Paper Mill Press
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Winter 2017

c/o Adam Beardsworth
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ashley Hemings</td>
<td>Whale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lindsay Bird</td>
<td>46 centimetres overnight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lindsay Bird</td>
<td>Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lindsay Bird</td>
<td>Tuesday nights at the Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ashley Hemmings</td>
<td>Notes on my grandmother's cabin:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tyrone Kelly</td>
<td>16 Westmount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lucia Torres (Faune)</td>
<td>Lumina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sam Westcott</td>
<td>Austere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sam Westcott</td>
<td>Reincarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Emily Critch</td>
<td>12/06/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rachel Fraser</td>
<td>Winter Exhalations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rachel Fraser</td>
<td>Neon Signs and Nights Alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Erika Stonehouse</td>
<td>Endangered Species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Melissa Tremblett</td>
<td>untitled (Diaspora series)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Melissa Tremblett</td>
<td>untitled (Diaspora series)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kyle Howe</td>
<td>“on Love”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>April Fowlow</td>
<td>Natural Habitat(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Marc Losier</td>
<td>#01 Building Management, Échange (Exchange)/Post(e) - Dawson City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Marc Losier</td>
<td>#12 Untitled, Échange (Exchange)/Post(e) - Dawson City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Maria Dussan</td>
<td>Naked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Maria Dussan</td>
<td>Transient Stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sarah Levita</td>
<td>Mourning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Kassie Lukeman</td>
<td>what big eyes you have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Charlotte Hobden</td>
<td>sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Joshua Pittman</td>
<td>Apostrophe No.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Jeremy Wills</td>
<td>Lost For Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Joshua Pittman</td>
<td>Best Seat in The House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Julia Keeping</td>
<td>A response to Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Alyssa Leahy</td>
<td>The Typist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Jessica Warford</td>
<td>Freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Jessica Warford</td>
<td>unafraid;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Erika Stonehouse</td>
<td>Post-Mortem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Emily Critch</td>
<td>Aguathuna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Jessie Donaldson</td>
<td>Poppies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Matt McCarthy</td>
<td>For the Seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Ryan Duffy</td>
<td>Mad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Olivia Wong</td>
<td>Seeing Double</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Olivia Wong</td>
<td>oneforty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Ryan Duffy</td>
<td>oneforty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Melissa Taylor</td>
<td>The Philosopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Kassie Lukeman</td>
<td>untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>A.H. Robitschek</td>
<td>An Ancient Lock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Quinton Colbourne</td>
<td>Incubator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Lucas Morneau</td>
<td>Part I: The Seer, Part II: The Abyss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Quinton Colbourne</td>
<td>Sheulogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Quinton Colbourne</td>
<td>Sprig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Hastings Gresser</td>
<td>High Definition Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Olivia Parsons</td>
<td>To Be Forgotten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Myron King</td>
<td>Recoil Escapement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Bernard Wills</td>
<td>Old Country Blues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Bernard Wills</td>
<td>Ark Alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Emily Wells</td>
<td>Montagne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Kyle Au</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Myron King</td>
<td>Misty Falls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Connor MacNeil</td>
<td>Informing the Bees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Robynn Hoskins</td>
<td>Streetlight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Hastings Gresser</td>
<td>Death (Among Other Things)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Kristen Thornhill</td>
<td>bench</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whale
Ashley Hemmings
oil paint on paper
It seemed like as good a way to pass the time as any, burn off lunch, meet some friends. But eight weeks in it’s taken over and you’re dribbling on your pillow in the dark, your wife’s low whistling beside you, a sleepy referee. Walking the dog, you keep an ear out for what bounces – bus tires, baby hiccups – before succumbing to the nearest sports bar to stand transfixed before the scores. You don’t tell her that’s where you’ve been. You’re starting over, taller this time. You never thought you were a team player, no matter how much you put it on your resumé. She asks you the most important question and you blank: basketball?

Tuesday nights at the Y
Lindsay Bird

We rise together around noon. No sooner. No school, no work, no milk for coffee just a black mug before the common slog, the weight, the wind, the wet of it.

The white and white and grey of it.

And then, the neon dots of dads appear, an army of old ski jackets called in to unbury the universe: our driveways, the longer days, our unburnt skin beside the unswum sea.

The blue and green and grey of it

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Buddha
Lindsay Bird

It was the last thing my sister sent, from a trip to the Caribbean that must have tipped the scales somehow, some tropical slant of light setting off the schizophrenic clock. A figurine to ward off the same thing from striking her closest kin, a silver-plated little god for luck.

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Red stairs led to a green-doored yellow hilltop cabin.

Skeleton key to which the back lock was never introduced.

Chopped logs by the wood stove. Day bed. Dinner table.

Smoke-stained lace curtains overlooked the ocean. Windows wide open.

Bunny in a floral dress. Floral pillows and wallpaper surrounding.

Plastic flowers in a plastic juice bottle. Another lace tablecloth.

Water-stained print of a painting hanging sideways. Peeling wallpaper.

Top of the stairs spinning wheel. Home to Raggedy Ann.

Walls of photos hung salon style. Above board game shelves.

First visit after her death. Dirty carpet. Locked back door.

Notes on my grandmother’s cabin:
Ashley Hemmings

16 Westmount
Tyrone Kelly
silkscreen chine-collé on japanese paper
Austere
Sam Westcott

Austere, weren't you? Like a red-breasted robin, gazing, saying nothing.
Crows around us, cawing,
dill pickle chips open on the dash,
evening harbour before us, ebbing, the
fog grazing across the bay like contented cattle.
Grew up happy, the two of us.
Heaven, itself
in a graduating class of seven. Inch-worm of a
joke, crawling up my back, now;
k ill it a part of me says, and I do, drowning the joke in a pesticide of
silence.
Last night we slept in the hammock stretched beneath
mandarin orange leaves, until
noon-brightness severed our sleep,
opened our eyes. Reptilian brain: thought we saw predators, only
park pigeons, trotting around us.
Queer look you gave me, like
Really?
Save it, I thought. Savour it.
Trainwrecks don't happen every day.
Under the dented roof of my second-hand station wagon, painted
violet, very 80s,
watching the waves and listening to the gulls' squawks like
xylophone-sounding muzak in a Chinese restaurant, I turn, say Let's
run. Let's get out of this salt-
y clad
zoo.
Reincarnation
Sam Westcott

Your split carapace
has a ring for every year
that tried to marry you.
And there's a ring to it
when our bloody knuckles knock
upon your hollowed back, and the frozen
bark litters the ground, where your
life was truncated and the stump that was left is left
like a tombstone, some
man-made monument in grey,
human-coalesced park.

I peer: the last ring marks the year you were
axed. Chopped. Smashed. Bit with
teeth more fierce than that of any
winter storm you ever endured. More
concise, blade sharpened for impact,
aerodynamic for human-thrust.

I can count the years back on your spine,
I was…five, you
were twenty-nine,
and despite my age,
there still isn't a salve for me. I
remember thinking, any line you
put between yourself and the world is
illusory,

you are it and it is you, and every
time you hurt some other, you're also hurting
you and vice-versa.

But there's an impedance on thought;
a kind of rot, wired into our biology. I think
about the roots beneath you, how
when you died, your
nutrients were delivered like
baby-in-beak-of-stork
to some other tree. Or trees.
Placed on their doormat of roots,
morning-met and taken in. So I watch
and practice
and wonder if you’re still listening.
Chapped lips,
rough like orange peels,
mist citrus puffs of air –
blown kisses
rising
into cold December skies.
Neon Signs and Nights Alone
Rachel Fraser

Colours slice through the evening dark
reaping shadows across fire escapes
cutting segments down alley edges

Rivulets of water
sent cascading from swirling
mist-topped scrapers
crash against my window pane

Figures cast upon the bedroom wall
ladies rich in contrast
flat in plaster
dance in seamless motion
finding rhythm in the urban pulse

Metropolitan heartbeat
the shadows shift upon the wall
suddenly a womb
pumping fluids
curling fingers
writhing in the ultrasound

Outside the city screams –
the birth of dawn

Endangered Species
Erika Stonehouse
oil on canvas
untitled (Diaspora series)
Melissa Tremblett
film photograph

untitled (Diaspora series)
Melissa Tremblett
film photograph
“on Love”
Kyle Howe

every rose has its thumbs?

or something like that?
or
What ever

---

Natural Habit(at)s
April Fowlow
ceramic
#01 Building Management,
Échange (Exchange)/Post(e) - Dawson City
Marc Losier
photocopy on archival paper

#12 Untitled,
Échange (Exchange)/Post(e) - Dawson City
Marc Losier
archival pigment print
**Naked**
Maria Dussan

I want to be naked with someone who appreciates the extents of skin without the attachment of paradigms—without oppression.

I want to be naked without shame, and in sanctuary space establish the dialogue of skins transforming into neural signals that belong to the beginning of time.

I want to be naked in artistic appreciation of the weird manifestations of nature, and in absolute liberation of constructed fears.

I want to be naked in protest, and your eyes my witnesses of the irrelevance of a term like imperfection which foolishly implies the nonsense of perfection.

I want to be naked in deconstructive mode until we find ourselves outside of meaning and blending with all matter outside of time and infinite.

I want to be naked in honesty—observing the skin that will melt over bones, and both of us embracing within this present knowledge.

I want to be naked in observance of all fake and artificial, and smile at you in absolute compliance.

I want to be naked under the spectrum of natural light and eyes-closed, so you know I have trusted you.

I want to be naked in humanimal affirmation and in denial of dyads.

I want to be naked with someone.

---

**Transient Stops**
Maria Dussan

It ended in a question mark as it began

open to doubt: no ends and no means only an in-between of absurdity

---

Maria Dussan

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I want to be naked in humanimal affirmation and in denial of dyads.

I want to be naked with someone.
A man whistles in the forest
shapeless morning runs past the green and brown
trees
mimicking the man’s sounds
wind
so loud and sharp stretching out and out
no one hears

sun falls upon the man
drifting through each day he forgets the night
alone
sailing deep in black angst and brown bourbon
a slow tickle in his throat
delivers the cough

stinging and wet
violently projects his bourbon breakfast
fingers eight decades old curl and lock
grasping for a cloth or comfort
nothing
but morning

gargling thick poison
it’s not yet
noon
the drowning bear
his death as forgotten as the forest.
Joshua Pittman
Apostrophe No.1

I saw the best minds of my generation;
Destroyed.

Not by madness, but by S-A-N-I-T-Y,
By an absence of ink and incredulity, by creased collars and decade day planners.

Where is the madness, Allen, old friend?
Where hides the hallway Howl, when HST rolls off the tongue with such
Terrific ease?

Where are the ones who sip Molotovs and preach flame-licked rhetoric?
Where are the ones who hide amongst the streetlight, the gutter, the alabaster alleyways?
Where are the ones who dance in fever-dream,
Who swim in pools of black coffee and honey-whiskey,
Who are desperate to remember yesterday and forget tomorrow?

I root amongst your headstone tonight, digging through broken spine and yellowed page,
combing depths of delusion;
searching for a crucible-verse to sing in the stairwell,

One to conjure rage and melancholia and sweet confusion,
One to galvanize tired minds to burn and raze and cry and fuck,
One to keep close to my breast, and remind me of the debt I owe,

To you, Allen, for taking my hand and leading me into the unfamiliar dark,
Where I might finally see.
Skinny, shadeless, stripped down, standing stock still in the corner with your cord ripped rudely out, headless and blind, your eye pirated.

A single lonely bone in your body, Five feet, tarnished, rusting, and a little crooked; time has not been kind.

And yet you stand regal, underneath the fragile, naked frame – I wonder if they screwed your mind back in and you woke up somewhere else somewhere high and dark, above a field of red plush seats and a place to dance.

I wonder, when the curtains go up and the switch is flicked, Do you smile?
A response to Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers
Julia Keeping

Lilly of the Mohawk
Virgin
Saint

Catherine Tekakwitha

history has not been gracious to you
mutilated by pimples and pocks,
reduced to the ability of raising a cock

plagued in a different way
he staggers among porcelain shadows,
desperately seeking

Kateri Tekakwitha,
Do you hear his pleas?
The ice picks apart our skin with maddening patience,  
like it has an eternity to destroy us – and it does –  
but that's of no consequence now,  
we are too far gone for worry.

Icicles are forming on my eyelids and my insides,  
as you laugh and tell me you can't feel a thing.  
There's no point in fighting this gentle demise any longer,  
when it's as easy as falling asleep.

Together, we are a dark spot on this white horizon,  
a smudge against the backdrop of a muted world.  
I couldn't think of an easier end,  
than lying here on this bed of glass shards.

So, darling, take my hand and we'll watch  
as the stars flicker out like birthday candles,  
we can sing a song to this wasteland,  
as she smothers us with cold.

the bloodstains on your hands have been there for years  
staying put like a guest you’ll never be rid of  
you grew up walking on eggshells  
with a gasoline heart and sticky fingers  
in a cruel world without constants  
where it's all about sex and timing  
and you never did figure out  
how to be unafraid of your own body
Post-Mortem
Erika Stonehouse
serigraphy on paper

Aguathuna
Emily Critch
screenprint
For the Seeds
Matt McCarthy

Report to the surface
It’s nearing the time
For sprouts to emerge
And for tendrils to climb

All you peppers, oregano
Rosemary and chives
For the sun, soil and water
Have rendered you ‘live

Maybe we’ll use you and maybe we won’t
But don’t let that hinder your desire for growth
It’s a marvelous realm in which to love and to breathe
From the moment you’re planted
‘Til you shed your last leaves
Mad
Ryan Duffy

It’s eight minutes to midnight.
I’m reading the newspaper, curiously contemplating
The strange state of the world.
I’m laughing to myself, wondering
How we got to this point.
The last thing I read is an article about a funny-looking cat.

I’m not worried about anything.

It’s seven minutes to midnight.
I see the shifting sands of machines
Shaving away layers of ancient lands.
The black blood of the earth bubbles through the
Continental vein, and is injected back into the machines.
The world is coughing, gurgling, grasping for air.

It’s six minutes to midnight.
I see factories with suicide nets, strung and
Stitched with the silk of hope’s pet worm.
I see the good of humanity, even though it’s
Far away, obscured by smog and the shadows of
A false flag waving in front of the only remaining sunlight.

It’s five minutes to midnight.
I see “To Protect and Serve” printed on the side
Of a flashing cop car parked recklessly on a lawn.
A Black mother is crying out for her son—

Murdered for reaching into his pocket for his phone.
The boys in blue applaud each other.

It’s four minutes to midnight.
I remember that Matthew talked about the fires of Hell,
And how contempt towards your neighbor will
Send you There. He was right, except Hell’s fires are a
Hellfire missile; fired and forgotten, as the nativity scene
Lays scorched and charred, soon to be drowned in Galilee.

It’s three minutes to midnight.
I see a profiting prophet, screaming in the
Homes of every living creature on Earth.
The clock’s hands are drawing lines in the sand
For the new gangs of the world,
Whose colours are black and white and pink and blue.

It’s two minutes to midnight.
I don’t know what to make out of what I’m seeing anymore.
Terracotta soldiers line the abandoned, littered streets
Where the citizens are inside, taking shelter from
A mutated government policy of duress and extermination,
Coupled with radical ideologues, ready to smash their win-
dows.

Lord, it’s one minute to midnight, and
I’m getting real scared down here.
I’ve always thought that I was ready to see you,
But I just don’t want it to be so soon.
I know you’re not listening to me, but all I can hear is
The sound of your final trumpet’s blare.

The clock’s still ticking, Lord, and
I’m still reading the newspaper, frantically sifting
Through the words, trying to separate fact from fiction.
I’m choking on my tears, trying to find out
How we got to this point,
But the last thing I see is a bright flash

       And then I can’t see anything.

I don’t know where I am right now.
I’m floating through stone-cold silent nothingness.
My watch is telling me that

       It’s midnight,

But I’m realizing now that

       midnight was days ago.
oneforty
Ryan Duffy

140 characters of falsehoods.

gouge out the public’s eyes and feast on them in your castle.

we're living in an age of vitreous gallows humor.

The Philosopher
Melissa Taylor
graphite
untitled
Kassie Lukeman
digital photograph

An Ancient Lock
A.H. Robitschek

I was taught poetry in all its subtlety,
from poets more
    shattered than I. Perhaps that is why I breathe
differently now, out
in the
Open.
**Incubator**
Quinton Colbourne
digital photograph

**Part I: The Seer, Part II: The Abyss**
Lucas Morneau
fire-charred oak and computerized LED sequence
Sheulogy
Quinton Colbourne

I was attracted to your traction
My feet hanging by your tread
I embed you in friendly fashion
Beneath soil you once wed
Terra firma to terra nova
Subtract the surface of the sun
Unearth a new utopia
Laces run undone
Tiptoe into Valhalla
Hearken to your own tongue
Heaven stands on a stairway
Each step and you are one

Sprig
Quinton Colbourne

under curtains, carpets and parapets
a floor of fauna engorged
in shroud of shadow and silhouette
the glory of forest forged
marrow and mirth of marionettes
bountiful and boundless
corrugated corsets wreathed in jackets of jade
abated beneath a thicket of palpable palisade
tendrils of sentinels, all tentative in vain
sapped of sapience, a terracotta terrain
shearing of sheaves in autumns rouse
division of visage devised
a boreal banquet, a bouquet of boughs
a feast of leaves and lives
a labyrinth embroidered in lattice and lace
bordered embracement of twine
amazed masquerade of tresses entranced
trespassing in turbulent time
High Definition Death
Hastings Gresser

It’s there and it’s not
and you don’t think about it and you do
when it’s not there you feel alone in the silence
when it’s there you feel nothing

sitting in some corner, festering in black
drawing little attention, destroying you softly
with electric light and stereophonic sound
sitting on top a cabinet made of bone

the senses wage war, trying to understand
putting pixels together
looking at your uncle’s body at the wake
wondering how something usually so animate
can lay so still
like a turned off television

change the channel
maybe there’s something else on

To Be Forgotten
Olivia Parsons

Painted pictures of lovers,
landscapes,
of mighty mountains and trees.

Photographs of accomplishments,
family,
brilliant sights of astonishment.

Sculptures of gods,
exceptional leaders,
of righteous Kings and Queens.

But yet,
nothing of Me.
**Recoil Escapement**  
Myron King

Signed up on arrival, enlisted for life.  
No choice given me, presumptuous delight.  
Control or guidance? – the line rashly blurred,  
an exacted proxy from unfounded concern.

Knowledge and reason – allies to the score.  
His torpor and silence affirms even more.  
With innate courage, a new path is graced  
but chagrin and reproach painted their face.

Novation of mind, and onward we tread,  
dishonor proclaimed, dissidence is said.  
Lonely is this – the road less taken,  
but worthwhile the resolve, my freedom awakened.

**Old Country Blues**  
Bernard Wills

Well first you need to find the place.  
Old Country is hard to find…  
some seems it buggered off somewhere  
perhaps in 1982…I don’t remember…but

suppose your expedition found the very last bit left  
swaying atop the dizzy tip  
of one of those tall eight-thousand-footer peaks  
only the hardcore climbers ache for;

or lost up north perhaps,  
forsaken on the bleak forbidding tundra  
behind the abandoned DEW line stations;

or maybe you just stumbled on it  
in the old growth boreal forest  
where bigfoot and the shy eastern panther dwell;

you might just find that Old Country  
is sealed up like a tomb, crawling  
with its legions of seraphic bouncers  
lucent in their blazing metal links
all hot and heaven-forged.

They may not let you in.
They may just toss you out on your behind.

It's fifty/fifty if they do or don't.

But, say you wormed your way inside-
a little sneak thief, Gollum like—
what do you suppose you'd see?

Not much. Old Country is a matter
of hearing, taste and smell mostly.

It isn't for the visually acute.

It leaves its trace however, faint but clear—
here are some things I've noted about it.

It is not forgiving as you can well imagine.
It is always the near kin of darkness.

You can hear the ocean there as well
no matter how far off it lies.

Old Country has the dark smell of pine,
the heavy crunch
of dense-packed snow about it.

Its theme song might be something like Dark Island

or, alternatively, those last-
death-rattle tracks
laid down by the late Hank Williams

for it is dust-devil dry as well.

Love is tragic in Old Country:
its silent lovers slip below the sea,
their soft hands parted,
to only modest protest
from the high-shrilling birds, the terns and gannets.

In the Old Country
there are no bloodless tales.

In the Old Country there are troubadours, duduks and an-
tique folkways…

Other than that I'm spitting blanks.
I speak in evocations, sure, but I've lost the thread.

Still, those Old Country blues go walking like a man.
I've got 'em bad
and them modern bar-room blues don't cut it friends—
not like Short Stuff Macon
or Blind Mamie Forehand
not like Ishman Bracey
or Shortbuckle Rourke,

Rube Lacey, Ed Bell Junior
or Texas Alexander-

nor like that sweet, sweet honey
slicked in heavy clots over barren, jag-toothed rocks.

Ark Alternatives
Bernard Wills

Got me a ticket first thing… cashed in my RRSPs to do it.

The Ark cast off a week ago… from jolly Amsterdam
but of course I had to make some changes.

I’ve packed two of every author.
By special request there are no animals.

It’s my ark damn it. I’ve picked out a nice deck chair,
laid in a good supply of Cutty Sark blended scotch
and Old Pusser’s rum
to suit the nautical theme.

I have nowhere to go so I just let her drift.

I am well caulked against storms.

That wide beam makes for a good sea boat.
She rides the slow Atlantic swells as a stately matron should.

Below she is dry, my bunk a kindly, rocking cradle.
Nothing like an ark for riding out the weather!

But today is gorgeous. I’m somewhere, maybe,
near the Azores. I have my deck chair and my parasol.
It inches closer… I doze… wake up again… there it is…
Shit, it’s big,
it’s squat, it’s wood… it’s… the other Ark!
I didn’t tell you there’s another ark.
This one was customized for no surprises.

Just the things I like… time, scotch and a fine sound system
looping endless ricercares
from nasal stops
of a wheezing baroque organ.

Well Savannah and I split over the animals.
She wanted an ark with animals and I said no way.
She wanted tequila too… clearly not a favorite of mine.

There she is on deck all young and trippy
horsing around with zebras and giraffes
(that happy squad of mated friendly brutes)
her hair dyed every color of Old Noah’s shining bow,
Her face tattooed with stars.
She is naked, twirling in a dance,
oblivious of the melting sun on her pale white skin
as baboons sway in time
to Ariana Grande

and the children,
naked too,
race up and down the deck…

It's golden-grove,
the Garden of frigging Eden in all that riot...I sing out

Ah Worldes Blis ne last no throwe
it wend and wit awey anon!

Thu likest hony of thorn iwis!

Could you hear me over the gruff baboons? Who knows?

Yet I don't begrudge you child…you’ve earned it…
gather ye rosebuds in Beulah Land….

simply, inevitably…like the rhyme of womb with tomb.

Mine is the ark of stale and bitter wisdom and you had best sail on.
Untitled
Kyle Au
35mm photography

Misty Falls
Myron King
photography
and Annabelle lay sleeping when a noise stirred her from her dreams. The noise sounded familiar in a way that should have been soothing but wasn’t. As she climbed out of bed, the feeling of cold floor against her toes jolted her awake enough to realize it sounded like how her mother would hum her to sleep. The only difference here was its aggressive tone and lack of a melody.

The noise came from outside. She stepped nimbly past her three sisters’ beds, tiptoeing so as to not squeak one floor-board, to the window. It was difficult to see much of anything in the dark grey-blue of the pre-dawn twilight but to her right she could just distinguish a figure coming around the corner of their barn toward her house. There was something odd about the silhouette, something insubstantial. It moved through the air as if parts of it were struggling to keep up, struggling to maintain form. As the shape approached her house the buzzing grew louder. She watched, frozen in place, as it climbed the steps of her porch and placed yet another jar down beside the door, replacing the empty one her mother had put out the day before. It descended the steps and headed in the direction from which it had come. And then, as if nothing had happened, it was gone. The silhouette, the hum. It was as though it had never happened. As if a switch had been turned from on to off, things were suddenly normal again. As the sun crested the distant hillside beyond their field, Annabelle regained control of her senses and ran around the house screaming that she’d seen the Bee Man.

Her parents didn’t believe her, nor did her sisters. But it was not just that they did not believe her. It was as if they were making a conscious effort not to believe her, which made it...
as if they had their pitchforks and lengths of rope ready by their bedsides just in case. In fact, they probably did. Forming one large cluster they marched to the butcher’s house and demanded Annabelle.

She had locked herself in her room, terrified and shaking uncontrollably. Annabelle hadn’t meant for this to happen. All she wanted was to let people know what she had seen, for people to believe her. Now she couldn’t even be sure her parents would protect her from the hellish masses outside. These were people she had once considered friends, the happy faces she once knew as the local tailor, the storekeeper who would always sneak her a sweet for free, even the once-friendly faces of some of her school friends, now contorted into the very picture of rage, hatred, even bloodthirst. There came a knock on the bedroom door and the sound of her mother’s voice.

“It’s time to come out, Annabelle.” The voice was cold and unfeeling. Annabelle would never hear this voice hum her to sleep again.

The front door smashed open in a flurry of splinters and their home was filled with rabid villagers. Annabelle’s bedroom door was next and tore like paper as the mob’s intensity grew even more. The villagers grabbed Annabelle and took her to the village outskirts, toward the tree they had designated for that gruesome activity on which they agreed without needing words. The rope went up, caught the jutting limb, and fell back down.

Soon it was taut with the weight it was bearing below. The week went by with an air of fragility as if something the villagers all cherished was in danger of breaking – if it hadn’t done so already. Each day everyone went about their normal business plowing their fields, peddling their wares, but despite efforts to silence Annabelle, whispers had arisen in the village of “the little girl who had seen The Bee Man.” It made everyone nervous. And for the whole week the village felt as if they were simply doing things mechanically, automatically, while they anticipated the coming Sunday when the honey would come again. Annabelle was scared. She hadn’t realized what she had started.

When Saturday night came, everyone was on edge, trying to muster as much luck as they could in the hopes that the honey would come again tomorrow morning. They used up every superstition – knocking on wood, crossing their fingers, shifting their bed so that they would lie facing south and even sleeping with horseshoes under their pillows. Each had their own boon.

But it was all for naught. When the morning came there was no honey. The villagers formed a mob with unsettling rapidity,
It's late. I walk briskly down the lonely city street. My heels make a steady click-clack sound on the pavement with each step. I wish I had worn more comfortable shoes to work. The business district is always dead at night, everything in this area closes at 10:00 p.m. and the only sounds are the ruffling of tarps in the alleyways from the homeless. I turn my head away from the sound of the tarps as the sharp wind ruffles them and gnaws at my cheek. The temperature tonight makes it clear that winter is fast approaching and I am poorly dressed for it. I repress a shiver and draw my useless autumn jacket tighter around my shoulders.

I turn onto a dimly lit street. There is only one working streetlight on this road, and it makes the distance all the more daunting. Sky-high apartment buildings blot out the moon and loom over me with their many sets of glaring eyes. I unravel my arms where they had crossed over my chest from the cold and begin to wish again for more comfortable shoes. A loud noise from the side of one building. I turn and I stare hard at the spot the noise came from. I don't turn around—not daring to turn my back on the sound. I stare and I stare and I stare. An alley cat appears from the side of the building where the sound came from and I realize it must have gotten into someone's garbage. I steady my breath and turn around to continue my way home.

I become aware of him then. He is walking several feet behind me. His tread is heavy. I can tell he is large without even glancing back at him. Anxiously I pick up my pace and

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Streetlight
Robynn Hoskins

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Two times I’ve met someone who told me they were dying of cancer. The first was when I was twelve and still messing around with Jordan. My mom was in the hospital at the time because she hit her head on a big flower pot, and I was living at Jordan’s place because my father and I don’t mix well if we spend more than a day around each other. Jordan and I were down at Wilke’s Dam. It was around midnight. There’s this hill that runs down to the water, and we had found some broken office chairs in someone’s garbage and were racing them down the hill. That was about all we did back then, stuff to which attentive parents would have said no that’s dangerous why would you do something stupid like that? We were kind of like free range chickens running around with our heads chopped off, banging into things.

Usually there’s no one down there at night so you can yell and run around and be free like kids like to do. Around three in the morning the night fishers would sometimes show up, but they’d just get their gear and get into the dark water and lose themselves in their own form of freedom. Back then we spent a lot of time at Wilke’s Dam and had a general acquaintanceship with most of the regulars, day or night. During the day it was populated with Asians fishing for dinner, and other young boys and girls being idiots. At night the old, retired fishermen came in pairs and groups of not usually more than three. Weekends were the most boring, since it would fill up with families and couples on nice leisure nature walks. Those kind of people don’t like to see dirty kids swearing and break-

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Hastings Gresser

Death (Among Other Things)

I look ahead to the streetlight which is just metres away. I take my keys out of my pocket and I grasp two of the keys on the chain. One between the middle finger and the index. The other between the middle and the ring. I clutch them in my left fist, knowing that I throw a much stronger hook with my right. The right is already closed in a fist, thumb spread over my fingers so that I will not break them.

I have reached the streetlight. The heat of it pulsates down on me and I clench my teeth, dreading his approach. He brushes past me, no glance, no hesitation, no terrorizing anxiety. I envy him. I keep my keys in my fist, grasping them so tightly that it looks as though my hand is all flesh and no blood. I keep walking.
ing things and racing broken office chairs.

That particular night a new thing showed up. There was this man looking out onto the water, not moving. It was just us two and him and the sound of the water dropping from one elevation to another. It doesn't drown out other sounds, it becomes like air and you forget that it's there. The man paid no attention to us at first and we paid a little to him since it was a strange thing to see at that time of night. Just standing there. Staring. Not moving. Stillness in the dark. I don't remember why but we came kind of close to him and he started talking to us. I don't even really remember what we talked about at first. He commented on what we were doing and told us that he approved and to just enjoy life and not care about anything. We agreed with him. What twelve-year-old wouldn't? We asked what he was doing down there so late, and he said he was just trying to enjoy the little time that was left. Terminal cancer. Not much time. We told him we were sorry. What else was there to say? We were twelve. Cancer didn't matter to us. What even was cancer? We just kind of stood there, not making eye contact with him, unsure what to do.

Usually I don't hear it, but at that time I focused my attention on the water. I stood there and listened to the water and it became so loud that I thought my ears weren't working properly. I realized later in life that the man was probably doing the same thing, letting the sound remove the awkwardness of knowing you're going to die. He seemed cheerful, though, and that confused me. I'm not one to ask the hard questions, but if I was I would have asked him how he could smile in that situation. A guillotine blade dropping down on you in slow motion, so you can see and feel it slice through the flesh and bone and whatever else is in your neck.

We stood there some more in silence, Jordan and I exchanging glances that both of us understood as uneasy and unsure and maybe a little scared but not really sure as to why. Things don't register in your head properly when you're young. The signal gets distorted. We inched away in the dark and went back to the office chairs. The man stared at the water a little while longer and then turned to leave, up the hill and into the night. As he walked away he shouted back at us to enjoy life. Jordan and I went on living and the sound of the dam became like air again.

After that cancer didn't come around for a few years. I was seventeen I think when it decided to give me a call again. My mom's head healed and the flower pot had been glued back together. I had given up my childhood freedom and was on course to becoming your typical anti-social narcissist who didn't care about anyone or anything and was sure that I had all the answers and everyone else was wrong, cruel, and just generally worthless. It was when Dylan, Garrick, Andre and I were hanging out a lot at McDonald's. Four or five times a week back then. Shaman came out that night too. He would always want to go up to the Subway that was half Subway half generic Pizza n' Chicken joint. It was up Colborne Street near Colby's Billiards, which was less of a pool hall and more of an AA meeting without the group circle or the anonymity. I think the Pizza n' Chicken half has closed down now and become a telephone company office or something. Anyways, we go up there and Shaman gets his sub and we sit around in the uncomfortable chairs and do whatever we did back then.
yup mhmm. The problem with people who talk to us is they can tell that we don't want to talk, but since it's always lonely people desperate for any attention they don't care. I wondered what made him want to talk us so badly. Some lowlife teenagers. The bottom of the rung. What could we offer him that he needed? People like that always find the one of us who will just sit there and listen without ignoring them, it happened all the time at McDonalds. Dylan got picked a lot, because he looks so docile and is so docile.

So there we were cramped into this four-person booth with five plus one big drunk man probably pushing three hundred pounds, and he's directing all his slurred speech at Dylan and the rest of us just sit there and laugh at his misfortune cause we all know the situation and Dylan looks at us and he knows it's the usual situation. The guy got right up in Dylan's face and I imagined the alcohol smell that must have been exploding out of his mouth and directly into my friend's nostrils. He switches from talking about his bear fighting to pointing out Dylan's acne, calling him "pizza face." He kept going on, like he had something to prove by doing it. Shaman Garrick Andrew and I just sat there with hands over mouths trying not to burst out laughing. Dylan hated whenever you pointed anything out about him. It was a thing for us to always point out the colour of his shirts or whenever he bought new shoes and he'd take a swing at us for it. He didn't take a swing at the drunk guy, though. Just let him continue on and about whatever it was he was continuing on about. The pizza came in the generic white square box that pizzas come in. Pizzas are always different depending on where you get them from, even if you get the same toppings, but the box it comes in never changes.
It reminds me of a coffin. He paid for it and we thanked him, and that’s when he kinda got sombre and told us he was dying of cancer.

We didn’t say anything. It was probably only a short moment, but there was this silence, which was weird since the guy had not stopped running his mouth since he came in. One of us said, “Oh, that sucks.” I don’t know who said it, it might have been me. I didn’t think about the man at the dam Jordan and I met. They were different experiences, different times, different people. But in both cases I felt the need to remove myself from the situation. I just stuffed my mouth full of pizza, eating away at maybe the last kind gesture the drunk guy might have ever made. Not as poetic as listening to the water, but it got the job done. He started crying a little bit, and then, like it was nothing, bounced back and said goodbye with a big smile and a wave and out the door he walked, alone in the dark.

We agreed that the pizza was better than expected, and worth the annoying drunk cancer guy. We wondered if he even had cancer. Maybe it was just something he made up to get some sort of compassion from us. Either way, we didn’t really feel much. We never really felt much back then. Walls of resentment and arrogance built up around us so we didn’t have to deal with anything that we didn’t want to deal with.

After the pizza was gone and out of our minds (even though our guts would spend some time digesting it) we walked home and whether the guy had cancer or not didn’t matter. We had already forced it out of our heads.