon  
I flip through a book titled *The Return of the Old Ways*.  
Beyond the security gate, my mother waves—  
She toddles, cane in hand, her face hidden behind a mask.  
The line is short here, but the wait is long.  
I clutch my blue U.S. passport, my small escape route,  
its page screams, “Do not touch my body.”

The airport groans, sagging under the weight of Burmese history.  
Outside, sweat drips from the wet brown bodies.  
Inside these man-made arctics birth new beginnings.  
“Where are you traveling?”  
A soldier laces his boots, leaning against the immigration desk.  
I creep along the queue putting on my best Burmese meekness.  
What’s the key to unlock his smile?  
I was born inside these walls that spied on infants.  
I’ve committed no letters on T-shirts.  
I’ve burned outlawed journals in the rusted trashcans.  
I’ve seen the flames snuffed out by the Burmese wind.  
The words formed in my mind never landed on my tongue.  
I’ve neither supported the Civil Disobedience Movement  
nor worn flowers in my hair calling for justice.

May I proceed please?

Now I’m walking to the gate— hand in hand with blistering shame.  
Now I’m muting the angry voices bubbling within.  
How to say courage in eight languages  
without a daring tongue?  
I hug the book’s happy ending  
and step into the plane.

Mirror Neurons

The kittens  
follow the sun,

one  
and then  
the other.

The light  
cuts across  
Ozzy's face;

the gentle curve  
of white fur  
on his stomach  
glows.

Violet wheezes,

her tiny pink  
upside-down  
triangle nose  
burrowed  
in the haunch  
of his hind leg.

Orange fur  
curls around  
grey curls  
around orange

like Yin  
and Yang.

Ozzy seems to  
smile  
in his sleep,

nothing but  
steady breath

**Poet:** Emily Danker-Feldman (She/Her), Group #1  
**Assigned Faculty:** Andrea Scarpino

and  
easy limbs.

Modernity

*Happy Birthday from  
Bommarito Mazda Chevrolet  
South County  
where I bought my car  
in 2020*

*Happy Birthday from  
WEPOWER family!  
a nonprofit I donated to  
once*

*Happy Birthday, Emily!  
from my alma mater  
which has never received  
a donation from me*

*Happy Birthday EMILY  
from Francis J  
Kubik DDS PC  
my dentist  
—Keep smiling!*

*Happy Birthday to YOU!  
from Dr. Charlotte Meier  
the chiropractor I haven't seen  
since 2016  
I am so grateful to have the honor  
of working with you on your continued  
health journey as you travel  
another year around the sun!*

*Happy Birthday from  
Steve's Hot Dogs!  
Get a FREE DOG on us!  
Reply STOP to unsubscribe*

## You Are Renaming the Birds

You are renaming the birds.

All those with English names: bye, bye, bird—  
to avoid bias and subjectivity, an impossible feat,  
sort of like human flight, and to remove a feather of  
misogyny and racism from the wild. It may not  
surprise you, most birds deemed racist live in Florida.

A dove that refers to an old civilization in South America.  
A curlew named after an ethnic group from arctic places.  
All hummingbirds native to this continent have a fresh start.  
While you extrapolate intentions and define everyone  
by the worst thing they could have or might have done,

I will remember the words you transplant.

I ignore the recent John Oliver episode on a bird, and  
when someone uses “Birdsong,” in a sentence, I do  
not provide examples of humans bursting into rhythm  
for territorial purposes. A friend gives me advice. The  
new phrase is, “To feed two birds with one scone.”

Pecking order implies some people have more power  
than others—I yearn to flap about how some do. Another  
way of saying, “81% of people are excited about this change,”  
is to say, “Out of the readers who like surveys, about 17  
of them thought this was the right kind of vibe.”

But it is important to say the truth out loud.

The names do not change how I feel watching  
a new flight, wing take air, air dip below, above,  
wing overhead, the wind, silence carries, the wing  
flies itself and takes the rest with it. I breathe a  
snapping breeze into my cage. And the bird rides.

But the change does make the world more alien  
to those struggling with the coldness leaking in,  
who miss when they watched mallards with their  
dad, before he was gone, they moved, or someone  
got sick—before there was a new right side of the river.

I would say, do what you will, but you already have.

When my son finds feathers on our window,  
he says, “Goodbye, black and brown bird,” in a  
moment like one where the child cares that the  
bird was there, cares that some of it is still there,  
does not know its future, but does know that

birds are beautiful, are nice things outdoors,  
knows that saying goodbye to a thing can make it  
better, knows that being good makes him feel warm.  
And who knows? Maybe its feathers hear what the  
universe is putting out there about clean windows.

Sometimes I hear it above the trees.

You do not have to teach a person to like animals  
or to run in a pile of leaves or to swing higher.  
People, when given the chance, are kind. There  
are exceptions, but we live in the branches of the  
average, can be happy there, have been before.

It’s not just about happiness, though. I know.

My husband tells me about death. The theories of  
the universe and his stress about the afterlife are  
placed together, not mingling but caged with separate  
description plaques and diets, in the same habitat  
of the brain. I decided then to be the messenger bird.

The newest theory is this:  
Your conscious is not a breeding male Smith’s longspur

with a bush of golden feathers bursting from the chest—  
producing something unique from the space around it  
with a head that works erect in black and white.

Your conscious is unremarkable, so they say:  
something to put on the hook in the garage. It reads  
the universe, deciphers what is already carried from  
a place over there to a place over here—and millions of  
years, and ozone, and minerals, and X's, and Y's, etc. etc.

It is just—the thing—that sees the Scott's Oriole from  
Baja, California, a sleek body of the Icterid family,  
sharp, yellow, black, bold, sparrow-like lighting up  
desert to lit from yucca plants, to carry those waves  
through that tool in your head, so that you may feel

it—the steam of the boiling river rising, upward, then  
falling, shot from the cloud, hit by the branch, tumult  
chaos carries, things reach overhead, and claws find feathers.  
The conscious is a part of the earthtones, it takes air, dyes  
in the accumulation of red, yellow, green and white. It hums.

To keep from all those names filling up the world with  
independent subjectivity, we must do the impossible, create  
a goodbye with a rhythm that soothes, lay in a permanent  
nest, and hope that when the tool is broken down, it is  
made into something considerate of its primitive past.



### Pandas in the Holy of Holies

When I feed the giant pandas, I wash my feet. I wear a uniform, white, pressed and non-scented. I provide information on their diet, meticulous in daily, sharp-knife rituals by close-lipped servants.

One of the strongest carnivores is the tiniest little bean when born, a soft, pink naked mole rat—puny, ugly, hairless, blind—hopeless, soundless, undermined. They grow into sacred things that wear grief as decoration.

The people already know that, they journey to this | Zoo to pay respects, enter sterile space, to see if they can recreate what they encountered in Chengdu. I delegate diluted bleach, recite verses, all eyes on me.

Giant pandas cannot digest bamboo. I start with an easy one. They have pseudo-thumbs; lies are the backbone of their success. They often have twins, choose which one to let die: strength is rewarded.

Giant pandas mate easily in the wild: people corrupt what is natural. “You sure?” says a dad. I blink once. They do not fast but poop 40 times a day. “Woah,” says a boy. Indeed.

The giant pandas are Lun Lun and Yang Yang. She is the mother of seven cubs. He is the twin of Winnie the Pooh. The guests pass red, crumbly biscuits, prostrate on the floor, and someone

keeps fingers from bars, explains arcs of claws. Here comes the reverence. Show me how you know a panda, how you probe them, teach me a little pain is not bad, will help draw future blood.

The Holy of Holies is chilled by an open freezer, bamboo donated to keep visiting residents alive: All giant pandas are owned by a government that bans freedom, Facebook, and the number 64.

I keep that fact and another sacred thing out of reach: The fate that lies at the foundation—a concealed rope—tied around the paws of each bear, measured daily by the omniscient keepers.

Giant pandas are held captive by forces unseen, black and white fur too coveted to release, too sacred to let roam. Each cub is given one rope for life and the promise that one day, it will be pulled.

## The Economy of a Cloud

Direct clouds  
Decisive clouds  
Demanding clouds

I once caught a cloud, pink  
sweet, nothing more  
and stuck to my grandfather at  
a waterpark on a bland blue day.

But now, there is a white roof above, sitting  
atop like a juror misplaced. I have become familiar  
with clouds that come from cigarettes bought at  
a chipped building down the street

and questioning clouds, the big and bold background,  
clouds in my coffee, poured over half and half with no one else around

Every night, I think my bed is a cloud, I lay and it lifts, and when  
I rise a little mist slips into my ear, floats through  
until my head is above it all but the body is still tied to this sphere

Now, there are absolutely bashful clouds always  
concerned with what's going on down here

But back then, when my cotton cloud was almost gone, my grandfather  
sat across from me at a speckled table, his shirt accumulating spray drops from the pool.  
Water slides slipped through a daze in the sun, and shimmers popped in my eye, blocking  
rays like gathering weather might hide in shadow part of a stage.

He bought me a treat, told me our time together was a gift—I nodded.  
He gathered his thoughts about the economy of this sweet moment—I listened.  
And now as I tell you this, I miss him, and him using my cotton candy stick  
to orchestrate how to lasso freedom, paint it sweet pink, and sell it to a passerby.

He asked me what I thought of something. In a floral swimming suit with  
yellow floaties on each arm, I yearned, deeply sighed and, trying very hard,  
wondered aloud if it would rain while looking at something of a dry bed above us.

## Death of Happy Balloon

The smile closes in on  
itself when he pops his balloon,  
watches a yellow smile fold like  
a crashing paper airplane.

The father picks up shreds of latex,  
the mother picks up the child,  
the boy releases his whole self  
finds his outdoor voice and uses it.

As a tire pump and reel of tape  
and breaths from deep inside the ribcage  
help the smile inflate again,  
the boy simply gives everything he has

to the sky, to anyone who would witness,  
releasing something into nothing to  
close what was opened  
when he hurt Happy Balloon.

## This is so easy

She knows what a nightingale looks like, sounds like  
in a deciduous hazel tree, watches them behind deep  
green binoculars in cargo shorts with no one else, part  
of the evening, like a lion in the bush, one of the birds.

She is a night owl smoking behind the bar, adding a  
liquor without labels, hands flying in muscle memory  
of boundless sunsets observing tequila sunrises, little  
brown drinks, and breezes caught by woven blankets.

She is 118 pounds, pecks at organic berries in plain  
Greek yogurt, only out of necessity, after three in  
the afternoon. Doesn't even want more. Eats lavishly  
of classical novels, intricate acoustics, and 27 inches.

Perfect alignment, a sharp jugular notch rising with  
waves, an equal to the sun, over a surfboard, always  
upwards, steadied by teak wood, the crest, the spray  
ascending to cloudless sky, birds of paradise, peace.

She eats almost nothing, walks holding bananas,  
coffee, persimmon and strapless dresses. She fills  
rooms as winter or summer-boiling tea cups, hot air  
-socks, candles, corners, or kites and kaleidoscopes.

She acts on a whim,

knows who she is and has been, the "always will be"  
-is her best-in the morning, perched above the sand,  
in the evening on the scene, and in-between small space,  
nesting, smiling to herself over make-believe plans.

She loves everyone and flies freely, a dozen novels  
polished off, an award, honeysuckle complexion. She  
spells and pronounces written words correctly, like it was  
easy, like the letters were immovable black and white.

She is funny, but soft-gentle, golden, empathic with ease, nice in a way that sidesteps social cues and insecurities—there in a way that breeds trust and truth, a candy-filled piece of advice on the middle shelf of youth,

She is kind.

She wins at darts, has a fat, black pig named Mystery owns unreal estate on the bay, has a husband, five kids, best friends, is needed, wants for nothing, prepares fish with a thermometer, uses on-brand candles, cucumbers on eyelids.

She runs on the empty street before dawn, runs right into her future, and when she does, she buys her coffee, talks so freely, hair becomes curtains, curtains curtailed by long fingers, and fingers heed the call to keep moving.

The sun rises, the stage is the brightest it can be, when purity drifts in through show lights, and such strong rays peak over Earth, she pays the barista and says to herself,

This is so easy.

## Queso and Chocolates

“What did you just say to me,” he says to me  
as I say we are all six degrees separated from  
someone who doesn’t have a pair of shoes—or even less if you  
count who you interact with online. This is in  
the local Mexican restaurant, the one with the best white queso,

He keeps talking, kind of skips over the interruption,  
and what he says about his struggles is misaligned with  
his background and education. So I dip out, into a memory  
of Christmas in China, alone, walking home with a box of  
chocolates given at school, under my arm.

In this mental space, I relive a boy rolling out from cardboard  
walls where his mother or some older woman stays hidden.  
My bathroom tiles are warmer than his bed, and I know  
he will never scrub off the dirt floors. They sink in, sprout  
defensively against hot water and paychecks.

I want to place the candy near his opening, which  
is near my gate, which is near the elevator to a  
skyrise, top floor on the lake. I want to tell him  
caramel insides cure more than hunger, they enshrine  
individual accountability, grow inside like a child  
to burst forth, pushing him out of this event horizon.

They at least stick, with or without braces.

That is when someone order more queso over thoughts of  
short sticks and while everyone nods, I nod, I choke, I stop  
him, almost, nearly correct his mistake because the boy in  
my head is on the floor, watching.

And girls who reject acceptance letters to help  
their families, and dads who work seven days a week,  
and moms who live in shadows, the backbreakers  
are sitting on the offensively bright booth across from us,

**Poet:** Kirby Ewald (She/Her), Group #1  
**Assigned Faculty:** James Kimbrell

their backs against the hard wood backing that shows a man farming corn in the sun

They are beside me, in disgust, cringe at us,  
horrified—chocolates, more than we ever needed,  
pouring out of our pockets and falling on the floor.  
They might believe him, but I doubt it, and I feel  
sick to my stomach, and I can't stand to watch.

## Cigarettes at Night

Smoking out the window, the midnight passes, clouds above made by the concrete city sit atop like jurors misplaced, and I stand outside for once, watching them.

Three cigarettes, actually just one passed between individuals all about the same look and place, are here too in a small parked car, too far from me to smell, but I can fill in the details.

It's not a place to be in the dark, but we have all been there: a cracked parking lot, a friendly call in the evening from a person you don't talk to often but wish you did. You say yes to the request.

You say, sure, I can wait outside, I will be there as they dig up an issue with vague audacities. Of course it is night, this someone has been one for dramatics, the kind you don't find anymore.

I wait my turn on this wishful acquaintance enjoying a light breeze with a faint smell and questioning clouds and concrete, of course. Always on in moments like this. The reliable cigarette sizzles on.

The scene is ugly, except for those damn misplaced clouds that belong on the plains of a before-now village but instead are right here, on the back of what was always going to be a future Walmart parking lot.

I've heard of a tribe that does not like living in corners, bad luck, I remember this when I clean my baseboards—two opposing forces in yellow and subtle wooden accents meet and do what things do upon seeing the other

The stop. Colliding in a neat right angle, a dusty corner with crumbs. Maybe it is because of the inevitable stop or it could be how hard they are to clean. You never know how close a nail can be to a corner.

Whatever the point, I cannot help but wonder if there were no corners in my life would the world be a happier place filled with overreaching arches and racing curves of the cloud.



**they look so small, lying there**

Castoff jewelry boxes hide in my dresser, filled  
with my daughters' teeth. Yellowed,  
shrunken, rattling with neglect. With each  
new loss, we pluck bloodied contributions  
from under pillows and make midnight deposits  
into these banks of shrinking mortality.

Now and then, when I spot  
black heads dotting my teen's nose, or  
when my youngest rushes past me  
to join friends, I lock the door,  
open the lids, and let their teeth drop,  
year by year, into my waiting hand.

**For Nora**

A possum waddles past me on my nightly walk,  
silver white under streetlights,  
so haphazard in its scuttling I am startled still.

And then suddenly  
I am on another sidewalk, in another neighborhood  
with you, almost two.  
No longer scooting along on your big wheels

mesmerized instead by the too-near possum  
giving birth, tiny pink  
pups sliding out beneath her tail with ease.

One by one they cling to her fur, inching  
their way up to the dark protection of her pouch  
as she climbs her way to safety  
in the rusted gutters of the abandoned brick house.

Your own birth was not so easy.  
No sliding for you, pulled instead  
from my sectioned stomach,  
tangled in the cord that had until then  
given you life.

For months I had dreams you would come out a  
furred animal with needled teeth  
and ready claws,  
even then wishing you the strength and fierceness  
all women need  
to survive.

**Wabi Sabi**

*(for Charlotte)*

The nurse stretches your mouth with plastic hooks  
taking pictures of teeth crooked and bent.

Your eyes open wide sending startled looks

as she recites: “upper arch deficient,”  
and “cross bite”, “crowded”, “insufficient space”...

“But don’t worry,” she smiles, “our resident

dentist will pull, expand, and then erase  
any flaws that you have”; she dismisses  
us. We wait. I peer at your downcast face

and add this hope to my long list of wishes,  
that he might leave one tooth, crooked and brave.

Like your raucous laugh, your sloppy kisses,

your singing off key, know this to be true.

There’s beauty, my child, in your imperfections, too.

Your singing off key, know this without question

There’s beauty in your imperfection

**Wednesday Afternoon, April 4<sup>th</sup>**

I'm leading my children  
around the backyard, searching  
for the best place to bury  
the cat.

A man on the garage roof  
pauses, gutter in hand, watching as

we pick a spot near the back,  
shaded by a large overhanging shrub,  
under the ivy that has overtaken  
all else.

Through the open back door,  
Sherman wanders outside, listing, unsure,  
a long line of stringy spit hanging from his mouth.  
Cancer won't let him swallow.  
He blinks in the new spring sun.

In a few days, I will carry his  
heavy, still body  
to the hole my husband  
now digs,  
careful to support his limp head  
the way I somehow knew  
as if by instinct  
to carry my newborns home.

## Mother's Day

*Can I see what it looks like?* she asks  
so I pull up my shirt and lower my pants  
just below the pink edged scar.  
Her finger skims lightly the numb jagged border  
through which my children first saw light.

Her own unborn son is curled up, bottom first,  
a breach of contract,  
the fourth and final child.  
Or rather, her fifth,  
if you count Grace, who was never born  
at least, not alive.

At the time, our mother asked,  
*Why didn't she have a C-section?*  
*I would.*  
*I would want to be knocked out, cold.*

But my sister was awake when she gave birth to Grace,  
or rather, when she gave death.  
She knew then,  
as so many of us know,  
no matter how our babies leave the womb,  
there is always a scar.

### walking down the sidewalk in Taejon, South Korea

He wasn't wearing a dark overcoat or stalking me in a rusty station wagon so maybe that's why I didn't realize what he was doing until he wobbled on his creaking bike closer to me. He wobbled because only one hand steered, the other pumping his half-erect penis. Grey hairs poked from the open fly of his dirty pants and his face was unevenly shaven, his lips mumbled, leered. He careened toward me, thumping ever closer. My feeble attempts at running didn't stop him, and my horrified whimpers of *No* didn't stop him, until I remembered where I was and yelled in borrowed words *Ani, Ajashee!* Was it the Korean command - *ani*, "no" - coming from my American mouth? Was it the endearment *ajashie*, "uncle"? Startled, he turned and pedaled away, zipping as he left, then waved with defiled hand goodbye, as if leaving a conversation, or a friend.

**Grace in territory held largely by the devil**

Cradled in my arms, she weighed nothing, this child of yours. Your first. She'd been dead for days, weeks perhaps, entombed in your womb. Her tiny neck bulged with deformity, the visible trace of slightest chromosome shift, her shrunken mouth puckered open.

Others surrounded you, pale with despair, to sooth, to comfort, to dispel the presence that haunts you still.

My feet began swaying with maternal rhythm. My breast tightened, heavy with milk. Murmurs, sobs filled the room. You trembled in bed. I held your daughter, and rocked.

## Ma Ma

She cried after giving birth to her tenth child, not from relief (as I would) but from grief. She was told, at 46, he would be her last. This same woman terrified her young children, belted one of her sons so long and hard he sat on pillows for days. Even the plastic-covered sofa pained him.

My sisters and I were left with her only once, when our mother gave birth to her fourth and final daughter. Ma Ma sent us to bed with staunch warnings instead of kisses, so when blood began trickling down Annie's nose – which often did, when she was anxious – we were conflicted. Surely this qualified as an emergency? As blood filled cupped hand, we three crept downstairs, under the watchful, disappointed gaze of The Sacred Heart of Jesus. Stairs creaked. We froze. We heard, then witnessed Ma Ma erupting from her room, hair angry, lips cursing. She disappeared into darkness outside, then loomed back, one hand raised high, holding long, thin branch. We realized, in one breath, it was meant for us.

She must have been confused when she came closer and saw blood already staining Annie's pink gown. Admonished, she shrank back to human size, sopped up bloody mess, sent us back upstairs. That night, as our mother had well into her teens, Annie wet the bed.

Three days later, we waited, faces scrubbed, hair tightly bound, for our little sister's arrival. Mama waited with us, impassive, unmoved, until our station wagon pulled up to the curb, and my mother stepped out holding a light blue bundle. I watched with anxiety, fear even, when Susie was placed in Ma Ma's arms. Would she break her? Throw her down? Punish her for her cries?

Instead, my grandmother's body melded around Susie's tiny frame. The hard lines of her shoulders softened, her eyes quelled.

She chuckled, then, from somewhere deep. A place still and forgotten.



Pa Pa

Deep lines crisscrossed the back of his neck, in perfect rhombus pattern, under fedora's rim. I traced them in my mind whenever I sat behind him in their station wagon. He smelled of rich pipe tobacco and newspaper ink, his fingertips stained dark from mornings throwing rolled copies of St. Louis Post-Dispatch. His tallness was made taller by thinness, and his joints and limbs resembled the taught, strained wings of fried chicken we'd eat every Sunday we visited.

At 12, he left school, tilling farmland above his father's grave. He married, young, to a woman who would lose her mind. When she chased her demons through their home, knife wielded, he wept to see her gurney strapped. He wept when she returned temples singed, eyes glazed.

He raised ten children and paid for college, each one. He was the man in the hospital bed, delirious after heart surgery, holding my hand, tightly, when the orderlies took his blood.

When he aged and began losing his memories, he shrank, smaller, frailer. His kindness, his patience condensed and distilled into a most pleasant elixir.

It is one we all drink, even now, to forget cruel memories, life's hardness, what we all regret doing to survive.

## Holy Eucharist

Charlotte thinks it a castle when we pull up - spire towering, turrets looming, door elaborate and thick. She shrinks, pulling my hand, inside. "Who is that?" she whispers, nodding to his body, bloodied on the cross. "It's Jesus." I reply. "Their God."

"They did that to their *God*?!"

We hurry to find empty spaces in crowded pews. Young girls, ruffled, white shrouded and rose crowned, step like brides up the central aisle, boys tuxed, hands steeped.

When the priest blesses wine, "Take this, all of you, and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, the new and everlasting covenant," Nora whispers, pointing to children her age, "They're going to drink blood?" "Well," I consider, "It's wine, but they believe it's turned into Jesus's blood."

"They're going to drink *wine*?!"

At the party, afterwards, my daughters gape at money and gifts their cousin Ben collects, surrounded by well-wishers, crucifixes, prayers. "What do you think?" I ask. "Should we start going to Church?"

My two girls, solemn as innocent sinners, shake their heads. Slow. Sure.

And wholly unrepentant.

