

THE HEART
IS AN
ECHO CHAMBER

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Featuring
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For Stacey, Helen and Kim, who gently cradled my heart while it
echoed. And wept. And learned to beat again.

STORIES

The Heart is an Echo Chamber

It Couldn't Be

Untethering

Letting Go

Pits

The Princess of Swords

Starless

Emerging, Closure

ECHOES OF

No Need to Reply (*The Heart is an Echo Chamber*)

It Could Be (*It Couldn't Be*)

Squeezebox (*Untethering*)

Holding On (*Letting Go*)

Olives (*Pits*)

Shuffling (*The Princess of Swords*)

Wishing, Happily Ever After (*Starless*)

Closure (*Emerging, Closure*)

FOREWORD

A chapbook by the name of *No Need to Reply* was ripe for subversive publishing action. The remit was to write a response to one of the original stories for a new chapbook. A theme developed as the stories came in: of a heart under pressure. Perhaps that is where the ricochet is felt most, the echo, when we strive to break the silence and be heard.

I can't help but recognise parts of my experience mirrored in the characters here. The fact the stories were written before the tempest really tore through my life makes me wonder if we really do write (or in my case this time, edit) our lives into being. And if so, perhaps I need to lay off on the body count in my other work!

No Need to Reply and *The Heart is an Echo Chamber* act as parentheses around two years of my life I am very glad to put behind me. Years dogged by isolation, depression, paranoia, creative desolation and heartbreak. The writers assembled between these pages are all friends and have been (and still are) rays of light in their own unique ways. Thank you to Lois, Tom, Stacey, Adam, Helen, Ben, Kris and Rus for giving me the space to make my way out of the darkness and for this chapbook to find its way into the world as a celebration of both an end and a beginning.

Jodi Cleghorn
Brisbane, April 2016

There is no love that is not an echo.

Theodor Adorno

THE HEART IS AN ECHO CHAMBER

Lois Spangler

You sit on the bed, your best friend's bed, still a mess from the last time it was used, just four days ago. In your hands are two phones.

Downstairs, Loz's mother is talking with family. Loz's father is long since gone. You are allowed to stay, to be in Loz's room, because you are basically family too, friends since before either of you could even talk. Two girls barefoot, stumbling, laughing.

Now only one.

You know what it means to want the presence of someone, to want that ghost of a feeling that if you just turn around slowly enough, squint your eyes tightly enough, you'll slip into a different world that brings that lost soul back to you. How things should be.

Joel brought a sparkle to Loz's eyes, but he never settled in right with you, and when things inevitably got tense—though Loz only admitted he was getting distant—your suspicions were proven.

Oh, but Loz had to post that one last letter. One last grasp, one last gasp.

Downstairs, a laugh shudders into a sob that rends into a low, long wail.

You fight to keep the knot in your throat from bursting in response. The heart is an echo chamber, bright and brutal, and like calls to like.

That's why you finally did what you did: found Joel, and through his electronic trails found Virginia, his ex. Why you sent her a message, a leap of faith, just like Loz's.

"That's what he does," Virginia had written of her former husband. "When he can't cope, he closes off. And he sure has a low threshold."

You messaged him online, the night it happened, when Loz still took air through shattered flesh and bone. Dreaming, eyes swollen shut, yellow and purple and black. When there was still hope, still a little bit of time.

No reply. Nothing.

Downstairs, more family arrive, the soft warm and worn voices of sadness and grief. Upstairs, you thumb slowly through the last messages Loz sent you.

i cant do this.

DO IT

but what if our msgs
cross & im ending it as
hes apologising

put urself first b/c hes

never going to

he doesnt no how

what do u mean?????

“Shithole,” you say, your other hand holding Loz’s mangled phone, damaged but still working. The phone Loz wouldn’t pick up when you called to apologise for going behind her back to find The Ex, for trying to save her from a vampire relationship that was sucking her dry.

“Friends,” Loz had once said, “friends write their own rules. Some you see every day and it’s a fight. Some you see once a year and it’s like you never left.”

So you asked what Joel was to her.

“He’s the kind of guy I want to write letters to,” Loz replied. “They’re like tattoos. Once you write them down and send them out, well, it’s out of your hands, isn’t it? It’s all done. It’s a little piece of you, cast away.”

Loz never wrote anything that didn’t have meaning.

The two of you, years ago, made it a yearly thing to write your grievances with the world, with the people you loved and hated and to purge them, together. First, letters in shaky pencil on wide-ruled paper. Later on you sprung for good ink on cotton vellum. Because it burned best.

These grievances, you’d set them alight and launch them into the little creek behind your house, Viking funerals for all the things that hurt, burning absolutions for the indignities of life. You’d imagined Loz burning him the next time you went down there.

But now – “Gina, love, you coming down?” – *it’s you who’ll burn Joel.*

“In a second!” you call, grateful for how steady your voice sounds. You focus on that nerve, afraid you’ll lose it if you wait much longer.

You were going to call Joel. You were going to tell him what happened. You were going to tell him what a cowardly manipulative shit he was. Is. But you don't have the heart for the real fire and venom he deserves. You've considered writing a letter but know full well he'll just ignore it, oblivious until he finally gets that Loz is *gone*. And by then he'll have the absolution of the passage of time, no obligation to reach out in response because then it would be poor form, it would be embarrassing. He would have to admit how out of touch he'd been the entire time.

You type Joel's number into your phone, fingers shaking from grief and rage. You try to keep the message short, because when Joel reads it—you will him to read it, to not ignore your unknown number because like hell you're going to use Loz's phone to contact him—the message is all there at once, and he'll have no way to respond. Because once you hit send, you're blocking his number.

You've already blocked him online.

guess ur 2 busy 2 notice L missing online.

she died Thurs. hit & run.

You choose to lie, next, take away the thin hope of having been able to reach Loz after the accident.

they say it was instant. how do u lose

some1 u love in an instant?

You almost hit send.

Almost.

But you know you only have this one chance.

no need 2 reply. u kno she ended her

emails w/ that so she wuldnt have 2 wait 4

the piece of shit reply u neva sent.

You stare at the message long enough for the screen to dim. You think one last time of calling instead, but you finally hit send.

Despite yourself, you wait for a reply. You even give him a full ten minutes.

No Reply. Nothing.

So you block Joel from your phone. And from Loz's. You shut them both off. And as you go downstairs to friends and family, you think of him languishing alone forever in the echo chamber of his own heart.

IT COULDN'T BE

Tom Dullemond

It couldn't be when I asked and you said no but your actions became yes. And I wanted it so much that I didn't question that there was a conflict there.

It couldn't be the way you held my hand that night, and the scratch swirl of our thumbs against our palms. The way you leant your head and rested it, with a sigh, on my shoulder. The cascade of your hair wafting perfume mingled with the scent of you. You were a cat, relieved and *homed*; at home, safe.

'I *do* love you,' you said.

Emphasised it, because it had been so easy to believe at first, then so hard, and then here, back to that easy inevitability. It was a reassurance.

It couldn't be.

You only ever strike when I'm finally vulnerable.

It's as though my vulnerability is itself a threat to you.

Scar tissue parts anew and I hate every single breath you breathed into me. It's when the hate stops welling up that I know I might've learned something, this time.

Acknowledge somehow, even if I can't say why, that somewhere
it went wrong in your head, this synthesis of us.

And how I might start telling myself: it couldn't be.

UNTETHERING

Adam Byatt

Death didn't stop you needing someone.

Death didn't stop you needing.

Death didn't stop you.

Death didn't stop.

Death didn't.

Death...

...waits for you, Daisy,

to relinquish

the final

tether.

He sits in his favourite armchair, hands in his lap. You stand near the window and imagine the fragrance of the mourning flowers stagnating in the still air. The clock on the mantle pulses a remembrance of your heartbeat.

For the first time since you died, he takes off the wedding band, and there—held between his fingers—is the tether between the past and the present.

Of you and him.

He runs his finger over the exterior, pockmarked and dented; it has borne the brunt of life's toil. You watch him turn the ring to read the inside. You know what is written there. He traces the words etched in gold, still legible, even though time has worn away the depth of the engraving: Strong as death.

Once, you heard the priest's words declared with intention in the reading—set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death—echo the promise in your heart.

Bill was nervous in his starched, military dress uniform while you fidgeted with the loose seam on the cuff of your friend's dress. He told you you were radiant. You blushed. You remember his cheekiness and how you held back laughter when he whispered, ever so gently inclining his head toward the priest, "He had to borrow a frock, too. But I like yours better."

Now his ring is removed, as is yours. You presume it should stay off because you are dead.

Until death do us part.

The soft pink indentation where the ring sat for decades is in stark relief to the darker skin of his hands. In the contrast you understand him—the turning of his affections in the fierce protectiveness of his summer and the vulnerable exposure of his winter—summed up in that single gold band. A circle that spoke of forever. Yet how short, how brief, that time actually was.

There is an impulse to take it from his hand and put the ring back on because you feel Death's fingers try to slip between the bonds to untie it; the offer to release the burden of carrying another through life.

Untethered and unmoored, the last fragments of memory unravel through your fingers like a frayed, woollen jumper but you cannot let them go. Not yet. The tether wafts and wavers on the tide of his sorrow. On the loss and heartache.

The clock on the mantle chimes the hour. He pauses, checks his watch and you know what time it is. Eternity is built on the rhythm of routine.

Moving to the kitchen, he places the ring on the bench top. Beside it he sets out a single gold-plated cup and saucer and the chipped enamel mug.

“Lovely, just in time for a cuppa,” you say as the flames tickle the underside of the kettle. “Why don’t you get us a couple of biscuits from the pantry.”

He places three Scotch Finger biscuits on a plate and while the tea draws, drops two lumps of sugar into your cup. Rubs his thumb and forefinger to read the braille of bereavement in the grains. Stirs. Adds milk.

Two cups—side by side. He takes his to the small kitchen table to drink and leaves yours on the kitchen bench as if you had only stepped outside for a moment to cut a lily from the garden for the empty vase on the kitchen table.

And you wait, watching the filigrees and curlicues of steam rise from the golden lip as the tea drains from his. When he has finished his tea and the biscuits, the mug and plate are rinsed and placed on the dish strainer.

And then he remembers you are gone.

He leaves your cup of tea there, waiting. Wanting.

In the corner of the kitchen, his squeeze box with its asthmatic

wheeze also waits. It gave him a voice when he had none, but you doubt there is any comfort to be had in it now without you to listen. He once said the notes were sadder without your presence to accompany them; that a duet performed by a single voice is not a solo.

He lifts the squeeze box and places it on his lap, puts the straps on his shoulders and unhooks the bellows. As they open you hear his heart's brokenness. He begins to play the lilting folk tune he performed for you under the porch light of your parents' house before sharing your first nervous kiss.

"I remember, Bill," you say as he sobs, unable to finish the final chorus. The air keens from the squeeze box as he takes it off and returns it to the corner.

From his pocket he pulls a handkerchief, wipes his eyes and sees the ring beside your tea cup. As he pushes the ring back onto his finger yours guide it, like that first time in the church. He holds it there and your fingers rest on his. You gather the loose ends of memory and tie them around your heart to keep him anchored to you.

"Hold on, dear. Just a little longer," you say, because...

...Death.

Death doesn't.

Death doesn't stop.

Death doesn't stop you.

Death doesn't stop you loving.

Death doesn't stop you

loving someone,

Daisy.

LETTING GO

S.G. Larner

It feels like a betrayal. But I've been searching for a way to reconcile with the part of me that shattered when you whispered those words.

If someone had asked me, in those days before you arrived, what two words could hurt me the most, I'd have said, "it's over". I sensed your distance, worried at the meaning. Why did you need to visit sooner? My restless mind circled back to your need to get it out of the way. To end it quickly. To move on.

I suppose, in a way, I was right. But what you wanted to end was my hope for the future. What you wanted was for me to move on. Because you had no future, and you knew it, and you needed me to know it.

The hotel smells the same as it did that night. Like towels. I made sure I got the same room.

"Please," I'd said to reception. "I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but it has to be 3B. It's our... anniversary."

The receptionist looked at me oddly when I checked in alone. A scarecrow with haunted eyes, hardly the kind of person one thinks of when the word 'anniversary' is uttered.

You see, I'm wearing the same clothes I wore that night, and they are looser on me now. Everything is the same, except everything is different.

Once you told me that ritual is essential for getting through the big things in life: marriage, childbirth, divorce, death. I thought ritual was merely a formality, a way to tick the boxes and say, yes, I've done that. Performed all the required moves in the dance and can now move on to the next stage.

When you died, I understood your words in a way I never had before. Ritualising your death, and my grief, seemed like appalling bad taste. Stiff upper lip, I told myself. Man up. And as time went on, I thought I'd managed to move past it.

And then I found your postcards.

And I was lost, and everything was dark, and I realised I needed to let go. That by refusing to grieve I was holding on so tight that my life was warping into something unrecognisable.

This is for me. This is not for you. You are dead, and gone. You are a memory, my memory, and all that exists now are my stories of you. And I will always treasure those stories. You will live on in my memories.

As I sit on the bed in our room, I relive that night: every touch, every kiss, the feel of your skin, the change in your body I tried to ignore. I remember the moment you broke my heart.

You said, "I'm dying."

The walls wait, expectant.

"I'm here."

The sheets beg for our sweat.

"I'm alive."

In the carpet I read the echoes of the past.

“I miss you.”

It’s ten fifteen.

“I love you.”

To your ghost, I choke on a single word: goodbye.

PITS

Kristen Erskine

I watched the burn on my fingertips give way to blisters.

Fuck, it hurts like hell.

The door chimes start and the old woman from earlier in the week enters the shop. Okay, not that old, just old thinking.

Don't ask her how it went with her son, oh god, I don't have all afternoon, I need to bandage my fingers, I need to clean the grills, I need to wipe down the fridge fronts. What the hell is she holding the empty jar for?

“How did the visit with your son go?”

I mentally slap myself across the head. She doesn't reply, just carefully lowers herself into a chair at a table closest to the counter. The relief is as long as it takes for my fingers to throb again.

“It's my back you see,” she finally says, gripping the jar like it's a life preserver.

I grimace. Not at her, not really. It's my fingers. And I want to tell her that. But there's no point showing her them. She's one of those armchair experts on everything. Probably watches all those doctor shows and would tell me fifty different ways to fix the burns

including rubbing on butter. I just want cold water and a bandaid.

I try and twist my face into a smile. It's obvious it's not working though, her mouth purses tighter. Then she returns the grimace, her own face twitching but she's not trying to smile. She's trying not to cry.

“He's going away.”

The sobbing commences.

It's going to be a long afternoon.

I almost sink to the floor in self-pity.

Oh my god. I need cold water. Need. Cold. Water. Now.

I just have to turn my back and take two steps, but I'm frozen on the spot.

What will happen if I turn my back on her?

You'd think I was a hostage or something.

She's too absorbed in her own misery to notice if you walk toward the sink. Slowly does it.

But as I move, she looks up at me. “He's going to some country on the other side of the world, where he'll eat chilli and get dysentery and probably marry some wog and have black babies and oh my god what will I tell the family? What if he dies over there or takes drugs and gets thrown into prison?”

I take advantage of the fact she's stopped talking, and is crying again, to scoot backwards, turn the tap on.

Bliss.

I could literally have an orgasm. Except I won't—her whimpering is like that off-station buzz or the irritating hum of a faulty fluoro tube that strips your will to live.

When she stops, she rattles off the long and potentially fatal

story of her son's future between hiccups. And somewhere it segues to the olives, and how he always hated olives, but she thought she'd get some nice ones and what do you know, he ate them, so she wants some more, for when he gets back.

I turn the tap off and open the cabinet to see what we've got left.

"Whatever you buy will be out of date in a fortnight. Unless he's going for a short trip, perhaps it's best to wait."

But she insists on heaving herself out of the chair and by the time we've gone through all the possible olives she's looming over the counter, almost in my face and my fingers are pulsing fiery agony again.

I want ice. NEED. ICE.

Her nose wrinkles. "You really should learn some personal hygiene, love. You're a pretty thing but if you don't shower regularly and use some deodorant you're never going to find yourself a nice husband."

I try to smile, really I do. But it's time.

I come out from behind the counter and usher her to the door. Remind her to come by when her son is on his way home. I promise I'll get in some good olives, especially for her. Especially for him.

With the closed sign on the door, shoulder deep in the chest freezer, the cold is the Hallelujah Chorus of pain relief on my hand.

Later, after I've bandaged my fingers, cleaned the grill and the fridges, when I'm getting ready to take the garbage out, I find her jar abandoned on the table and drop it in with the rest of the rubbish.

If he comes back—*IF*—olives are the least of his problems.

THE PRINCESS OF SWORDS

Helen Stubbs

Jordis sips dark red wine, staring up at their faces on the many screens that cover her walls. Here she bides time watching every face of every hand that deals her. To them she is a card—a puzzle they have little chance of solving—so she ceased to meet their gazes long ago, looking instead over their shoulders to the forked roads beyond. But the man in blue and the woman in red are different. They both want her; their need might tear her apart.

She taps their avatar: Red recognises her as she falls out of the pack, smiles tentatively at her. Blue is absent.

Jordis leans a little closer.

A warning sounds and seconds later Jordis's butler appears on the lowest left screen; angular eyebrows and high cheekbones always cast disapproval—but never at her.

Jordis looks back to Red, but in the Other Worlds her card has slipped back into the deck. The window is offline.

“Ma'm, your sharpener is here,” the Butler announces.

Jordis sighs, places her wine on the floor and drops through a trapdoor into her receiving chamber. An indigo bikini and ebony

hair are her only accoutrements.

What's the use of a gown with her sword and scabbard absent?

Head down, Berach waits on bended knee, her short sword in his hand like a crucifix, the point kissing the velvet cushion.

"You bother me, swordsmith?"

"My apologies, Princess."

"What's the problem?"

"There is a chink in your blade."

She steps closer. "You lie."

"Let me show you. If I may rise?"

"You may sit, like the dog that you are."

Berach sits back on his heels, beseeching through his fringe. He holds her sword before his chest. "You must look closely to see the mark."

Is it a trap?

She'll play.

Jordis kneels on the cushion, throwing some hair behind her shoulder. His gaze anchors hers.

He smells of sweat and wood smoke, like the night his scents mingled with her perfume, and not even these few inches separated their bodies.

His hands are warm in hers as she pulls the sword closer.

"Where's the mark?" She studies the blade.

"Here." He lays a finger near the point.

"Nothing," she says. Only sharp shining silver.

Is that a tiny grin on his lips? Yet he's unhappy.

"You've done well," she says.

Traces of pain and accusation are sketched across his features—

around his eyes and the shape of his mouth. He releases the blade, leaving its weight in her hands.

“Your presence heals all blemishes.” His eyes shine with need.

“Even on the heart? The temperament?” Jordis asks.

“On the heart, briefly. And what you don’t like, on the temperament, you carve away, do you not? Or cast it away –”

“Some stains run so deep I’d have to kill a man to remove them.”

“What about love? Would you kill a man to rid him of that?”

Jordis shifts her grip onto the sword’s hilt. “We’re done, Berach.”

“You always say that.”

“I mean it every time.”

“Until the next time.”

“There will be no next time.”

“Then you should cut out my love.”

His lip trembles. Jordis laughs, rising and holding the blade to the candlelight.

“Who would sharpen my sword?”

“Some other fool,” Berach growls, “and you would temper his sword in your fire.”

“You want death!” She can’t ignore words intended to debase her.

He’s still kneeling on the floor, his face upturned to look at her, tears running down his weathered cheeks. She flips the blade into reverse grip and raises it over her head. “I don’t want to kill you. And yet...”

“I leave you no choice.”

She plunges the blade down, stabbing deep into Berach’s

breast. His eyes open wide: as though death's face is other than he expected.

Jordis kneels and lets him fall into her arms. Kisses him. Her long dark hair tangles around the sword, soaking with blood.

"Does this cure your pain?" she asks.

His gasp could mean anything as he falls away from her, off her blade, slumping to the floor.

"I'm sorry."

She closes his eyes.

Inside his satchel she retrieves a cloth to clean her blade.

"Butler!"

The butler appears in the doorway, eyebrows arching in surprise.

"I'll need another sharpener." Jordis fastens her scabbard on. "He was one of the better ones, wasn't he?"

The butler nods. "The best."

Jordis sheaths her blade. Spilling blood usually makes her feel better. Yet...

Before the Butler can take her sword, she springs to catch hold of the trapdoor and hauls herself back into her room of screens.

In the Other Worlds, Red draws her from the pack again. Next comes Death. Red crosses her with it. Jordis throws herself back onto the cushions, knocking over her wine, and laughs and laughs. If only Red knew.

"Is it love doomed to fail, or... is she going to die?" Blue asks.

"Enough!" Jordis hisses, and leaps to her feet, pressing her sword through the screen, into Red's world. Red gasps in shock, but wraps her hand around the hilt.

This, she knows, will end his ignorance.

STARLESS

Ben Payne

The wire door slams behind me. It's cold outside, starless. Cicadas burn through my eardrums with their tiny screams. My head is like a pressure cooker.

Let go, the voice says.

I walk away from the party, deeper into the backyard. I hate the people in there and how they make me feel; so stupid, so inadequate. I hate Stephen for bringing me here, for not knowing how much I'd hate it, or knowing and not caring. Most of all I hate myself for failing. For not fitting in. For not being the person they want me to be. For not knowing who I want to be.

Let go, the voice inside says, and I sigh.

I take off my shoes and find a spot where I can climb onto the roof via the fence.

Up here, it's quieter. The pressure inside my head eases, just a bit. Up here, I don't feel so lost, so out of my depth. Up here, I just feel distant.

I hear the vacuous party conversations. The roof does nothing to mute them.

*She said I need to lose another ten kilos before they'll consider...
Whatabout the game Friday, mate...
I heard she's pregnant...
You think she'd sleep with me, I mean she's slept with everyone...*

And Stephen. He hasn't even noticed I'm gone. But then he never does.

*I turned silences and nights into words.
What was unutterable...*

He's chatting up that psych-grad-girl with Rimbaud. Like he did with me.

*...I wrote down.
I made the whirling world stand still.*

I wanted to believe the whirling world could stand still. That maybe Stephen would help calm it. Stop the endless fight, be my happy ever after, but—

She's giggling.

Enough.

I can tune them in and out, like a radio station. This is what the voice offered. This is the bargain I made. Fade the volume until they're gone. In the silence, I close my eyes and let my body slip into the air. I float higher, higher, way up above the house, the street. The cold is beautiful.

I remember the first time, flying above my mother's car the day

she fought with Dad at the beach. I remember the daisy shoes and my feet burning. I remember her voice: the anger, the frustration, the disappointment.

You promised you'd be responsible. You're a father, an adult, and you're not acting like either. How the hell can I trust you? Sorry's not good enough, Craig.

It's her voice I find hardest to tune out. Even now, after all these years.

*Shush, Lilianna.
Not now, Lilianna.
Stop it, Lilianna.*

I fly a little higher. Cling to the distance, the cold. My protection.

Let go.

This time, I almost do.

The ground is waiting. The ground is welcoming. Calling me down into its embrace.

One day I will let go. Give up fighting it, surrender to its peace.

One day I will fall. There is a price for every gift.

One day, when I work out what still holds me here: my strength, my cowardice? My mother's control, Dad's chaos? My love, my hate? My stubbornness, my obedience? Happy ever after?

When I work it out, I'll cut myself free.

And I will fall.

“LILY!”

I startle. Reality swings back into my face. I am on the roof. Freezing. The guttering beneath my left foot gives, momentarily.

Let go.

The voice is a whisper now, lost among the cicadas’ screams. Stephen stares up through narrowed eyes.

“What are you doing up there?”

“Nothing,” I say, stepping off the guttering, away from the edge. “Just looking at the stars,” I add quickly, so he won’t humiliate me by repeating the question.

“Get down! Come back inside.”

He doesn’t wait to see if I do. He doesn’t offer me a hand to get down. The wire door slams behind him.

I flew up above the car.

You cannot fly, Lilianna

Yes I can, and sprinkled us with Happily-Ever-After dust.

There is no Happily-Ever-After dust, Lilianna

Yes there is.

No, there isn’t.

Yes! There! Is!

There is no happy ever after, Lilianna. There just isn’t.

I leave my shoes to gather dew by the fence and walk slowly back toward the house. The grass is newly mown, soft and damp. At the door I take a long breath. Fill myself with silence.

Let go, I tell myself and open the wire door.

EMERGING, CLOSURE

Rus VanWestervelt

Partial Eclipse

Tucked in the corner of this small, sterile kitchen, you look at the screen. Words mock you, a deafening condemnation of the latest attempt to create something worthwhile before everything changes. Forever.

So original, you Fuck.

Still, you hit print and hear the gears grind words, push pulp to the tray by the window. You walk to the printer, notice the smooth white back of the unprinted side, and smile.

So pure

Everything is tabula-rasa-possible when the pulp is so white, so pure.

Pure? You know what's not pure?

You push the thought out of your head and reach toward the tray, but another returns just as quickly.

A holding bin for trash.

You pinch the paper.

Turn it over.

See the black-on-white—

Excrement. Disease.

—and rip it once, twice, again and again, until serpentine confetti fills your hand.

They told me poetry cleanses...

Crush your fingers around shards of words that pained you to pen.

Poetry doesn't cleanse.

It condemns.

Paper rains from your hand and falls to the kitchen counter with the crumbs left over from your breakfast. Tell-tale evidence of the crimes of your hunger.

Go on, call it your passion.

Imposter.

Dead Man Walking.

You lean over the polished-steel sink and with one upward tug, open the window. Welcome the cold, December winds.

Warm reds run ice white on your cheeks. There is comfort in the cold. A slowing of the onslaught. An emotion-numbing rush of stillness.

You turn your back to the cold, to the words, and stare at the barren chair—it mocks you too—opposite the silent, static screen.

And why should it not.

You watch the screen dim. And the shadows move in.

Full Eclipse

I stir in the cold wind blowing through the window. Each desiccated scrap of self is a foetal pulse, a catechumen thought innately aware of possibility. Of potential. With each beat, I push forth, like a call primed for mating; a longing for completion without any understanding of what will make me whole.

The wind plays with me. I twirl on the table.

A black-white dustbowl of ideas: bumping, caressing, entangling.

I watch the still silhouette, a monochromatic wash of resignation and possibility that fills the space with definition. So precise.

I begin to take form.

Find a line.

Face the shadow.

illumination outstretched control diamonds

Stretch to touch. Make contact. Twelve inches. Eight. Five.
Finally,

three

two

one

A single strand of self rides the wind to kiss the silhouette. For us to be joined. Whole. But the silhouette turns away. Thrusts the window shut. The wind ceases.

The single strand falls. My black-on-white self, in pieces once again, settles.

Pulse slows.

In the eclipsed light of a broken life, I argue against the darkness. But I'm dying in ever-quickenings in the frigid, stagnant air.

Returning Light

She releases the clutch of covers and heads downstairs to the kitchen. These early-morning binges in her third trimester are getting on her nerves, but when Baby Neo starts stirring and kicking, she really has no choice.

Through the slits in the kitchen blinds she can see the half moon bathing the yard in silver light. She stretches (*kick*) across the bench, Baby Neo making it harder than it used to be to simply open the blinds a little wider.

Perhaps when the moon is full and bright they'll welcome Baby Neo, she thinks. Maybe before, she adds as something other than

hunger pangs tighten inside her.

As she steps back, something flutters to the floor and brushes the top of her bare foot. When the tightening stops and nothing follows it, she stretches (*kick*) and flicks the switch; five incandescent bulbs and the ceiling fan come to life.

At her feet printed words lie. And others on the bench dance in the air stirred up by the fan. She stretches again (*kick kick*) thinking nothing is easy any more—to reach the chain to kill the fan.

She leans down to look at the words on the bench and separates out individual words—bolds and flares and selfs—and smiles. Bending down (*kick kick kick*) she brushes the rest of the words into a cupped palm, and takes them all to the table.

In her warm hands their crushed forms relax, and she sees more words, more potential...for life. She touches each one, stroking, sliding words into phrases,

Tiny diamonds flare in fractures of the sky,

Pregnant whispers expanding in the night.

Until they rise and climax into stanzas:

A response without a call,

Hidden in plain sight,

Beyond her control,

My sister self whispers back.

The floorboards above creak and she startles as if caught (*kick kick*) in some salacious act. More creaks, and she stands. The stanzas shudder in her wake. She turns the light off and follows Baby Neo's lead (*kickkickkickkick*) into the hallway to meet the footsteps on the stairs. Her hand extends into the darkness. Awaits the return touch.

“I was worried about you...”

(*kickkickkickkickkick*)

“And me of you.”

She takes his hand and places it against Baby Neo.

“We make beautiful things together,” she says and follows him upstairs, waiting for him to agree.

In the moon's growing light, beneath the fading heat of the bulbs—*kick-kick*—the words live.

As I will. As will I,

Beautiful and free,

For all to see.

Bold and mercurial she rises

An Overshadowed Eclipse –

illumination in the sky

The moon – she to me

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OTHER PUBLISHING ADVENTURES

AS EDITOR

From Stage Door Shadows (Literary Mix Tapes)

Eighty Nine (Literary Mix Tapes)

Deck the Halls: tales of festive fear and cheer (Literary Mix Tapes)

Nothing But Flowers: tales of post-apocalyptic love (Literary Mix Tapes)

100 Stories for Queensland (eMergent Publishing)

The Red Book, with Paul Anderson (Chinese Whisperings)

The Yin and Yang Book, with Paul Anderson (Chinese Whisperings)

AS PUBLISHER

From Dark Places, by Emma Newman (eMergent Publishing)

In Fabula-divino, edited Nicole R. Murphy (eMergent Publishing)

Best of Friday Flash Volume 2, edited J.M. Strother, Tony Noland & Rachel Blackbirdsong (eMergent Publishing)

The Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal, edited by Jessica Bell & Dawn Ius (eMergent Publishing)

The Machine Who Was Also a Boy, by Mike McRae & Tom Dullemond (eMergent Publishing)

AS AUTHOR

Elyora/River of Bones, Endeavour Press (UK)

Twenty-Four, co-written Claire Jansen, self published

No Need to Reply, self published

