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Declension Music
Seth Jani

The dreamer wakes up
Near the axis of the dream.
The trees there are blue,
The ground made of fire,
A cold fire, and the other world
Where he sleeps is only
A splinter of memory
Fixated between the moon
And a thin, vitreous cloud.
In this place, the heart proves
To be made of plurals,
Papier-mâché birds who roost
In the shape of a body.
He can feel his awareness
Grow scattered, each twittering thought
Pushing towards the boundaries of the dawn,
Its white fractals.
Whatever names signify
In our austere cognition,
They are only music now.
Reels of deteriorating polyester
Looping back, again and again
In the dreamer's mind.
This Next Poem
*Sarah Leavens*

is a little
drunk. Thought you might
like to hear the word
*mother.*
This next poem can’t stop
rocking on the tiptoes
of its new vintage cowboy
boots, especially when it says
*cunt.* Thank god
there’s a podium.
It remembers the gnats flocking
to the red meat
of your shin after that seventh
grade bicycle slide.
This next poem dated
my friend Suzy for a while and that
ended badly. We don’t call
Suzy a cunt because we’re trying
to reclaim the word, okay?
Only time the gnats
went away
was when the leg was actually
submerged in the bathtub, and that
was a different kind of burn. This next
poem would like you
to know the carpet does not
match the drapes and fuck
you for asking. It uses
em-dashes with abandon.
It wants
to wear white. It’s about the dead
cat, mother. The circling insects
and that torn space. Just like
always.
I Like Floating on the Assured Buoyancy of Literary Devices

James Blevins

I like it when
the irony is so
thick—

such as when
Ishmael uses
a coffin as a life preserver
at the end of Moby Dick—

that one could caulk
the whole of a boat with it—

all the places
where air might
escape and water
spit—

and still float safely on the
surface of the Pacific Ocean.
Blind Prophet
Chloe Hanson

I once shot a .22
with an uncle, hit
an inked circle with one eye
closed. He called me
a natural.
Each shudder
of the stock wet
my eyes. I cried
at the violence, the crack
of ignition each time
I let a bullet fly.

Sometimes I picture us
as Circe’s messengers, descending
for some noble purpose, afraid.
We recall stories of friends turned
to pillars of sand, heads severed,
set to sea.

I hate when I hear their names
(say them) did I hear
about this one (Terrence Crutcher?)
Was this the one with . . . whatever
happened to Orlando? How long
until they’re swallowed, stuck
in the throat of America?

How many memories can I keep in my mouth
waiting to be spoken?

The first time, a man bound me
to a chair and stripped
clothes, left fear
in his trailing tongue
between my legs. He told me
he could go when he wanted
with the rifle under his bed,
I stayed awake next to him
felt the barrel under me
through the mattress.
Is this the place myths go
to become truth? Do we listen
to the blood-hungry shades, warning
everyone will die.
We search for someone
to explain the world like a parent
explains religion to a child:
without science, heavy on belief,
and soothing.

Try to find information on this year’s
shootings you’ll find databases,
website headers reading thank you
for your interest in our
statistics.
You’ll find numbers and cities,
sterile representations of death
like statues: grey and cold
and speckled with shit.

When I was a child, my father threatened
to step from his car into traffic
fire through the closed windows
of cars who ran red lights.
I’d never seen him hold
a gun, yet I saw it behind
my eyes when I slept,
the blood offering
unheeded, invoked savior
silent. I feared the violence
that could live in me,
powder sans spark.

Tell me, blind prophet,
are you God? Am I?
Can you open me,
pick the buckshot
of memories
from what I’ve forgotten?

Here are bones to build, and blood
to wet dry lips like dead
banks so that your words might flow,
so we might know what else
we can give.
Here is my blood.
Speak to me.
a raccoon’s paw reached toward my hair
as if i were something to be held

as if i was something to be caught
i was in the shower

the falling plaster taking root
in my scalp i thought i might have

lice again
the debris now on the floor

i found a small gray nail and snow
sludge from the attic and soft roof

sharing space with my foot
how i knew to look up

the coal-colored paw and silver arm so minute hungry
and tender maybe

i almost reached up for a hand
shake or a high-five

something to say i forgive you for
chewing through the wires and

rendering the heater cold in below-zero winter
a touch to say i’m sorry i didn’t

check the trap in your attic for a week
where your sister starved to death

grew stiff, something to say i wonder
sorry how many times you tried to pass

food to her through the tiny holes in the screens
there were so many crumbs near her when i found

her, something to say sorry i took her
body, my father asked me to dump it in the backyard

i did, i shook the cage mouth like a clogged lawn mower
i shook her corpse with a splash into the swamping ditch
fallowed girl prints negatives of her hair swallowed girl ½ her birth: her mother hated to see her move through the world as she did girl

my love with your hunger wrap my split skin round your shoulders like cormorant wings and wrap your usual straight into the flesh of my neck. i am not sleeping when the wind hollows my eyes inside out my window rushes in bent creek water: we smoked nearby

and laid into each other’s nausea; your arms cut straight through my womb
Doll Factory I.
Mary Lou Buschi

Tell me about the melting cheeks, unblinking eyes, of violet and coal.

Hundreds of spiked skulls, empty shoulder rims, fat outstretched hands, solid lungs beneath

a sheet of soft plastic the texture of nectarine; knees that don’t bend, heads turning a full circumference.

What about the ones fully formed resting in cellophane nests? Out of the empty casts, out of the metal press,

with the delicate curves of the auricle, dangling uvulas that will never close off the

nasopharynx, resulting in an imaginary death: swallowing oysters turned to pearl.
Tide
Mary Lou Buschi

Watching waves plumb the sand,

image of want.

Watching the woman unravel a mistake,

dropped stich, misstep.

Watching my friend carry

the dead child for a week, told it’s better this way

and then the after, every day from then,

lack.

Some say it was a haunting,

an anxious bird lodged in her throat

or a colony

of red ants coursing

through her veins

up to her mouth:

an air raid siren letting loose,

a hollow bowl of crowing.
Mostly it’s wondering if the deposit has cleared
and will the chicken last another night
while our attenuated dream-selves
perform regularly-scheduled acts of erotic spontaneity
and inhabit the bodies of the one-percent.
The neighbors don’t seem to do much except smoke and occasionally
order pizza at 11 p.m. while up the street,
between the Anabaptists and the aging hardcore bassist/IT guy/dad,
the female bagworm moth dies immediately after the act of mating,
her larvae to burrow into her corpse/cocoon and emerge in spring (the world
in spring: slow-lidded, incredulous, the half-thawed river scabbed
with ice) through which desire, being deciduous, moves
mainly backward, while grief is holographic and moves
forward by two’s. Certain constants remain: water will always
seek its level; the child asks, not unreasonably, How can a fish poop
if it doesn’t have a butt? the storehouse of the body, by turns
gutted and razed, as the rednecky/hot survivalist guy
on the Preppers show shrugs at his stockpile of freeze-dried nutritional paste
like, It’s not tasty, but it’ll keep you alive.
Pretty-Conflict

Jessica Lee

She walks into a café. It's a Sunday-holy day, and she is wholly in the mood for wine. A man plays the slack guitar. Maybe he is fifty. He falters but she doesn't notice. “Sorry,” he says. “I still get distracted when a pretty girl walks in. I may be old, but I’m not dead.” He smiles into the microphone.

She hears him then. Looks up and laughs, then questions whether she should be laughing it off or bowing her head. She wears a fur trimmed coat, sixties vintage. Wonders if Donna Reed had these same questions—to feel flattered like a Californian poppy, or scrutinized like a headless trout on ice behind the glass. But there is no glass here, just your table across from his crossed legs.

What did he mean by I’m not dead? You’re not dead, either. And neither is Donna. She’s there inside your head, saying Smile, Mary. Be polite. But this is the 21st century, darling—you don’t have to do anything you don’t like. But you like your face, and your new coat, and you imagine you look like some kind of Grace.

Kelly, wafting in in the afternoon light. Maybe his compliment isn’t a bad thing. Drink your wine, but avoid eye contact for the rest of the night. You don’t want him to get the wrong idea. Your coat may be long, but you are not naked underneath (as drunken men sometimes ask you). You are still a respectable girl by Donna’s standards. You didn’t say fuck you, after all.
from *Ghost Exhibit*

*Melissa Atkinson Mercer*
I try to tell you again//but again//as soon as it's words//it's wrong//how sad am I really//a girl
crawling in the dirt of my mouth//ripping out the blue-stemmed roses//this is
the metaphor inside the metaphor//the same girl inside a rabbit's lucky foot inside a coffin
in the church between my bones//so I say yes//I say now//right now//chickens in the
flower plots//chickens humming in the hard mud//I say wait//does everything
hum//when I wake & I hum//am I everyone//am I anyone//finally//at last
each harvest the frost came first//to my grandmother’s bones//& possessed her
utterly//she would tie her feet with scarves & wade into the gold-frothed fields//keeping
the brutal faith//which is to say distance//from guilt & god//from the mice-filled orchards
of her soul//her husband so drunk once//he ran through a glass door//as he ran//after
her//which is to say//when she blessed the plagues of snails//when the frost crawled from
her ear like a river’s light//it was too late to act//each time too late//all at once in a
stranger’s earth & we could not move//through it//& no//it was never ours
sweet hurricane of a boy//the foxes will leave if you don’t tell them your name//bring them honey wrapped in white cloth//the news of your mother’s death//how she knelt for years beneath the lion mouth//moon//bees glinting in thick heat//child of nowhere//built like you//like a wasp nest near ground//you were every seat on the bus she took through every last county of the apocalypse//the winged horse that broke from the throat of a woman too broken to live//you were the apple that glimmered her human//the riddle in a sphinx’s mouth//the woman who lost//her voice in the roaming feet of wolves//little storm of a thief//the one tree at the end of the one hot road
the moon hasn’t moved for years now // hasn’t lessened or gone back // the lesson is our brothers // sick as summer they said // sick as light // sick as a wolf in the last cave of dawn // they said sick to the knees // sick through to the other side of no // I mean when the candle of the earth burns low // what can we do // your brother splitting open // his chickens with an axe // my brother stepping into the stairs of his only // throat // entering the crypt of a journey from which he will never turn back // & neither will we // turn back // turn away // as when we cut clean my grandmother’s piano // to heave it through the narrow kitchen // out into the black rain // the merciful orchids // as when we taught the bluebird’s twisted beak // to eat again // after a week of starvation // & yes its winter heart did writhe // against our muteness
I read of an airplane landing in a field of cows//what they call acceptable loss//propellers splitting open//the body of a young bull//I never could get worked up//over the deaths of animals bred for captivity//my brother says//& I wonder how much like us//does a thing have to be//for its death to be counted//I'd like to see the proof of that//my father says//when I call a famous man a rapist//though he like me//knows the stories of the women who've come forward//women wading like deer through a flooded town//pulled salt & song under//bleeding hoof caught in glass under//under crocodiles nosing through rivers of mud & stars//how much like us does a thing have to be//to be believed//to be more than wild//I'm fighting to love//the you separate from me//untwined//un-entwined//the not-me me//what was it I read about love//keeping no score//I keep a score//I too am here
A tree grew in a forest and the tree had three or several leaves and had grown up with branches, and sometimes birds would light upon a branch or on another. Though the tree had care for most birds, still the tree preferred that birds not linger long save for a few birds, friend birds, birds who had by so long visiting grown knowings and returns.

Then one day or several days or this happened more than once with birds, the tree became befriended by a bird who seemed a fine bird who appeared a could-be friend bird. And one day and several days passed and the tree and bird had many heart-to-heartwood talks and the bird shared stories of its birdly self and the tree shared stories of its treely self and the tree counted its fortunate that the bird had chanced to light upon a limb.

Until one day the bird ceased its returning. Until one day the bird began without a word of bird to light at only nearby other trees. Until the bird gave nothing further of a word or knowing to the tree, and the tree felt to its heartwood all the signs of bleeding ever ache.

So the tree still grew in forest and the tree still let its branches out to birds and spoke to birds as welcoming as ever speech had been, but the tree’s deep heartwood never ceased to ache to eek out signs of absence, and then never the tree never forgot and never loosed the meaning of a sudden silent absence, of a bird who was so close and naught.
slinklove
Lauren Suchenski

slinklove, you pile your hands upwards towards my skin – a bottle-nosed dolphin and something mammalian and curved – like the willow of a spine, the pterocottontail of a clavicle. bones, rapturous, rattling against one another – flesh: hollow, formed, willing, perpetual. windowpane of your eyes/they keep approaching, following, leveling. is it your shape or your circumstance i find myself in? is it this bed or this hurricane i keep myself bonded to? is it proximity? this thing – desire – is it close to me? or closeness to the sea (which heralds me back, and in heralding, bonds me – keeps me never approaching anything other than the brine of the sea)

is it intimacy, or the sea calling me back? is it ever approaching? your skin/the nape of your circumstance/my hunger/lust, or something language approaches; like teeth

is it skin; a shell; a sea/

or the shore, lapping back?
Here is a season I once flooded – here is a season I’ve never met. here is a month drenched in climate confidence (change and circumstance, pomp and confusion). here is my child, here is my breath. here is my constantly churning yearning for the knowledge that I am brave enough to articulate what tiny words I know (together, they are a spell/apart, they are a whimsy; a whimper; a wish). here is Meinong’s jungle, here is a hacksaw. here is Aquinas’ theory of natural law, here is nature, tapping at my window, asking to come in. here is the new season, tapping on my tongue – asking to come in. asking me to come out, come out – see the splendid seeds brandishing their stalks and stems. come out, come out – pull your skin towards the sun once more. come out, come out, the clocks will tumble too – we’ll all lift our faces towards the sun/tilting/tilting/we’ll all till the land, kill the clock, shake the ice out of our senses. here is the season – come out, come out/the wind is waiting to warp you.
someday you’ll open the door, after a winter-ball of months rolled up under the carpet comes yarnballing out across the floor – you’ll open the door; you’ll see a field of purple crocuses dancing on the hill. you’ll see spring rooting through the soil – pushing, baby-lunged and pregnant, waiting to burst. the prenatal core of the earth placenta-flooded and filled with grass waiting to turn green. you’ll see, you’ll see; one day you’ll open the door and spring will be staring back like an anchor. like a river. like something you can wade in to/float along, swim down, dive deep, dig wild. and wilder. come back, old wild one.

someday you’ll open the door; you’ll see a field of purple crocuses dancing on the hill.
Calloused
Haley Holden

I was once in love with a boy who had tree bark for skin. He didn’t ever explain it to me so I often wondered about it. Had he been born that way? Or had someone caused it? Had someone caused him so much pain that the roughness around his heart crept its way onto his skin, his forearms first, in patches. I imagine that then the roughness moved towards his torso, slowly but surely consuming him. If someone made him harsh he never showed it to me. He was the gentlest boy I ever knew.

Maybe I was projecting with the second theory, although my own skin was smooth.

Either way, the boy’s skin was not like mine. It was not like anyone else’s. On sight he was different and I had always admired him for not letting that hold him back. I think that my father assumed he was a minority when we got out of the car the first time I brought him home. He never asked and I guess he thought bark was better than melatonin. He got along with both of my parents well, but I never had the chance to meet his. He told me one night, when he thought that I was asleep, that he had never had the chance to meet them either.

I convinced him in the summer to let me carve my initials into his arm. We chose his right bicep and I bought a special carving tool, practicing on saplings in the back yard to make sure it would turn out right. He winced when I began carving, tensing up but not protesting. He didn’t tell me to stop, so I didn’t. When I finished he smiled at me, nodding his approval at my happiness. The picture I took of the carving was my most liked photo on Instagram. He never asked me to get a tattoo for him and I never offered.

When I bought my first house he helped me tear down the wallpaper in the kitchen so I could repaint it. We had a paint fight in the kitchen and couldn’t stop laughing for long enough to wash off the paint before it dried. The cabinets ended up splattered as collateral damage, making me smile every time I walked in the room. He spent more time at my house than he did at his own apartment. I gave him his own key but I didn’t let him move in.

After three years together the human part of him started dying. He planted himself outside of my house, becoming more tree than man every day. The doctors didn’t know how long it would take, they had never quite seen a man like him. The boy with tree bark for skin stopped talking back to me after two weeks in the front yard. The boy with the tree bark for skin became the tree in my front yard once I could no longer touch my carving, not even on my tip toes. The tree in my front yard haunted me, reminding me of all of the things I had loved, that were now just out of my reach.

I sold the house after two years of waking up every morning in the shade of him.
Metal Men

Cole Meyer

i.
My upstairs neighbors play piano at two in the morning. Simple scales and arpeggios. Repetition, repetition. I lie in bed and wonder if I’ll ever sleep again. I’ve never seen them. Not leaving by the dim stairwell or in the basement doing laundry or in the garage smoking weed. But I hear them. Every day they stomp from room to room and I picture them: broad and silver, all steel, not human at all.

ii.
Your nostrils flare, your eyes shudder, half-open; your hands grope the sweaty sheets. I tuck hair behind your ear, careful not to wake you. You curl into the corner, half-shrieking. Your lips part to reveal off-white, crooked teeth. Your legs tuck beneath your chin and I wake you then, before you smack your head against the wall and I take my pillow to the couch.

iii.
I dream I’m in their apartment: cabinets spill onto the linoleum – coffee mugs and plates and knives and jumbo boxes of spaghetti. The floor is scuffed and pock-marked and dirt is caked between tiles. There’s a cushionless couch in the living room and a lamp with no shade. Instruments are strewn across the floor: An electric keyboard. A bass guitar. A drum set with a broken snare. I search for my noisy neighbors, the metal men, but I find you instead, tucked in their beds, writhing and kicking. Your eyes flutter in distress. The muscles in your neck constrict and you release a shrill scream, all at once terrifying and beautiful. Your shoulders hunch. You pitch forward and before I can see your face, I’m awake.

iv.
I watch you eat. Your hair is frazzled. You scratch your head distractedly and I smile, though you don’t notice me.
How did you sleep?
Fine, you say. You seem startled by the sound.
Do you remember screaming?
What?
Last night.
I didn’t scream, you say. You grab a cornflake between two fingers, dripping milk, and slide it into your mouth and suck.
You did scream, I want to say. But I’ve learned by now to let it go. I watch as your eyes lose focus; you’re looking at the space beneath the fridge but your mind is elsewhere, captured in the dream you won’t describe.
I love you.
Love you, too.
Next cornflake, and the next. I am pulled into your pattern, the rhythm with which you eat, and breathe, your introspection. Subdividing the silence.

v.
Things collapse and crash above me. Cymbals clatter to the floor. Dust sprinkles from the ceiling; I worry the fan will rip from its moorings. They shout – violent, incoherent – and I consider intervening.
vi.
You’re in the bathtub. I’ve called an ambulance. There’s nothing they can do. But for a moment, before I dropped my backpack, before my fingertips tingled and the goosebumps and before I choked, just before: I thought you were sleeping. You were dreaming, your head tipped back beneath the dripping faucet, your legs pulled tight to your chest, curled like shrimp, and I thought, perhaps, it was not your blood diluting the lukewarm water.

coda
My upstairs neighbors play piano at two in the morning. Scales and arpeggios. Repetition, repetition. I’ve given up sleep. I sit on the floor and pretend they’re here, next to me, reading what I’m reading, watching what I’m watching. Did you see that? I ask. Wasn’t that so funny? They turn their metal faces and a minor chord escapes their silver lips. My windows rattle in the frame.
CONTRIBUTORS

Robyn Art is the author of the full-length collection, “The Stunt Double in Winter” (Dusie 2007) and “Farmer, Antagonist,” winner of the 2015 Burnside Review Chapbook Contest, as selected by Jennifer L. Knox. Other chapbooks include “Vestigial Portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls” and “Scenes From The Body,” both from dancing girl press, as well as “Landlessness,” forthcoming from dancing girl in Summer 2017. Recent work can be found in WordFor/Word, The Burnside Review, Bone Bouquet, Konundrum Engine, and The New Guard Review.

Melissa Atkinson Mercer is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection “Saint of the Partial Apology” (Five Oaks Press) and five chapbooks, including “Star-Blind in the Family of Fortune Keepers” (Hermeneutic Chaos Press) and “My Own Strange Beast” (Porkbelly Press). She has an MFA from West Virginia University.

Elise Bader-Saye is a transgender writer from the badlands of Central Texas. She enjoys going to lesbian bars, eating Chebakia and drinking strong coffee. She cannot drive or draw but watches enough bad TV for ten women. She trades secrets for brownies, affection, lessons in Aikido, etc.

Kristi Banker exists in the form of an unfinished pun and that is about all. Sometimes she has lived in Michigan. Sometimes she has lived in Iowa or Wyoming or maybe other places. Now she lives in a forest of wounding and could confess herself compact of jars. One day a bee fell into her pocket. It was a good day.

James Blevins is an award-winning poet studying English and Creative Writing at the College of Central Florida. His first published short story, “For All the Bending,” was included in the 2016 Scythe Prize collection. His poetry has been published in Alexandria Quarterly, Literary Juice, AZURE, and THAT Literary Review.


Chloe Hanson’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including The Heartland Review, Arsenic Lobster, Crab Fat Literary Magazine, and Public Pool. Her poetry was also recently awarded an Honorable Mention at the Tennessee Mountain Writers Conference.

Haley Holden is a lifetime author, who participated in her first writing contest at the age of eight. Since then she has been published in Palaver, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, and The Gateway Review. She is currently a senior at Bowling Green State University, studying to become a starving artist.


Sarah Leavens is a writer, teacher, and artist residing in Pittsburgh, PA. A Lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh, she also works as a teaching artist. She is poetry editor for Lime Hawk literary journal; her poetry has appeared in LUNCH, Corium, and So to Speak, among other places.
Jessica Lee is the poetry editor of *Sweet Tree Review*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Literary Review, BOAAT, The Boiler, cream city review, DIAGRAM, Fugue*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist for the 2017 *So to Speak* Poetry Contest. Follow her at readjessicalee.wordpress.com.


José Manuel Santiago Ribeiro was born in Coimbra. He shared his childhood and youth between the rural and religious environment of the village of Condeixa, where he lived, and the academic, secular, “avant-garde,” revolutionary University City of Coimbra, where he was studying. He attended Avelar Brotero Comprehensive School in Coimbra, where he finished his Technical Course of Arts and Crafts. In 2006, he joined a Higher Education School, also in Coimbra. He organized and participated in numerous individual and collective artistic exhibitions. His work is represented in several private collections. He is also represented in the Collection of Contemporary Art of the National Museum Machado de Castro and in the Bissaya Barreto Foundation in Coimbra, Portugal, European Union.

Lauren Suchenski has a difficult relationship with punctuation and currently lives in Yardley, PA. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and her chapbook “Full of Ears and Eyes Am I” is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. You can find more of her writing on Instagram @lauren_suchenski or on Twitter @laurensuchenski.

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