

# SPOONFEED



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# EDITORIAL

*content note: food, consumption\**

As a new addition to the SPOONFEED editorial team, and the editor of *New Interpretations*, a blog for political essays, I was looking forward to bringing a critical approach to bear on the editing process. This was, however, complicated by the outstanding quality of not just the work selected for publication, but of all the writing submitted for consideration. The authors whose work was eventually chosen to feature in this issue all show an ability to understand and represent the value and beauty of food – something that is often lost via its relegation to the realms of necessity.

Inspired by the perceptiveness of the food writing in this issue, I began to consider how we might come to better appreciate the aesthetic value of our food – and put this into words. It is not until this aesthetic value is translated into language that it is truly appreciated; prior to this, the value is trapped within the individual. The ability to verbalise or write about this value does, however, rest on an ability to appreciate it in the first place.

I looked to [Howard S. Becker's 1974 discussion](#) of how to read a photograph. Becker argues that – unlike photographers – ‘[l]aymen learn to read photographs the way they do headlines, skipping over them quickly to get the gist of what is being said.’ This inattentiveness to detail should not be attributed to a lack of ability, but rather to the role that media plays in our society. The oversaturation of media in daily life has meant that its consumption has ultimately become symptomatic of its dailiness – something that is done absentmindedly. In this sense, the “consumption” of media parallels the consumption of food. We so often fail to grasp the value of food outside of chemical sustenance, by eating it quickly, and – rather aptly – eating it whilst consuming media. It should of course be acknowledged that rapid and/or inattentive consumption of food is not necessarily a choice, but rather a symptom of time poverty. Ultimately, what this means is that we frequently miss the beauty of food.

Becker implores us to read photographs with care, as ‘[e]very part of the photographic image carries some information that contributes to its total statement’. Becker cites a method taught to him by Philip Perkis:

‘Using a watch with a second hand, look at the photograph intently for two minutes. Don't stare and thus stop looking; look actively. It will be hard to do, and you 'll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture to yourself: this is a man, this is his arm, this is the finger on his hand, this is the shadow his hand makes, this is the cloth of his sleeve, and so on. Once you have done this for two minutes, build it up to five, following the naming of things with a period of fantasy, telling yourself a story about the people and things in the picture. The story needn't be true; it's just a device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and mood the picture has evoked, both part of its statement.’

Given the similarities between the consumption of food and of media, Becker's call to pay attention to photographs could likewise be applied to our food. By using this method, Becker hopes that we can unpack what a photograph evokes, and through the application of this method to our food, both visually and to its taste, we can hope to achieve something similar. Of course, this approach cannot be utilised word for word – staring at your food for five minutes before touching it may leave it rather tepid.

For Perkis and Becker, appreciating the value of a photograph hinges upon an appreciation of the value of *time*. Wherever possible, when eating food, we might set time aside without distraction to consider its flavours and thus practice a sort of mindful eating. On a fundamental, analytic level, it may be useful to bear in mind the five 'basic tastes' (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami): to identify them in the same way Perkis asks us to identify the elements of a photograph, so as to build up a complete and complex idea of the meal being consumed. This could be termed the 'reading' of food.

The writers in this issue take Perkis' method further: they follow the naming of things with the 'period of fantasy'. They tell themselves – and us, the readers – a story about the food. This storytelling functions as a means to examine its resonance: by telling stories, borders shiver and dissolve; the world shrinks and holds itself, prone, at the end of a fork.

By spending time with food, as these writers have, it is rescued from the depths of necessity. Hopefully, the writing in this issue can serve as testament not only to the aesthetic beauty of food, but to its power. This issue is free to access; it costs you only the most valuable of currency.

Connor Smith  
Assistant Editor

*\* Please be aware that due to the focus of the magazine, this note applies to the whole issue*

# ADELINE LOH

## *Two Poems*

### eating ondeh ondeh for the first time

they looked innocent enough, these green rice balls dusted with grated coconut. you think anything pandan-flavoured must taste good, be good enough to keep you from wanting. except no one told you that the first mistake is to hesitate. you've never eaten one before so you bite into half of it, only to have gula melaka burst out and forth, away from your half-open mouth, brown sugary streaks now settling into carpet before your hands can even cup the spill. so here, you have half an ondeh ondeh, damp and limp in your palm. suppose this is what it feels like to be a butterfly unfolding its sticky, wet wings for the first time, only to see that its world has not changed. only the beating rush of new wings, hammering and then peeled apart by shaking fingers. crumbled back into grated coconut at the end of its lifespan. say that it lived as fiercely as it could against its own teething, a kind of longing for a wider wingspan, for the surety of a migrating monarch butterfly, to be one for whom nectar and flight is enough. eating and longing cannot sit on the same wings yet. later, you quell the trembling and finish eating from your own hand. one more bite, and then nothing left but sticky fingers to wash.

## kitchen diorama

where everything / narrows down / to the way he says / restaurant / do not laugh / it does not  
have to be / a good restaurant / i am thinking of / eating again / eating because / i have learnt /  
to love / myself / but i also eat / if i may admit / because i love / not so much and just / you /  
but / to you / in some shape or form / because i want / to eat with you / always watch / the  
way you / hold your chopsticks / fingers curled then flexed / the shape of your mouth / there  
is no question / feelings sharper / over time / a wet knife on the whetstone / we've never /  
eaten together / just the two / of us / something / out of the rubble / of food scraps / i am  
asking you / to be in the kitchen / with me / bear witness and testimony / to these feelings /  
give me a reason / to learn how / to peel and slice a mango / scrape a mango clean from its  
skin / to share, sticky sweet / fold a dumpling like / a love letter / what makes / a kitchen? /  
takeout rolls of chee cheong fun / every clinging bite / a reminder of / the slope of your neck /  
turned away / visions of fine bone china / porcelain / plates, spoons, chopsticks / meat eaten  
clean to the bone / things that i imagine / you like to eat / i'd make / lotus root soup / the soup  
spoon / a sweet kiss / every meal hereafter / a direction / towards you

Adeline Loh

is a final-year Literature major and writer from Singapore. Her work has been published in *SingPoWriMo 2018: The Anthology* and *This Is Not A Safety Barrier* (2016). When she's not wrestling with her poems or creative nonfiction pieces, she can be found napping, cooking, or knitting at home.

# BRIONY HUGHES

## from *Milk*

### *pint 1: soy*

all plant triggers the reflex  
arch to spout any froth or foam  
entering this pint glass  
a thickness lines the teeth

there must be a throat  
rearing the next swallow  
not choreographed not rhythmic  
just miming her dietary intervention

this is the first pint of five  
[tidal] intervals emptying her outline

### *pint 2: oat*

my bloods will run creamy – thick  
[a possibility increasing over 14 days]

watch the duct sting as white film layers her iris  
[rub this away in sleep]

press torso into mattress and reconsider the worth of your pain

### *interval*

rinse and repeat  
until lips flickering  
enter a new site  
consider a density  
[at the bottom of your glass]

### *pint 3: almond*

not as I remembered  
notes of soil  
a scratch to the throat

ask yourself:

the question will  
always be sugar coated      [but as for the almonds]

not flavoured in imitation  
not sustainable water use

*interval*      roof of mouth as metallic  
the tongue pitter-patters  
an episode of dehydration

[excrete and breathe]

from one body to another

*pint 4: rice*      consider water tension  
of the stomach      knotting  
as you take a midday shower  
these shards  
[or clear ants scuttle]  
redacted into the thousands  
sweet sickens the palate  
avoid sickness

*pint 5: cow*      heave further as body mass  
or take a nap

[a commitment is necessary]

formed from grass or hay  
flanking as restlessness  
this tributary waits

## Briony Hughes

is a poet, visiting tutor, and AHRC funded doctoral researcher based at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her publications include *Dorothy* (Broken Sleep Books) and *Microsporidial* (Sampson Low). She is a co-founder of the Crested Tit Collective (2018 – 2020), and established Osmosis Press in January 2021.

*Milk* was written following a short stay in hospital. This excerpt reflects on the liquid diet the author was placed on prior to surgery: five pints of milk a day, for a fortnight. *Milk* reflects on the experience as a form of embodied research, wherein the boundaries are pushed between the body and its intimacy with liquids.

# C.P. NIELD

## Communion

*content note: recreational drug use*

I say 'Alexa'  
and now I'm streaming  
a triptych of muscle Marys  
quaffing liquid G  
in one clusterfuck of 'Hallelujah!'

C.P. Nield's

poetry has appeared in *New Poetries IV* (Carcenet), as well as journals like *PN Review*, *The Rialto*, *Ambit*, *Agenda*, *Magma*, *Brittle Star*, *The North* and *Poetry Wales*. Recently he was shortlisted for the Wolverhampton Literary Festival poetry prize and the Telegraph's lockdown poetry prize.



# CHARLIE BAYLIS

## chelsey i don't care

i wasted the best years of my life  
making breakfast for chelsey minnis, making lunch for chelsey minnis  
making dinner for chelsey minnis  
while she wrote poetry  
she was as pink as most people who are pink  
she threw a cabbage at me  
for coming home late from the supermarket  
she threw a turkey at me  
for buying the cheapest beer in the supermarket  
& chucked it down the sink  
i had a handful of dreams  
i hid them from chelsey minnis until the day they came true  
those were the best years of my life  
the last thing i want is sympathy

Charlie Baylis

is from Nottingham, England. He is the Editor of *Anthropocene*, the Poetry Editor of *Review 31* and the Chief Editorial Advisor of Broken Sleep Books. His poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Forward Prize. His most recent publication is *Swimming* (the Red Ceiling Press). He spends his spare time completely adrift of reality.

# CHRISSIE DREIER

## Love

I love the grasp of a hair in tweezers,  
the tug as I pull it from the mole on my chin.

I love fried eggs in a pan,  
the lip-smacking smooches

as their conversation fizzes  
like old lovers reunited after years apart.

I love watching brewed tea and milk collide  
love the power I hold with a spoon

as liquids reveal thin, gnarled tendrils  
surrendering into a shade of beige.

I love making popcorn, love  
the children's faces and open

mouths, as we hear the snaps,  
see the quivering lid.

I think what a thrill it would be to throw  
my bubbling fury into space

and see scorched clouds  
ignite the sky as they ascend

sparing nothing.

Chrissie Dreier

is a poet from Oxfordshire and mother to three young children. When not writing poetry or parenting, she works for an online educational enterprise for young people.

# CHRISTINE MARIE LIM MAGPILE

## Ramen o Tabemasho

*content note: pandemic*

In Nihongo, *ramen o tabemasho* means 'let us eat Japanese noodles.' With the COVID-19 pandemic, I miss eating ramen because my favourite ramen restaurant, Ippudo, is temporarily closed. When I went to Japan in 2017 to visit my sister, she brought me to the Ippudo ramen house in its Roppongi, Tokyo branch. My sister thought that eating ramen would be perfect, as its warm and tasty pork broth and chewy egg noodles would comfort my growling stomach and soothe my aching body, tired from the long walk from the Ueno Park.

At Shin Yokohoma, you can find the Ramen Museum. Visitors can learn about the history of Japan's ramen. The museum also shows the different kinds of noodles, soups, and bowls used all over Japan. There are regions in Japan that are known for their ramen dish.

I like eating ramen because of its sumptuous pork both with a generous serving of pork belly *chashu*, *kikurage* mushroom, and scallions. Specifically, I like *tonkotsu* ramen. In Nihongo, *tonkotsu* refers to pork, while 'ramen' means 'noodles'.

Due to the restrictions on going out during the pandemic, local government units in the Philippines give food rations to each house in the neighbourhood. Instant noodles are one of the staples in these food packages because they are easy to cook. But instant noodles are no match for the authentic Japanese ramen.

Apart from the larger serving, *butaniku* (ぶたにく), or pork, ramen, and *gyuniku* (ぎゅうにく), or beef, ramen are tastier than instant ramen, and include other fresh vegetables such as spring onions and carrots. In our area, the relief food packages are mostly local brands of instant noodles like Lucky Me or Ho-Mi. One time, our neighbour knocked and asked if we would like to barter the Ho-Mi chicken-flavoured instant noodles he received for the Lucky Me calamansi-flavoured instant *pancit canton* we got.<sup>1 2</sup>

The instant ramen, aside from its small serving, is also very salty. One time, while eating Lucky Me beef-flavoured instant noodles for three days in a row for breakfast, it dawned on me that while Mama and I may survive the pandemic, our kidneys could be in danger and get kidney stones, as the relief goods we receive are mostly instant and too salty.

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<sup>1</sup> Calamansi is a small lime, about two inches in size, common to Southeast Asia.

<sup>2</sup> *Pancit canton* is a local Filipino version of stir-fried noodles, with soy sauce and sesame oil.

In some cities from the provinces, they receive either fresh fruits or vegetables. I wouldn't mind eating boiled potatoes and yams, just like people during World War II, as it is much healthier. With a little imagination, peeling boiled potatoes gives a 'Princess Sarah' vibe.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from instant noodles, canned sardines are a staple in the relief food packages, as they are cheap and easily sourced. In three rounds of the food ration from our local government unit, there was one instance when a nearly expired can of SPAM was included in our bag of "goodies". I then missed *musubi*, my favourite Japanese snack – a rectangular rice *maki* with spam on top, which is then wrapped in *nori* (seaweed). Eating canned sardines with *ohashi* (箸), or chopsticks, I just imagined that it was tuna or salmon.

When I was in Japan, I always ate *sushi* and *sashimi* as an appetiser before having ramen for my main course. In Japan, sushi and sashimi are so fresh and tasty compared to the local Japanese restaurants here in the Philippines, where they are frozen. During the lockdown, I suggested to Mama that she use the canned sardines to make a gourmet ramen. Mama's attempt to make the fancy ramen failed because the instant noodles we received were nearly expired.

Mama's been contemplating opening a canteen with instant noodles as the special menu when the lockdown is lifted. *Ramen o suki desu*. In Nihongo, this means 'I like ramen.' Once it is safe to travel overseas, Mama and I will eat at our favourite ramen house with my sister.

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<sup>3</sup> Princess Sarah is the main character from Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. When she becomes "poor", Ms. Minchin, the headmistress, makes Sarah an errand girl, and asks her to do odd jobs – including peeling potatoes.

## Christine Marie Lim Magpile

has a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education (BSEd) from the University of Santo Tomas, and is currently pursuing an MA in Araling Pilipino from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. She was a fellow at the 6th Angono Writers' Summer Workshop and 9th UST National Writers' Workshop. She is a copy editor for the UP Press.

# ELEANOR BURLEIGH

## baby teeth

dear semolina you lumpy and  
yellow squat in my throat like bile  
as I lie in bed restless at night your  
taste permeates me like I read tastes  
can do you imagine something and  
the apparition of it appears on your  
tongue but you don't stop there you  
crawl down my throat wriggling  
through all the tight spaces custard-y  
worm tail you never understood me  
at school sat squatted there in  
a plastic bowl with a plastic  
spoon staring sullenly at my  
small pig tailed face they used to  
mix raisins through which  
I've always liked but when I would  
pick them out there was always  
a coating of your milky spit like  
the sugary thick coating they put on  
pain killers semolina I never  
understood myself through the  
thin veil of water floating above you  
I would tilt my head puff out my cheeks  
watch the slight shifts of the reflection  
in the bowl we never had too much to  
say to each other it's funny  
the relationships that stick

Eleanor Burleigh

is a writer who finds inspiration in the sensory and tactile, and a fan of exploring ideas of the abject through poetry. She is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia.

# ELLA DUFFY

## Shy Supper

Find me at the gate of some old house,  
    knees in the mud, pulling  
a mushroom as if it were a wrist and under the earth,  
an arm reaching. Here, the garden  
is in knots; old green lifts     new green.  
But I have found part of our supper  
and it is rare. Under my thumb,  
it offers a kind of blush.

Ella Duffy's

work has appeared in *The London Magazine*, *Ambit*, and *The Rialto*, among others. She is the author of two pamphlets, *New Hunger* (Smith|Doorstop) and *Rootstalk* (Hazel Press).

# EMILY COOPER

## Dinner with Raymona

*content note: blood, death*

her mother was driven to distraction by the blood on the walls  
all up the tiles the clots filling the drain scaffolded by needle bones strips of skin  
pulled off like rabbit hide ripped over the heads  
the rows of sharp teeth she would never eat eels again preferring  
fish with less mud in their veins fish that have never travelled from the Sargasso sea  
to die on the deck of her father's boat slammed hard against the wooden edge

Emily Cooper

is an Irish poet and writer. She has been published in *The Stinging Fly*, *Irish Times*, *Banshee*, *Hotel*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and others. Her debut pamphlet *Glass* comes out with Makina Books in May 2021.



# FISOLA KELLY-AKINNUOYE

## Pancakes

Nancy wondered why we got the families we got. Was God tossing people, without rhyme or reason, into family packets that moved on heaven's conveyor belt? Were you given who you needed so you could be fully you – whatever that means? Is everyone somehow in the right family? Does God make sure at least one person can cook?

Nancy's mum would make pancakes in the morning. Not really morning because the young kids slept like sloths on the weekends, not a care in the world, the day drifting away and nothing really mattering. Nancy, however, tended to rise early. She would watch morning TV for hours. Not the kids' channels. She had an appetite for reality TV. She would gawk at rich, white girls crying about their boyfriends cheating on them for the fifth time. Staged confrontations about who said what about who and whatever, those moments really had her on the edge of the sofa. Sometimes it would be drama. Strangers kissing passionately after talking for five minutes, and someone seeing them and telling someone. She would watch a lot of people kissing on TV.

Small Nancy, swallowed by the three-seater, not really feeling guilty but knowing she would not watch this if her mum was there. Then her mother's footfalls would drum on the stairs, gradually growing louder. Nancy would fumble with the remote that would be sinking into the gaps between the cushions. Her heart would be on the floor and she would hold her breath as she pinched the buttons with her thumbnails; frantically trying to change the channel to news.

'And now for this morning's headlines...'

'Good morning my dear, God bless you.'

Pretending to withdraw herself from the intensity of the world – its calamity, its policy trouble, its rising deaths, its war, its crises and crashes, its violence and retribution – Nancy beamed at her mum's sleep-stained face. Her eyes were small in the swell of her eyelids and her lips hung lazily after she spoke her first words. It was important a good morning was wished upon everyone who woke up in that house. She would hold her greeting in her mouth until it was about to turn bitter before she would spit it out.

'Hi mum, God bless you.'

The morning was always gentle and forgiving of what happened last night. You could say the most horrible thing or yell violently at your child for a minor transgression, but sleep softened the rage, until morning could get rid of it completely. Nancy would always wonder if the night did its job properly and the new day was truly new.

After a while, her stomach growled, and she began to hang around the kitchen.

'Mum, what are you making?'

'Do you guys want pancakes?'

Nancy became very excited at the prospect of breaking her fast with something so sweet. After all, she was anticipating egg and yam. Nice but heavy. Her mum got out the ingredients on the counter table and Nancy let out a shy smile. She was in awe of her mother's wizardry.

What she began with became sweet sheets that would fill her belly. Into the white bowl went flour and sugar and milk and eggs. Her strong arms began to combine the contents of the bowl vigorously.

'If it's too thick, you can always add water or milk.'

Spinning over to the sink, her mum shot a quick stream of water into the bowl, and then began to whisk again. Nancy turned dumbly on the gold stool, making mental note of the recipe. Then the pale liquid settled into the pan. Breathing shallowly, letting tiny, tiny pockets of air rise to the surface before turning solid. The sweet air wafted through the kitchen and beyond. Deftly, her mother flipped the pan, revealing a giraffe-print bottom. Her hands shifted the pancake back into the centre of the pan so the heat could radiate throughout. And even though Nancy knew her mum didn't feel the scorch of the pan, she knew something else burned inside her. There was a reticence in her face – as if she needed to scream.

Freshly woken children trailed into the kitchen. The wind chime twinkled like an old bookshop door. Four plates on the counter. The pancakes waited to be eaten. Ma didn't eat any. She worked on the perfect circles and watched her children tear them and smack their lips. Pulling paper-thin pancakes like crepe-coloured pages from an old book. Maybe that's love. Making something perfect and giving it away to be destroyed.

The eldest of the children washed the plates. And when they were all out of the kitchen Nancy's mum would prepare her own food. She didn't have breakfast often. Pillow-fluffy rice and stew was her preference. A mixture of pepper and toothpaste. Two kinds of spice jousting on the tongue. Does food taste as good when you make it yourself? When your own webbed hands slide rice until the water runs clear? Who are you loving when you fix a plate of food and give it to yourself? Rice and stew made Nancy's mum feel at home. It was like a plate from her own mother. The warm pureed tomato sauce was kind to the belly. She needed this embrace. There was nowhere to be small in a house full of noise.

Nancy wasn't watching TV anymore. There were too many people talking and running around the place. Someone wanted to watch this and someone else wanted to watch that, so she went to her room. Maybe she would read a book. Maybe she would do some homework. Nancy felt the pancakes in the bottom of her stomach.

**Fisola Kelly-Akinuoye**

is a BA English student at the University of Birmingham. She works across mediums including theatre, poetry, and prose. Her writing reflects on identity, race, gender, and mental health.

# FRAN ATTÍE

## Tapioca

*content note: recreational drug use*

*Mandioca is a plant, a brown root, one of the few ingredients of Brazilian cuisine that has always been in Brazil, even before colonisation. It is conjoined with Indigenous culture, both in our recognition of mandioca — as plant and myth — and the way we prepare it. It can be eaten like a potato; it can be turned into flour, into bread and pasta; it becomes tapioca, to be eaten sweet or salty; it can even be turned into drinks, still or alcoholic, chibé, tucupi or cauim. Mandioca is the most versatile ingredient I know, and it took me a long time to realise it, probably because I failed to recognise what it meant for myself.*

Sometimes, on the road, you find people so inextricably like yourself, and you're surprised, because it had been a while and after heartbreak you thought you wouldn't again.

I met Maya once before, and we bonded quickly but transiently, but now we've shared an overwhelming experience together, where one of its most enduring realisations was that I knew her deeply, or rather intuitively, as if I had grown up with her and for the longest time we'd existed together. Then, at some point in our childhood, we'd separated, without pain or trauma — perhaps even without the knowledge of the separation — and lived our lives, different and separate.

Way down the road we met again, and recognized in the Other familiarity. This speaks to more than culture, class or nationality. It's a bond in the way we think, in values related to our very abstract understandings of the world.

For the longest time, I had a hunch we'd get along. You see, Maya is my best friend's girlfriend, and as I said, I met her once before (last year), and I had certainly heard a lot about her from him, but I don't live in Brazil; I left my country a long time ago, to search for something — though what exactly, I couldn't possibly tell you. Maybe I forgot — and ended up missing out on so many of the experiences my friends had here in my absence. I couldn't, for one, ever bond with Gil's girlfriends, and rarely ever met his friends. That is why, perhaps, I was so glad when Maya and I found common ground so nonchalantly in this experience we shared.

It happened in the mountains of Minas Gerais. We went up a few days before New Year — Gil, Maya, another two of their friends, and me. We wanted to get away, reenergise, and eat mushrooms.

Bravely, or perhaps stupidly, we almost resolved to pick the mushrooms there ourselves. The region is a hippie port, and though we aren't, some of us felt it our duty to act as such; when in Rome...

The house was inside an old farm and there were animals roaming about, chicken, farm dogs, and cattle. Now, where there's cattle there's cow shit, and where there's cow shit, there's mushrooms. It's simple math really.

Not so simple, however, is to forage if you're inexperienced, as we all were. So, luckily, we didn't. I guess it's easier to trust men to give it to you proper, especially when you're dealing with potentially poisonous stuff.

I always wondered if the reason mushrooms can make you both trip and die is because they grow so close to death, and alive as they are, fungi that feed off death, they try to show us a reality much different from ours. Though they grow over the dead, they are not dead themselves, but that line is fine and timid, and if disrespected, can send you either side of life. Mushrooms are a passageway of sorts, to convene with energies we couldn't ever feel in our regular lives, in our regular state of consciousness, energies from our past and our inevitable future.

After taking the shrooms, we decided to venture out into the farm. It was easy to realise, however, that not all of us were feeling the trip the same. Maya and I wanted to be outside. We looked at the mountains in the distance and at each other and we wanted to be there, and were in some way walking up, like Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith. Gil and the other couple had their hearts set somewhere else, and left us quickly.

So we walked some more, we traversed green fields, each their own little world, as we talked sparingly but deeply, about matters celestial and ephemeral. We felt connected, the same, our minds each our own, but our feelings very much one.

We heard a creek in the distance and felt the water on our hands — a bubble in water, swimming. A frog — and wondered if bees always feel this sort of synaesthesia, because maybe it is *feeling*, so much of it and at the same time, that makes animals less inclined to barter their existence.

Then, in the middle of our path, was a rock. *There was a rock in the middle of our path.* As we tired of walking, we pondered laying down on this rock, stranded, white and stable in the middle of our path. We were wary at first, as we didn't want the change of action to ruin our moment. Still, we sat, we laid down, we watched the clouds, clouds cycling in their own time above us, showing us how they do it, to what end; and we closed our eyes and felt the sun dim and rise, ebullient, and when we finally stood up again, she said,

'We were worried, but getting off the rock was so easy.'

The moment I realised how alike we were came at the end of our walk, when we reached a gate that would lead us back to the house. It was truly a divider. Up to that point we had been walking on grass. Beyond the gate, the floor was cement. We stopped there for a moment, taking account of our journey, silently closing the ritual, and preparing ourselves for what was to come, the future goodbyes, the separation.

We looked at one another again, and at the gate, she said, 'Open sesame!'

A flood washed over me, the effects of the mushroom leaving my body, replaced by a stock of memories I'm not sure I'd ever remembered. As a child I used to say 'open sesame' all the time, in front of doors and elevators. I'd learned it when my mother read me the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. I'd only ever said it with her, and had never heard it said by someone else. The hit from those two words in that moment was instantaneous, and, as I write it now, I almost feel it, and am glad to have left that day with that echo.

When we got back, we understood our experience had truly been our own. While the others were showered and eager for the night, we had just realized how much we loved mornings and the sun. It felt to us like they hadn't completed the experience, and were unable to coalesce the moment. Maybe they never got up from their rocks. We did. Perhaps because we were together, or because we'd always been.

We knew we had stayed outside for hours, but were surprised by how many (five), and once we were told the time, we instantly got hungry. She cooked, without a moment's hesitation, *tapioca*, and as I saw her cooking, I wanted it too.

Eating *tapioca*, I always remember when I had it the first time, in Amazonas, at that unknowable age, when all is magnified and ethereal. I had gone with my family in one of those trips where the aim is to go into the forest, though not deep enough so there's never real danger. A friend of mine went to the Sahara once, to camp in the desert. At night, when he needed the bathroom, the Bedouin guide told him to walk backwards from the camp, until he felt far enough away to do the deed, but never to break sight of where he must return to, because it's easy to get lost in the dunes and it would be pointless for them to search for him if he did.

Obviously that's not all true, what the guide said; the liability would be too grand. But that's sort of what you want in these types of adventures, you want to be told the danger exists, though never truly be in line for it, and then you feel accomplished somehow, as if you'd not only had a fresh experience, but also achieved something that's so enigmatic for city folk. I reckon that's what my parents wanted to offer me when we went to Amazonas.

The first *tapioca* I ate came at the end of that trip. *Tapioca*, I realize I haven't told you yet, is a flour, and at the same time, a sort of crêpe. It is quite bland on its own, but you eat it like a taco, though with much less stuffing because not everything agrees with *tapioca*. The first one I had was stuffed with ham and cheese and it was true and felt like nothing I'd ever had before. It's a simple flavour by itself, but gets magnified as a complement, and the texture is equal parts elastic, grainy and dry.

To get *tapioca*, you must skin the *mandioca*, grate it and press it inside of a *tipiti*— an indigenous tool made out of straw, which extracts the juices from *mandioca*— separating it into flour and *tucupi manso* (the juice), which you must collect as it leaves the *tipiti*. In the *tucupi manso*, after you let it rest for a few hours, the liquid will come to the top, while a white paste— gum, we call it— will sink and bind at the bottom. The liquid is poisonous, but fermented and cooked, becomes a drink, called, simply, *tucupi*. The paste, dried and strained, becomes *tapioca*, almost a flour, which, when put over heat, binds again, in whatever shape you set it, and becomes a crêpe.

I saw my mother doing it once when I was very little. Only when I was older, long after she had passed, did I properly learn the ritual. And it is very much a ritual, one that's been the same for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, passed down in Indigenous tribes and then to colonisers and the enslaved Africans, until, in the *mélange* of cultures that is Brazil, it became our own culture. Alex Atala calls it the backbone of Brazil.

That day, Maya cooked herself a ham and cheese *tapioca* and I did the same. After the trip, I embarked on a quest to cook the perfect *tapioca*. Knowing, of course, that no *tapioca* would ever taste as good as the first, nor the one I ate that day with her. Still, I kept notes, a food diary of sorts, as I searched for that ever elusive feeling, one I don't fully understand, nor can I explain. Maybe I will know it when it hits me, like 'open sesame' did.

I've been writing about it since, and I learned the ritual and remembered a story my mother told me once. It's our folklore, the story of a young Indigenous girl called Mani, who was vibrant and happy, but suddenly got sick, very sick, and lay on the brink of death. The tribe's healer, the *pajé*, tried to help her, but he couldn't figure out what was wrong with her, and Mani died, so very young. Her parents buried her in their home, inside the *oca*, and with their tears they watered the soil. One day, a plant grew in the *oca*, a brown root, right where Mani had been buried. The mother gave the plant her daughter's name, and it was as if they had been reunited. As time passed, her name grew— Mani plus *oca*— became *Mandioca*.

## Fran Attié

is a writer, born in São Paulo. He has been published in *Lodown Magazine*, *Abend(b)rot* (based in Berlin), *The West 4th Street Review*, *Dovetail*, *TheSportUniverse*, and *Confluence in New York*. A graduate of NYU in Global Liberal Studies, with a concentration in Law, Ethics, History and Religion, he digs movies and music.

# JAKE REYNOLDS

## from *Two of Us*

*content note: allusion to murder*

E (know) I'm so jealous of the families who  
can just switch off as the tale-telling starts.  
Those who serve veg in family heirlooms  
with steel serving spoons, and leave them to steam  
until they sweat off, linger, and go cold.  
I love their unjust contracts: chat to me  
and I'll dry. Luxury disagreements  
every week regarding communal  
mealtimes. The decadence of a table  
with a takeaway menu folded in  
a tight wedge jammed beneath a leg so that  
glasses don't rattle as we take the days  
from each other and carve them all up, cack-  
handed, then protest: *I don't want us to  
argue! Let's make up! I want us all to  
get along!* Like, fine. I'm here. And I know  
that I'd hate myself for wishing for it.  
I've filibustered my way through pomp and  
now I have to attend to it. I'm a  
fraud with an active listener.

Gravy.

O (alright) Always pooled in mounds of mash, that smell I  
know from childhood. With our forks we scraped peaks  
into palaces, but we had to tear  
them down—the moat would always burst its banks  
and drown the cowards, no relief from slits  
for arrows, no narrative or justice  
for unfounded anger. All deleted.

E (sweep) The clock won't stop spinning. Clocks blow my mind.  
I've been angry almost all of the time  
at everyone telling me I'm angry.  
I go to reflect, but not before you  
lollop onto the tracks, jangling a bunch  
of keys like you know what they're for — like this

place is yours — unannounced like a fatal twinge, or landlord. And then you chastise *me* for frowning. For so many years I've been treading dark water, in charge of a web of leads. You rest up — I wake in cold sweats.

O (well) I climbed from the pit of my own malaise and the world became my loft bed and desk.

E (erm) The world's your room for wrappers and packets. You still have the scar from bolting too quick. It's settled like solder into its groove; a mark of your childhood, charm pink and smooth.

\*\*\*

E (testing) Ours was the home classmates said smelled funny. Spiders smushed on the walls, smudges of tapped ash everywhere, slack beanbags on the floor like ablated corpses. We knew to wash beans and lentils, but never the start to finish of any useful process. Scraps toward something worthwhile. Fools' errands. These days I miss that uselessness. I miss my life as a cog. Everyone acts like I'm boiling over, but they never leave. Instead they walk around me like this house, old-boned, might reveal them. The very first time I recall seeing my own image reflected back at me, I was playing by a creek on a morning without wind. I pushed one eye until it reached its give, went lazy, and saw a double vision of myself. We both spoke in the same way, but before I'd unplugged my bony knees from the suck of the muddy bank, they both left me there. Reeds buffered invisibly, humming to an indifferent current. I know what my reflections have been up to since that day, and salute vicious shoots of pain for the sake of the twin process, the endgame. I returned as a nuisance years later, but the water had clouded into grey, too filthy to see a thing. The last time I checked, there was only a gulch. So, dear house, I have abandoned my



selves, and with them their capabilities.  
The boards contract and crack. Now the two of  
us are back in a tableau of my youth,  
I sense you seething, playing tricks on me.

O (struggle) That's better. Do you think I'm a coward?

E (flat) I think we're just predisposed to drama.

O (snag) Predetermined (that's my education).  
Look elsewhere. Let's forfeit the theatre  
of an extravagant meal, this second  
helping of torture. Why is it so us  
to make such an adjournment in fear of  
our stresses? Why should we manufacture  
an occasion? Do we like pain or what?  
I say get it done. I know you think I'm  
brutish, or giddy for blood, but this knife  
is just a totem. It's my figurine.

E (more fool) Having eaten—though I know we haven't,  
yet—you'd bolt, then complain that your escape  
was scuppered by a stitch. I know the thought  
attracts you. But without me you would be  
limping as they closed in: SWAT teams, choppers,  
the lot. If food goes cold I couldn't care  
less. It's the being seen that matters. I  
demand, at least, that we are seen by both.

O (closed) Perversely, I could eat.

## Jake Reynolds

is a poet from Lincoln, currently studying for a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of East Anglia. His research concerns the first-person plural, antipopulist poetics, and the late works of John Ashbery.

*Two of Us: Electra & Orestes* is a loose retelling of Euripides's *Electra*, a duologue poem between siblings Electra and Orestes, as they prepare to murder their mother and stepfather under the guise of an extravagant banquet. The action takes place in the family kitchen, the parents asleep upstairs.

# JONAH CORREN

## Rue Cremieux

*for L.H.*

The Airbnb flat didn't have a corkscrew,  
so we used a knife instead; shredded  
the stopper until it collapsed, sprinkling  
sandy fragments into the bottle.

We drank it anyway, sieved into one  
tall glass, and one large mug with  
the Eiffel Tower embossed on the side.

Sitting on the unconverted sofa-bed, we watched  
as the sun set on the cobbled street, eating  
packet ravioli from a nearby supermarket,  
our bags still packed, resting by the door.

Jonah Corren,

hailing from West Dorset, is a poet and singer-songwriter. His work has been published in *Alter Egos: A Bad Betty Anthology*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, *Blog 84*, and *Morning Star*. He is also a UniSlam champion (2019), and a BBC New Creative (2019/20).

# JOSHUA JUDSON

## August

there's lads  
on my road  
look at me  
like they wanna eat me  
all huddled round  
the open bonnet of a car

lads who might've been called *trouble*  
more than their actual names in school

but what do I know  
other than the definite feeling  
of eyes pressed hard  
against my back

and the sky is the same overripe colour  
of the figs on offer in Lidl  
and I'm biting my lip  
for something to do with my mouth  
in front of the baked goods

and I fill my little tote bag  
and I think my little thoughts  
and by the time I round the corner  
they've gone

Joshua Judson

is a poet from Nottingham. He's a member of the Barbican Young Poets community. His work has appeared in such publications as *The North*, *Magma*, *Brittle Star*, *The Rialto*, *The White Review*, and *Butcher's Dog*. His debut pamphlet *Gongoozler* is available from Bad Betty Press.

# LAUREN SCHARHAG

## Snoot

*content note: implied slaughter*

There's this dive that serves burgers and tenderloins  
and a pig snoot sandwich —  
police rookies are served the latter as a rite of passage.  
They've been slinging snoot since the Depression era  
when people were more appreciative  
of the *eat everything but the oink* mentality.  
Served on a bun, one nostril yellow with mustard,  
the other red-orange with horseradish and hot sauce,  
garnished with tomato and onion.  
Pigs have exceptional senses of smell.  
It's how they sniff out those elusive truffles.  
I want the sandwich to reflect this sophistication,  
but it's fatty, spongy, though the horseradish  
clears my own sinuses. As I chew it,  
I think of our road trip to Chicago,  
sister meatpacking city, a livestock truck on I-80  
hauling young piglets, dozens of tiny pink noses  
thrust inquiringly through the slats like  
climbing vine roses, tasting the Iowa air.

Lauren Scharhag

is an award-winning poet and author. Her titles include *Requiem for a Robot Dog* (Cajun Mutt Press) and *Languages, First and Last* (Cyberwit Press). Her work has appeared in over 150 literary venues around the world. She lives in Kansas City, MO.

# LIAM BATES

## Spoils

At the end of the month, I turn in  
my check sheet: a quantified list of assorted heroics.  
The clerk chews a pen as he updates his spreadsheet.

A bushel of rare herbs acquired from a mountaintop.  
A missing ring back in the hands of its owner.  
A wagon escorted through countryside swarming  
with bandits. I typed up the weekly meeting notes, as requested.  
I saved the townsfolk from themselves,  
by lying several times on behalf of employers.

He tallies it all and deposits the funds in accordance  
with work legislation and those few gains  
obtained by unions. A portion goes straight out  
for rent. Then I spend some on eating.  
I'd love to eat fresh but I'm just so tired.

The driver is with me shortly. I take  
my pizzas at the door. His fee plus tip  
will be spent on him eating.  
He'd love to eat fresh but he's just so tired.

At home, he pours boiling water onto freeze-dried noodles,  
up to the pot's line, a little over. Green pea globes  
and chunks of soya swirl, some make it  
to the surface of the broth, some drown. Escaping  
steam fogs his glasses and the kitchenette window.  
Out there now could be something else entirely.

Liam Bates

is a poet originally from the Black Country. His poems are in *Ambit*, *Popshot*, *Prolit*, and others. His pamphlet, *Working Animals*, is available from Broken Sleep Books. His second pamphlet, *Monomaniac*, is forthcoming in November.

# LYNDSAY WHEBLE

## Truffles

*content note: death*

We've moved onto a street full of busybodies, I just know it.

What other reason could there be for me lugging this hedge trimmer along the pavement — god, it's heavy — when a pair of secateurs would have done the job just as well? I'm not hugely enamoured with this serrated blade flag-poling above my head, either. But, come on: it was *nice* of Mr. Gilbert to lend it to you. And if you will think aloud about the state of your garden in a room *full* of your elderly neighbours, this is what you'll get.

Mr. Gilbert's own hedge could do with a trim — crap, did that catch my coat?

Maybe he won't be in... it's so quiet at this end of the street.

They're lucky to have us, really, to bring some life back to it.

'Oh, hello there, Mrs. Marsh... to what do I owe the pleasure?' Mr. Gilbert asked, mock-debonair, clutching the inner handle of his blue front door. There was a jam smear on his Argyle jumper and his cheap slipper toes were scuffed. Pebble glasses made his pupils enormous.

'Hello, Mr. Gilbert! I wanted to get your hedge trimmer back to you, before you missed it,' I said, surprised that it was necessary to draw attention to the huge piece of machinery in my arms. 'I'm so grateful to you for letting us borrow it. Our hedges are looking a hundred times better.'

'My pleasure, Mrs. Marsh — my little way of welcoming you to the neighbourhood. Though, of course, you're welcome to borrow it whenever you need it. Just knock on my door, I'm always in...'

I shifted my grip.

Didn't he realise that it was heavy?

'Oh, my dear, do come in. Would you mind carrying it to the back door? César will be round to look at the garden tomorrow and he'll need to use it,' he said, shuffling aside to let me pass. I lumbered with it through his narrow house and leant it against the kitchen door jamb, which lead out into his garden. It was dark — such a towering incline to the gardens on this side of the street...

I realised that I'd walked into a rat hole.

'Thank you, my dear,' he whispered, close behind me. Hot, smelly breath.

I turned to face him, very measured. Smiled.

I'd have to knock him down to get back to the front door.

'No, *thank you*, Mr. Gilbert,' I shouted, in case anybody was passing, 'I should get back, my husband will be home soon, and he'll wonder where I am!'

A cloud passed over his face.

My skin prickled —

'Of course, Mrs. Marsh, don't let me keep you...'

He shuffled back into the hallway.

'Oh, my dear, you mustn't go without having a truffle,' he said, lifting an open box with his shaking hand — I jumped a mile. Truffles jittered in their plastic divots, old and stale, the fat bloom rife. 'My son brought them over at Christmas — we had one with a whisky before he had to go. It'll be months before I get through all of them myself... just me, on my own...'

Oh, God.

Doom oil-spilled through me.

'Thank you, lovely, what a treat,' I enthused, taking the freshest-looking one and putting it in my mouth. The cheap fat screamed and stuck to my teeth as I munched it. He took one as well, and put the box down. Everything was quiet for a moment. Then Mr. Gilbert made a strange noise, airless — more of a gesture, really, towards his throat.

'I'm sorry? Mr. Gilbert, are you choking?' I enquired, knowing in the back of my mind that I should be doing something more dynamic. Something that would cross the line of propriety.

'Mr. Gilbert?' I asked, a little wan now, as he smacked the wall with a jerk of his arm, grabbed for my coat and yanked me down towards him, before his hand went slack. He fell to his knees, then the floor. My heart was pounding, but it had been pounding since the kitchen door, so I wasn't sure what that meant. Lying prone, he was blue-tinged, like his carpet, which combined a geometric pattern with a blowsy, baffling floral. A flattened path in the nap ran between the front door and the kitchen, right under Mr. Gilbert's body, like the scent path of a wild animal. He had gone still — oh, hang on. No; he was still. I didn't know how to acknowledge the situation, so I stayed statue-still, as if this were some deeply distressing game, gone on a little long.

A clock ticked in the front room.

Tick.

Tick.

I tentatively exhaled, and then let out a great, gut-deep sigh.

Safe.

I looked down again... there he was. I nudged him with my foot. A little late for the Heimlich manoeuvre? He seemed less like a person now, and more like an object. The truffles were open, on a side table, just inside the living room.

A truffle had killed him.

Clearly, I had been right to hesitate.

Oh God, but I was with him. Maybe it was all my fault?

I grabbed the truffle box — five of them left. If I got rid of them, nobody would know that they ever existed.

I took three in a handful and pushed them into my mouth, chewing through them, soft and almost flaky where they should have been firm. Slick fat coated my teeth. Ugh, swallow. Two more. I couldn't taste these ones as they were nothing new: I was so full of metallic chocolate.

They were gone. I jumped over him and ran to the kitchen, separated the packaging for the recycling, and then realised he only had one bin. Flipping old people, not caring about the environment, I thought, as I stuffed the packaging down into his bin and used a teaspoon to flick teabags and greasy chip shop wrapping over the top.

Was that it?

Tick.

Tick.

What else was there?

I tried to breathe in time with the clock, faint from the other room.

In a quiet part of my brain, the word 'ambulance' formed. Yes, I thought. Ambulance. There's a body in the hallway, on my new street.

I took my phone out of my bag and, like a grown-up, called the emergency services. I'd never done it before, but I was pleased to find that I knew the answers to many of their questions. He was in his eighties; single... widowed? That was a guess. The address — I swung open the front door to check the number nailed onto it in brass. Seventeen, I proclaimed. The woman on the line asked if I'd attempted resuscitation and I squeaked an indeterminate noise, which she seemed to take as a 'yes.' She moved on with another question, so I felt I was off the hook. In all my answers, I didn't mention the word 'truffle' once —

A voice rang out: 'Hello, Cyril?'

I looked up. Red hair in the doorway. She'd told me at our housewarming that she was a beautician: *Patricia*.

I made a noise. Patricia stepped into the hallway and gasped.

It all came gushing out: 'He's dead, I was returning the hedge trimmer, the lady's on the phone, an ambulance is coming. I did try to resuscitate him, but he's so old, I mean, this is what happens?'

She stepped over him, rolled him over. I had to look away.

'Why is he so — chocolatey?' Patricia asked, looking at me funny. 'And what's that all over your hand?'

I looked down, almost in slow motion, knowing what I would find. I swallowed, feeling sick. God, those truffles had been old.

'It's chocolate,' I whined. 'He offered me a truffle... he took one too...'

I shrugged and started to cry.

'Oh, my darling, oh, you poor thing,' she said. She dropped Mr. Gilbert's purple hand and stepped over him to put an arm around my shoulders. She can see that we're a little past the point of mouth-to-mouth too, I thought. She enveloped me, my face to her pink nylon uniform. She smelt delicious, like soap and flowers.

'What a shock this must be for you, my darling,' she said. 'You're so new to the street — what an angel you are for coming around and seeing him. I pop in, or I try to, everyday, to see if he needs anything — though between you and me, I stay on the doorstep so he can't get handsy,' she whispered. *I knew it*. But, he was very old, my dear — aren't all old men lechers, in their way? I felt for him, not able to get out. His knees,' she said, sadly, as if knees will get us all in the end. 'How lovely to have you visit, though. And how lovely for him to not have died alone, in the end.'

The ambulance pulled up, and, at a wave from Patricia, reversed up onto his driveway. One of the paramedics snagged their uniform on the overgrown hedge. Then they were in the hallway, feeling Mr. Gilbert's neck. Patricia told them what I'd said. We had to wait for the police, they said, with a shrug — as if to say, yes, he was old, but what can we do?

'We're best just to wait outside,' one of them said, a tall Black man with a Birmingham accent.

What if the packaging wasn't far enough down in the bin?

'Sorry, I left my handbag in the kitchen,' I said, sunny. 'I'll just go and get it.'

'There'll be time for that,' the paramedic said, stern, stopping me in my tracks. He narrowed his eyes at the bag on my shoulder. Patricia was looking at me too.

Shit.

Outside, it was cold in the shade. When the police arrived, I said words. I felt a little strange, but they seemed disposed to believe whatever I said. After all, was it more likely that



he'd died from natural causes, or because of an inauspicious truffle that I'd failed to knock from his hand before it got to his mouth?

Not that I had to tell them about that, master-sleuths that they were:

'We can see that you attempted mouth-to-mouth with the necessary vigour,' the older officer said. 'There's chocolate all over your face.'

The other one took notes and nodded with approval.

Patricia encircled my shoulders.

'She's a credit to us, our dear Kate,' she said to the police officers, clutching me to her side. 'You write that down. The salt of the earth, you are, my dear,' she said, turning to me. 'I'll tell everyone how kind you were to Cyril in his final moments.'

At length, the police said something to the paramedics, and the paramedics nodded. They drove away, with Cyril in the back, one of his truffles still lodged in his throat. Would it melt, now that he was so cold? Or would it be there, eternally incriminating, forever?

Patricia was talking to me again, reassuring me. The things she was saying were so nice, so encouraging. I pictured myself as she described it: the toast of the street's garden parties, the mulled wine get-togethers, forever. Old people didn't forget things like this, I knew that much. A kindness to Cyril in his final moments would garland me in their eyes forever.

'...and you must say a few words at his funeral, it would mean so much to people...'

I looked Patricia in the eye, her blue eye. Blue like the carpet.

'I'd be happy to, if it's helpful to people?' I said.

She nodded and embraced me again.

Yes, this was the street for us. We could be happy here. We could really bring some life back to it.

Feeling happy, I turned my face away and threw up chocolate, all over Cyril's hedge.

Lyndsay Wheble's

work has appeared in *NEWMAG*, *Litro*, *Belle Ombre*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *The Oxford Writing Circle Anthology*, and elsewhere. She won the Reflex Fiction Prize Summer 2018 and has shortlisted for the HISSAC and Yeovil Prizes. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Oxford Brookes.

# MARK VALENTINE

## The Blue Mean One

*content note: mention of alcohol*

It was in a pub, in a back street of Southampton where I'd strayed aimlessly, that I tasted the original and only Blue Mean One. It was gloomy and empty inside and so was I. They had a blackboard with a chalked menu. Well, menu might be pushing it. They only did toasted sandwiches on a sandwich-maker at the back of the bar. At the end of the brief list were the words, written in blue chalk in a sort of psychedelic swirl, The Blue Mean One (a nod to the Blue Meanie villains in The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* film of 1968). There was a green V next to it to show it was veggie. 'What's that?' I asked the barman, who had lank hair, smeared spectacles and red cheeks. 'Try it,' he said, 'we made it up. It's strong.' I nodded and he disappeared for a bit to prepare it.

The pub didn't seem to do plates; you got your dish wrapped in a red paper serviette. The contents were already oozing out before I bit in and then they slithered over my fingers and scorched them, but I didn't mind as I was still absorbing the contents. Which were, so far as I could work out, horseradish, mustard, raw onion, ripe blue cheese, and an entire rockery of garlic. It was a meanie all right and very satisfying. I thought that when I went out again, I'd have to be careful about my breath in case it caused buildings to fall and passers-by to swoon.

It wasn't only the rampant flavours that filled the mouth, but the feel of it, which was sticky and clinging, as if the beast didn't want to let go of your teeth or your tongue. For a few moments, with my half pint of dark mild as a sort of brown sauce accompaniment, I felt very contented; it seemed as if my loneliness in this city and my uncertainty about myself were banished and I felt part of a secret order, the brothers and sisters of the Blue Meanie. That was how it got hold of me, the whole idea of it.

But I never could find that pub again. It was a part of the city I didn't know; I hadn't noticed the name of it, and I couldn't remember how I got there. I went so far as to ask some people if they knew of a place where they served a toasted sandwich called The Blue Mean One and tried to describe it, but they mostly looked sceptical and some asked outright, 'Who the hell would eat anything like that?'. And I have never found the recipe – or maybe *formula* would be the better word – to be known by anyone else either, and I expect the pub is long gone too.

I have tried making the Blue Mean One myself, and sometimes I think I've got quite close, but there's always something missing; probably I falter at the quantity of garlic or horseradish required, and certainly the fiercely adhesive quality, which might have been a product of the particular sandwich toaster and its settings, I have never perfected.

I expect the memory of the original and only Blue Mean One, that alchemical compound of white fire, gold fire, deep earth, and decay, has grown with me over the years and will always flicker in its being, the lost talisman of a moment and a living, lingering, changing, elusive thing, still slithering its proud and pungent spoor across my memory.

**Mark Valentine**

writes essays on old books and obscure subjects for the Yorkshire independent Tartarus Press and edits *Wormwood*, a paperback literary journal. His poetry has been published recently in *ink, sweat & tears*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Finished Creatures*, *PN Review*, *M58*, and elsewhere.

# MARY M. BROWN

## Avocado on the counter

wonders when it went  
from firm to soft, too  
soft, from vibrant green  
to fallow, drab, earth  
yellow inside, from  
appetizing to undesirable,  
how it traveled here so  
fast and far beyond its  
rare moment of ripeness,  
beyond its middle age  
even, everyone resigned  
to it and knowing the only  
thing worth saving now is  
its seed, slick and sturdy  
and full of life, but likely,  
realistically, just tossed.

It looks at its reflection  
in the small stand of water  
pooling beside it  
on the counter, wonders  
again if what it sees  
is what it is and *how*.

Mary M. Brown,

a retired writing professor, lives in Anderson, Indiana. Her work appears on the Poetry Foundation and American Life in Poetry websites and recently in *Rockvale Review*, *Thimble*, and *Open: Journal of Arts and Letters*. She is the poetry editor of *Flying Island*.

# NORA BLASCSOK

## *Two Poems*

### A personal history of miracle balls

*after Jennifer Wong*

A recipe passed down generations. Grandmother thought mine were just not good enough, yet the jury is still out whether hers could be described as miraculous. The taste was below par. One year we didn't have rum to soak the cherries or no cherries to soak in the rum, accounts vary. The coconut on the outside was the only coconut I was willing to eat and rolling the balls in it was the best part of the process. Jumpers up to elbows, we'd sit in the kitchen, rolling. I'd keep mother there for the chat. You had to make sure you had equal parts pistachio and cocoa dough. Somehow, one or the other was never the right consistency. After two hours of molding, stuffing & rolling they did get bigger & bigger, as my patience seeped away like the rum through the cracks. They'd have to be kept in the fridge overnight. Mum always allowed one taster, a snack, left in the middle of the red plastic plate of grated coconuts. I remember the year my uncle stood up to my grandmother to say my miracle balls did taste good. It is easier to refer to sour cherries as cherries in English. In Hungarian, they are only one letter away from 'goes'.

# Watching

seagulls  
fuck on the roof

the violence  
three quick flaps

& they are off  
to peck crisp packets

post-coital doom  
scroll or  
standing naked

staring into  
the fridge

**Nora Blascok**

is a Hungarian poet based in Brighton. Her work has appeared in various online magazines and print anthologies. Her most recent poems can be found at *Harana Poetry*, the *Babel Tower Notice Board*, and *Streetcake Magazine*.

# OLIVER SEDANO-JONES

## It is Beautiful

To sunbathe, nude and thin as a lily  
To watch the clouds contract in envy  
And be okay with life, like a baby is

To be a twiggy, malleable, raw little thing  
Always dressing as candy for Daddy  
Is a new kind of happiness

Relaxing into the absence round the waist  
I'm okay with this now, do you see?  
I am so okay

With one foot on the mirror I admire the cured meat  
Me and my disease are not friends exactly  
But we have an enemy in common

And though I don't remember life before our estrangement  
It is beautiful to feel cheese slices dissolving on the tongue  
It is like retiling a soft bathroom

Oliver Sedano-Jones

is a British-Peruvian writer. His work has appeared in *FLAR*, *Marathon*, and *The Northridge Review*. He was shortlisted for the Yeats Prize in 2018, the University of Hertfordshire Single Poem Prize in 2019, and the Wales Poetry Award in 2020.

# PAUL JONES

## The Executioner's Love Potion

*content note: alcohol*

People said he was a doctor of the dead, by which they meant forensics. But everyone suspected more. His car was missing from his driveway on nights when executions were underway over in Raleigh. At work, his face was always well-hidden. Even he admitted that.

At home, he was anonymous too as he worked with his roses. But there among the flowers, he was desired — if at a distance —; bored homemakers drove slowly by his house to gawk at him in his European swimsuit, a dark 50s Speedo, and his plastic sandals as he tended his garden. He would have nothing to do with DDT. His idea of killing pests was specific. One on one. He picked each beetle, scraped every aphid off his plants and crushed them between his fingers, then sank them in a pail of water mixed with gasoline. He didn't fear the thorns; for the most part he was skilful at avoiding being scratched.

When he wanted to show his love, he chose one long stem of rose. One perfect deep red flower. He was swift with his clipper and deadly accurate. He chose the loveliest petals from the bloom to candy. The rest went into a simple syrup. He made a mist of salt water with paprika, exactly the salinity of blood or tears. He sprayed each cocktail glass with the salt mix, added a jigger of rose syrup to each, and set the glasses in the freezer to frost over. While they were chilling, he trimmed the rose stem into four-to-six-inch sections. He was careful to preserve the thorns. He removed the chilled frosted glasses and added six pomegranate kernels to each. Then he carefully added two shots of vodka and a dash of Peychaunt's Bitters. One red petal was floated in each glass. The drinks were served unstirred with the thorny stems as swizzles. My aunt thought the drink was delicious; that he was delicious too.

### Executioner's Love Potion

Rose simple syrup (1 - 2 shots per glass to taste)

Candied rose petals (at least one per glass)

Vodka (or Gin) (2 shots per glass)

Peychaunt's Bitters (a dash)

Light salt and paprika dissolved in water for misting the glasses (½ tsp salt to one cup of water, paprika to taste but not so much that it overpowers the rose. Enough to burn a little.)

6 pomegranate kernels per glass (Persephone's count)

4-6 inch rose stem with untrimmed thorns as a swizzle (1 per glass)



## Paul Jones'

poetry has been published in *Poetry*, *Red Fez*, *Journal of American Poetry*, and in anthologies including *Best American Erotic Poems (1800 - Present)*. Recently, he was nominated for two Pushcart Prizes and two Best of the Web Awards. A manuscript of his poems crashed on the moon's surface in 2019.

# ROWAN LYSTER

## fixing everything except the thoughts

*content note: blood*

swallowing pebbles in a fractured garden

stamping on molehills until your tongue bleeds

propping open your jaw with pinecones

sanding your molars to make them smooth

to make a rock fit roundly beneath your tongue you can strike it against boulders scrape it with scissors or climb the tallest tree hurl the rock down and repeat or draw it along the ground applying as much of your bodyweight as possible in order to increase the resistance or turn it over and over and over in your hand imagining you are water what you should not do is use your teeth since the rock is almost certainly harder than enamel it will only hurt them

filling the pond with chewed-up granite

prying the ground apart with pliers

grit on your fingers it's getting in

burying the burying the

## Rowan Lyster

is a poet and arts administrator from Herefordshire, based in Bristol. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in publications including *Magma*, *PERVERSE*, *Poetry News*, *Tears in the Fence*, *The Scores*, and *Under the Radar*.

# RYAN ORMONDE

## Renovation

*content note: hospitals*

It was a relief to strip back the kitchen,  
and a surprise to see bare, hard walls.  
It really was a room after all, not so seething;  
whatever horrors were discovered in the layers  
were now dispersed. They do this in hospital too:  
you really are a body with known behaviours,  
or at least their best guess, and the nurses have  
seen it all before, they've seen it all before.

Ryan Ormonde

is a poet from London. In the last year, he has contributed a poem to the first online issue of *SPAM Magazine*, and collaborated on two short poetry films, one with poet Karen Sandhu for *Magma*, and the other with artist Madalina Zaharia.

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