

Paper Mill Press

a journal of creative arts/ 2025

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2025

Paper Mill Press 2025

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Words Fail

By Julia Daley

Words fail.

The breath of silence

Between this moment and the next.

A reminder of what's unsaid.

Distant voices chime in

Their attempts to help muddling together

Until it all becomes unintelligible noise.

And yet, their words do not become my own.

The impatient metronome within my heart

Begins to count.

Its near-constant ticking

Urging me to utter something, anything.

I pause. I breathe. I try.

And once again.

The words fail.

Growing

By Taylor Cave

A blue room
Once painted in purple, then pink, then blue
Now fading into time

A white house
Once full of memories
Now empty

A street sign
Once read Palace Avenue
Now spray painted over

A town
Once filled with laughter and life
Now quiet and dead

A person
Once grew up in these places
Now moved on to something more

Still Sacred

By Stephanie Ernst

I have nothing holy left in me,
These stained glass windows are all blown out.
The bones of my childhood church are burning down
around my feet.
Breathe in smoke like sacrament,
Scars circle my wrists like shackles.
But I can still sing hymns with this torn throat,
Nevermind if I want to.

They pulled me under the water,
Held there like an insect in amber.
Called it cleansing but I have never felt more a fraud.
Surely these spectators can see
The ink stains of sin which cover my skin.
An abomination of their careless creation.

They gave me no other option than
Communion which burns going down,
Until I broke the chains myself.
I have nothing holy left in me,
But I am still sacred.

Thaw

By Stephanie Ernst

To sit here in the soft breeze
Feels holy.
A remaking of molecules long dead,
Or simply dormant.

Like the sunlight has thawed frost
I didn't realize covered my skin.
Held me still and shivering.
Always looking forward without moving,
Frozen to the spot.

But now the sky is blue
And I am not.
Colour has returned to my life, to my cheeks.

I will make a pillow of this soft grass,
And listen to the trees sing.
What a great privilege it is,
To bear witness to the symphony
Of living things.

What greater privilege,
To be part of it again.

Trouting

By Logan Ropson

Baiting hooks is
like driving a nail.
Worm struggle
against cold steel
until submission.

Cast into the murky depths
its last breath is pond water
not earth.

Displaced,
pulled from soil
in ignorance
of its most important task.

Now a beacon for the coming trout
it bobs in the wake until at last
a quick snap
jaws lock around
an ingenious trap,
tug of the line
and the fish is pulled ashore,
later consumed with onions and pork.

Newfoundland Buffalo

By Logan Ropson

Why did the herd
not take hold here?

It worked for the moose.

Maybe they went
back to the crates and cranes
which hoisted them
through the sky,
where they conversed
with seagulls.

Maybe they floated back
across the harbour on
rafts that bowed under
their mass
so that their hooves
cooled in ocean water.

Perhaps they traveled west
back to the prairies,
where oil rigs towered over earth
like tall grass
in the vast plains.

I imagine them asking
like their ancestral kin after that
first whip of rain,
first crunch of Newfoundland soil,

first taste of sea salt from the coastline,
how on earth do we survive here?

Biologists blamed
rocky shores, sheer cliffs,
and lack of buoyancy
on their extinction,
bison so used to open fields
and rolling hills that
they stepped right off the side of
Brunette Island
sinking out of sight,
an anchor or
chum for the leviathan
swimming in the dark
where myth eats myth.

Struffoli

By Parker Wiseman

Watching the Alps sing past my window, the steam rising from the freshly brewed coffee fogs my glasses, creating my own personal rainbow from the Italian sunshine.

The families and old good friends chatter to the hum of the train tracks.

The wind tickles the tall honey-gold grass outside...

I've felt that same wind embrace me countless times in my long life.

That wind always accompanied by the smell, or the smiling remembrance of the smell, of nonna's *struffoli*...

It's a different century now but those memories are timeless.

Through my steamed panes I glimpse a young couple in the car ahead...

A radiant brunette, not unlike *cuore mio*.

Her smile brings me back to that fated Florence night when I met an angel on Earth...

As I hear that faded bedside photograph calling me home, a tear traces its way down my face and nestles into the corner of my mouth, the salty taste a reminder of the beauty of it all.

The knowledge of our inevitable end brightens every rose and sweetens every kiss.

To be struck by the beauty of a symphony, it must only last a moment.

The Conductor takes my hand and tells me I've reached the end of the line.

I rest my eyes...

Her

By Daniel Lemire-Penney

Innocent specter, gliding along the clouds,
Soul fumbled and betrayed.
Infant and toddler thrust into the claws of mortality,
Cries for maternal comfort left wholly unanswered.
Familial unit stitched together haphazardly,
Jagged holes mindlessly abandoned.
Upon gazing into polished crystal,
Viewing otherworldly fragments.
Mourning for the child she was,
And the mother she never got to be.

Deeper Waters

By Daniel Lemire-Penney

Worried soul engulfed in darkness,
Forgotten in icy waves and deep waters.
Coughing and sputtering,
Tendrils pulling deeper down.
Otherworldly views and colours,
Captured in a moment of gentle bliss.
Bubbles slowly fading,
Blackness all consuming.
Thrashing with no hope of escape,
Becomes reluctant acceptance.
Cruel life with gentle moments,
Gentle death with cruel ignorance.

Comparison as the basis of understanding

By Malcolm Warkentin

I met her and she was dressed up as her own likeness for
Halloween

Her hair was not that bright yellow wheat blond—only in
summer as the sun lightened it,
in the winter it darkened

I asked her what she knew about the painter and she said
'not much'

The earring was not as large as depicted,
not a pearl but an enameled half-dome ball

She came from a country in the north of Europe

Her eyes were the very same colour as in the image

Her cheekbones were that high and austere and wanting
look

She skipped when she walked

The girl with the pearl earring

Four attempts

By Malcolm Warkentin

soft scuttled rock in
stream cold clear and carrying
low spectrum white noise

depths of snow to sink
mossy acute angle ledge
boulder in the flow

bulwark splits and holds
debris that tumbles down stream
it stopped me also

heavy perception
layered days with three waters
the air was thick there

July

By Benjamin Siemon Gorman

I go to sleep every night with a song in my heart
A melodic note composed in stanzas
With each verse, a clone of the other
Sending tributes to a lover
Sometimes to a lover I am yet to know
Sometimes to a lover I have always known
Other times to a lover I once knew
But today, I know the song in my heart is for me
And I will call it July

Stillness of a Rotted Roof

By Joshua J. Randell

Silence drips into the night.

Falling from the death of a million stars that still
offer the galaxy a beacon of light,

through the hole in the clouds,

and down in between the molecules of my ceiling.

Its mission is to find and torment
me with memories misplaced in time.

To weep dryly of what can never be replaced.

Even when I cry, silence takes my pain and muffles it.

All to keep me awake to hear a misinterpreted song of
the
sparrows of early morning.

Beauty is stolen.

Beauty has become nothing.

Silence made sure I overthink it all, and it robs me of opportunities I've never noticed.

Blood Talks

By Joshua J. Randell

This crimson flow is no elixir.
It is a burden that has merged to be ten percent
of this tangible being.
Yet it permeates the realm of my
perception.

It clashes with the ordinary and urges to
reverse its tide.
An attack on my bond with life.
Betrayal on a sacred decree.

I cannot travel the path of the sidewalk.
My will won't allow me to be one with the crowd.

I will not survive if I join the swirling current.
I'll be bashed against the rocks and
fade into the river of blurry faces.

It is not a want, it is a need.

With every pump of blood that passes
through these valves and pipes,
I can feel it changing course.

There is no way back.

Not now.

I am a no-one who opposes nature

Bela Lee's Transylvanian BnB

By Matt Sherstobetoff

A Vacation to Sang Home About

8 guests. 2 rooms. 6 beds. 1 bath

Address: I will personally escort you via my black 1970 AMC Gremlin

Nightly Rate: 1,198.81 Romanian Leu/240.90 Euro/260.82 USD

Registration Number: BS5261897

Greetings and Salutations,

I write from my estate in Transylvania. I wish to invite you for a night of dinner, drinks, and divine company. We offer premium cuts of steak, cooked bleu. The selection of Rioja is also to die for. Come on for a bite. It would suck if you were to refuse my invitation. I do ask one thing relating to food, please do not bring any garlic onto the premises. I have a deathly airborne allergy. If you are vegetarian, please note that I am on a strict carnivore diet and will be dining with you.

My fourteenth-century Victorian castle is now a bed and breakfast. Hospitality is our number one priority; I do hope my company isn't overly intrusive. Take a

break from your boring lives and take some time to reflect before it's too late.

We ask that you do not open any of the curtains as the day breaks, as it would not bode well for our business. Also please do not bring pets, I keep many bats in the left wing of the castle (They are not friendly, please do not visit the bats. They bite).

If you have thirst for a weekend from home, come be my guest. I hope you won't say no(sferatu) to my invitation. Bring the children, hear what music they make. Sink your teeth into a once-in-a-lifetime vacation experience.

- Bela Lee's Transylvanian BnB

Portrait of Rebecca

By Jeremy Wills

Medium: Digital photography



The Place Where I Just About Died

By Mackenzie Dean

Medium: Digital photography



Perspective

By Minahil Khan

Medium: Digital photography



Drinks on Me

By Summer Snow

Medium: Digital illustration



Withstanding Time

By Cyril Byrne

Medium: Cyanotype on paper



Canyon

By Cyril Byrne

Medium: Analog film



Untitled

By Leah Osmond

Medium: Analog photography



Ghosts

By Leah Osmond

It is and will forever be beyond our human
comprehension that we exist.

We watch the clouds pass,
We watch the sun rise and fall,
We feel the wind on our skin,
And the grass in our toes,
Day by day, until we don't.

What is even more incomprehensible is how we are
aware of this—aware of the finite limit on our earthly
existence—and yet we still choose to live inside our past.

I am not really here.

I am on the steps leading up to our brand new
house, my tiny feet passing the threshold of the doorway,
unaware that I am about to enter a new world—one that I
could never willingly leave.

I am on the hazelnut deck porch of my late Aunt
Becky's, using my manners to procure a popsicle on an
eternally warm summer afternoon.

I am camping, I am fishing, I am playing games with my brothers.

I am seldom alone in my memories. Now I am among ghosts, and memories are all I have.

But longing for what no longer exists is a foolish pursuit: to forsake yourself, forsake your life, forsake your future—in favour of the days that have passed. May we all try to live—to really, truly live. May we not let the sun set without our notice. May we watch the leaves fall. May we change with the seasons, and may we create not just new memories, but a new life.

One that leaves no ghosts.

Black Excellence

By Amina Achimugu

In the depths of night, beneath the starry skies,
Black joy dances, where hope never dies.
In every laugh, in every heartfelt smile,
lies a story of triumph, told all the while.

Through the struggles and hardships we sustain,
Black happiness rises, like a gentle rain.
In every hug, in every warm embrace,
resides a strength that no one can erase.

In the beats of drums, in the sway of hips,
Black joy sings, with sweet, soulful lips.
In every step, in every graceful twirl,
lives a spirit that refuses to unfurl.

So let us gather, hand in hand,
to celebrate this joy, so grand.
For in unity and in love, we find our way,
in Black joy's embrace, forever we'll stay.

The Path to New Res is Oddly Poetic

By Kira Horlick

Stop, stare.

Dead in his tracks, looking upward-
a waning gibbous moon.

Not quite full—

it is sheer coincidence he knows the name,
unsure of where he learned this.

And he stares upward.

Blurry with the smudges of his glasses,
his breath fogs in the air,
and he stares.

Waning gibbous, bright white and glowing,
a pearl amongst the dark sky,
glistening as if it were a prize jewel.

And it stings his eyes.

It aches as memories often do,
burning of when times were good-
the smell of old lady perfume and church wine.

Like his mother's pearl earrings against her dark hair,
the moon shines. He can almost hear her voice,
admonishing him for his dirty glasses.

But he stares.

Where else is he to look? The sky
is so full yet so empty,
barren of anything but memory,

vaguely of a forgotten taste,
a childhood rhyme of what berries were poison,
and a reminder that he is

holly.

But the moon is bright, and
still dead in his tracks,
destination forgotten,

He stares. Blankly, transfixed,
haunted by what he sees in the night sky,
what he lacks the words to describe.

But the moon looks like pearls.

Background Extra #5

By Kira Horlick

I live an odd existence,
always compared to *her*.
She is the hero, and I
am her dutiful sidekick.

She is bright, colorful,
grabbing your attention and holding it hostage,
a gun to your head.
Look at me, look at me.

I am her sidekick, her lover, her mother,
her friend, her enemy,
everything this two-person show demands.

Learn the lines.
Wear the makeup.
Memorize the blocking and manoeuvre around her,
forever dancing, still as a mannequin.
Ever-contradictory, performing
a dance, frozen in a snowglobe.

The vignettes are long,
my roles are strenuous.

I inflict her wounds in one scene
and kiss them better in the next.
Whatever she needs.

I, her enemy, will wound her,
and I, her mother, will soothe them with my words.
I, her friend, will provide her with strength,
and I, her sidekick, will fight by her side.

And I, her lover, will fade
as lovers do.

I will give, and she will take.

She will inflict wounds upon me,
and I have no mother to kiss them better.
I will soothe her pain,
and I have no friend to give me strength.
I will give her my life,
and I have no one to fight by her side.
I give her my heart,
and I will receive nothing in return.

The audience cannot understand me.

As a character, I do not make sense.

I am not neat nor tidy,
impossible to fold into a tiny box.
I am her sidekick, her lover, her mother,
her friend, her enemy,
everything this two-person show demands.
I cannot be viewed as separate from her,
for I am never onstage alone.

I am nothing without her,
and nothing with her.

Such a contradictory fate.
To love her, yet hate her.
To befriend her, yet to parent her.
To be everything, yet nothing.

I am her sidekick, her lover, her mother,
her friend, her enemy, everything this two-person show
demands,
and one day,
some enlightened artist will try
and fail
to write a play about *me*.

An eMail to the Afterlife

By Kira Horlick

from: Kira Mackenzie <kmackenzie@gmail.com>
to: Whoever
<heaventheafterlifeorwhateverisoutthere@gmail.com>
date: 7 Nov. 2024, 13:41
mailed-by: gmail.com
gmail.com

Hi,

I don't know how to communicate with those who have passed on.

I know you didn't have a cell phone, didn't like these SmartTvs, thought the new AC was nothing but a pack of trouble. I don't know if you had an email. You must've, or maybe you just used the home phone? Never had Facebook, nothing new-fangled.
Still listened to the radio.

I hope this email finds you well.

How do you put this into words? How do you write the sound of sobbing in a theatre, the sound of an accordion? How do you write about grief? I am a writer. I should know, but this is something that evades me.

We've been okay, in your absence. As okay as we can. I cry easier now but only when I think about you. Your music group performed at *Voices* again, and I heard them from a hundred feet away. I didn't hear the absence of an accordion, but I knew.

I meant to write this email because the Americans just elected a new president, or rather, an old president. You'd be glued to your "stund" TV right now, losing your marbles at how they re-elected that fool.

I told my friends that I desperately wanted to see your reaction. Wanted to know what you'd think, what you'd say. There's no way for me to know.

You'd find it funny that I still tell people about Cain and Abel and the monkeys. And the windows, and lobsters, and how you had that accent that put H's in places they shouldn't be, and took them away where they should be. 'ash h'oil, you saw on the news. And that story of you and the radio and the purse, or the one Dad tells me of when

you shaved your beard. And Nan tells me about your lobster habits, how you'd eat the gross parts she didn't want. My friends find you very funny. I wish you could meet them.

Anyways, Trump is president again. We're all managing, but I'm dreading Christmas without you. Father's Day was hard enough, only buying one card for a grandfather. When I was home for Thanksgiving, Dad said I was the most like you out of any of us. It's oddly comforting.

When I was a little girl, I remember crying one night because I was scared that Mommy and Daddy were going to die. And to comfort me, Dad told me that a little piece of him lived on in me, and the same for Mom, and a little piece of you and Nan lived on in him, and in me, and I'm just like you. So stubborn, so routine-oriented, always making plans. Always.

That's all I have to say, as far as I know. What else can I say? Can you email the deceased? I guess I will find out.

Love, always,
your mini-me and granddaughter,
Kira.

Nannies

By Kel Parsons

My Nanny kneads bread dough
with underwear on her head,
Her hangnails unravelling between
the cracking and the stretching

Revealing innards of
Coconut
and Peanut Butter

Slaughter with intent of alteration—
Cry yourself to sleep unclasping snares

The Squeaky Wheel Gets The Grease,
yours assured me as we held my knuckle back
together
and we waited

I told her she was as versatile as party sandwiches,
Cut into four pointed triangles
Available for Beginnings, Middles, and Ends