Internal Combustion

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*a controlled explosion supplying power for propulsion
I couldn’t taste the metal in your key because of the glue on my tongue. If you chew gum while you dissect cadavers, it’ll taste like formaldehyde. I can taste my own death in stamps & almonds & if I spit the bitterness into the trashcan, I won’t absorb it, but if I hold it on my tongue, it turns sweet. I’ve been places downriver you aren’t allowed to have shoelaces or listen to music or be alone. Where someone sits in a chair & watches you sleep. When you sleep, sometimes you move through the dark. Sometimes the dark moves through you. Sometimes the dark asks questions; sometimes it shoots.
ROOM LIT BY A BULLET & A PHOTOGRAPH OF A PONY

What you did was a bullet, but I’ve drilled a hole through it & wear it around my neck. And sure you’ve a key—I’ve seen it—but it is a cheap one from the mall like every other girl has with the plating wearing off to brass. It doesn’t open any locks.

In this Western, I ride bareback. Once I peed in the holy water & saw graves yawn open to flowers. When daddy told me to drown kittens I did & I didn’t feel bad. Today, I’m double-fisting anything I can & waiting for the river to become a cracked riverbed I can walk along towards the scaffold I’m waiting to finish being built.

There is solitude in the long furrows of dirt in fields & in standing at the front of a crowded train looking down the tunnel, a question about loneliness in the long barrels of cold pistols.

In a cold shovelful of dirt hitting wood lined with satin, slow, the way a balloon sinks slower in a dirty room. An answer to the question in using favorite forks & breaking favorite plates & in skin picked from nails, in lightning bugs trapped in jars.

What you were: a photograph of a horse to someone who’s never been on a horse. What I am: hordes of children riding bareback off cliffs with satin ribbons in their hair & the horses’ manes, the satin trailing up to form a picture that shows where they’re going next.

I had the same dream seventeen times in a row & I had it because I slept alone.

Solitude in lipstick: a weapon by the bed brightening as the cigarettes in the ashtray & the bugs wink out; solitude as the long black car arrives & the door clicks shut with the sound of vocal cords being cut. There’s the end of solitude in the mirror on the ceiling. In the knock. In waking up thirsty & drinking cold water. Falling back asleep to have the dream an eighteenth time, only this time all the faces are blurs but I know who everyone is. I know that this time we are all dead.

Every person’s voice is still ice clinking in a glass, but now everything costs $5.99, which is almost a dollar more than I have. We depart, we depart, we go new places—but there is still dust in our hair & not enough air in our lungs to blow the sinking balloon back up.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Belladonna* Collaborative benefitted from the volunteerism and passion of more individuals than ever, as evidenced by the increasing unwieldiness of this annual project to honor those people with an event and publication. In its first year, 2012, the Belladonna* intern reading featured two interns, Jamila Wimberly and Jane Kennedy, matched with poet Hanna Andrews. Even then we knew the word “intern” was insufficient to describe the crucial work performed by these student workers, but we hadn’t yet quite articulated the idea. We stuck with the 2+1 format through 2013 and 2014’s events.

But now, after initiating a formal partnership with Evergreen State College and Professor Leonard Schwartz’s Poet in New York course, and after taking steps to compensate our workers with not just college credit and letters of recommendation but cold hard cash, we happen to find ourselves with a bigger group than ever, all deserving of recognition.

Today, we refer to everyone who helps on a regular basis, whether in our studio or remotely, as Program Assistants, a title that better reflects the significance of the work.

Those who newly contributed their labor in 2014 are: Liat Kaplan (Claremont McKenna College), aung.robo (Evergreen State College), Emma Marshall (Evergreen), Katelyn Peters (Evergreen), Amber Short (Pratt Institute), Chelsea Klopp (Pratt), Saretta Morgan (Pratt), Alexis Pope (Brooklyn College), Nina Puro, Ra Ruiz, and Chia-Lun Chang. Jolene Gurevitch provided accounting tutoring.

Belladonna* is also sustained by occasional and short-term guest curators, PR helpers, consultants, brainstormers, leaders for book or grant or event projects. Words fail to capture the energy generated by our rhizomatic body. There is truly space in Belladonna* for anyone who wishes to be involved, whatever their expertise or curiosity. Our only limitation is the number of hours in each day and scheduling around our duties in the myriad roles each of us plays as we move among various environments. I am proud to curate this annual event and chaplet, to turn the attention of our programming to the engines that make it go.

— Krystal Languell
WITH ASBESTOS EXPOSED

We move like beetles silvered by moonlight.
The crack house across the street is always open, even when the barroom isn’t. We sit in a circle in what must have been the living room, some nights. Strangers’ heights in pencil laddering up a blackened doorjamb.
I pick your singed hairs out of books & piles of metal. The mirror’s mercury pooled on the ground. The burned-out ceiling is a ribcage; our skins just various shades of charring. We flinch from snowlight, lie on the cooling planks & mark patterns on the boards, collect cigarette butts to arrange in rows.
Call us marked by some invisible sign; call us thieves, call us shrinking. I want the future to stop, or go. I want to sit inside places scarred by time & understand what must have been the blade, & why. I don’t understand why copper is so valuable, or the past. The walls graffitied to a muddle. We can’t remember where the locks are now, but we have keys. Our voices shudder, waver like the window glass—thin as the skin on water at the top, thick as bargain china at the bottom.
Knives in the middle. I beat time with my hands on the sill.
A DATE BETWEEN TWO STALLIONS, ONE OF WHICH HAS BEEN READING FOUCAULT

Cinco Volvo: … Having been skinned with red-hot pincers, he was quartered by horses. First four horses, then six, then pocketknives were drawn to sever the thighs some and the horses pulled their hardest until the job was accomplished. (Eyeing OffAndOn, dips face into feed bag)

OffAndOn: Even when it isn’t it’s so erotic. Our domination.

Cinco Volvo: (With mouth full of food) And that’s only the beginning.

The Shroud of Turin

The winter she didn’t get out of bed Was a soft season. Soft like rot. Soft like muffled voices, Dead slug tongues curled in our mouths. Soft like the hole she wore through the sheets Just from lying there.

The coldest winter on record, When the bedsheets twisted into a noose And didn’t give her back ’til spring. That year was a very late thaw. Minneapolis melting, Her lying still.

The heart is a leaky faucet You can’t afford to have fixed. A mattress stained in silhouette. A season of sweat.

When she got up, All faun legs and jackrabbity heart And gilly breathing wrists, We stripped the bed to its wood frame And threw away everything soft.
Rule #1 to a Happy Marriage

Emma Marshall

Rule #1 to a happy marriage; don’t have sex with too many people beforehand. I didn’t even read the article, just the headline.

Slut shamed by my Facebook feed without ever knowing what hit me.

So I start crying because the guy I’m fucking is a drag

but if I fuck someone else I’m in the fucking double digits.

Double digits = forever alone. Obviously.

And this is how future housewives become Angry Feminists.

But I’m fucking Angry.

Facebook traps me with a penis my vagina doesn’t get along with.

My mother wants to take the word “slut” out of “slut shaming.”

Society turns my sex life into a score board.

I should only have a taste of a few flavors of chocolate

but I should buy all the God damned perfumes Bath and Body Works has to offer.

Because smelling nice will bring you pleasure.

I’m on the table my side I won’t Write what I was screaming You kept telling me you were sorry It’s the only thing you’ve been sorry for
Men keep telling me how strong I am
The garbage corridor between buildings
A gate with no lock
Wake up I can see them fucking
How hasn't this happened before
Sure I was a child at some point
Miscommunication exists
We’re human after all
Who will you lie to next
Where is my full glass
My mouth a deep purple
Tattoo a Schuyler line
I keep misquoting
What’s the reason for waking
With a suicide wish
Why would you tell me
Your depression amplifies
The pain I’ve not been allowed
I’m circling this tiny apartment
Picking up crumbs and clothes
Cut into a very large birth dream

Pleasure, on the other hand, will not.

I’m not being silly, either. I know this feeling.

This box.

I am powerful and beautiful and confident

and I avoid Victoria’s Secret at all cost because their ads bring me to tears in the middle of the mall.

What is the Huffington Post’s definition of a “Happy Marriage” and do I actually want that slice of cake?

How would the article “Correlation Found Between More Sex Partners and a Happier Life” read?

And would the author be a man or a woman?

If I were to decide to take that final—promiscuous—step into the double digits would it affect the overall happiness of the rest of my days on Earth?

Not my marriage.
Nor my social standing.
My happiness.

The answer?
Yes.

Who knows how long that headline will ring in my ears?
Katelyn Peters

BRIGHTLIGHT

library stories arsenal time
I read a monologue about, your lull
your stare at my expense eye
a soliloquy
a procedure receding, nonetheless
this doesn’t sound good, anyways
in Seattle crowded
a crowd I always think of you
the more there are
the chances
that two are you
chance
I am adamant

last night we crisscrossed 9 blocks
the boys’ hips sidled dear things
we ran downhill the wind tickled flying skirts uphill
in peril thought we would not notice missing the vein
wandering late last night

Tyler’s little brother said, “If you think too much about something, it is a problem because it becomes a problem.” Is it a problem that I think too much or does thinking terrifically create problems?

so we didn’t think about how lost we are in the world
instead bought books that we cannot return to the library
instead ate food that is not funny
instead told grave stories
about love
dire not the least abashed
last night damp from drinking and
drenched with each other’s loud lives
why else so big and happy

PAY PARKING
6am to 10pm
EVERYDAY
says the sign

pay by the hour
so we pay for time

Home from the bar
You blame tequila
I’ll blame my nerves
Whatever it takes to get your socks off
At the pet store
Even the unimaginative
Make up fake lives
from That Which Comes After

In peacetime we feel the same as
Diner lights with dirty glass
I'm about this high
My head against your chest
I can't pull my tights off fast enough
Come back onto the porch
Finish this Corona
We're too old to have such bad taste
A squirrel eating old bread
Tell me a story tonight
I think I'd like to hear a story
Remind me why horses
Were so strong when we were young
What ties us to these bodies
Why can't we leave without dying
Sometimes sunshine isn't welcome
I'd look really good next to you on that bench
Cut my cheeseburger in half
Can't finish what I start
That time you carried me

Maybe I…

Today it's been 60 days. I'm on the east coast but sometime early this morning, 60 days ago, I sent a typed message, through my phone. I took my scissors and cut that string. It ended. I still think of you every day, though there are some days I don't. Some days where I am so engrossed that it's gross that I don't miss you. I needed to do the work on me.

I keep picturing our ending.

I wish this were a different story. We wrote it together and tore up our fingers ripping pages it was not right. The load grew so heavy. Complex. You, when I hit you. My hand that appendage attached to me, my afterthoughts thinking and fully comprehending what I'd done. Just one moment, only an instant, the echo of understanding the force of that blow.

I didn't know just how hard it shook us.

I've never wished to take something back as much as I have, that action. I tell myself daily that the act doesn't define me. Neither does being an artist. A poet. Queer. Polish. Fat and white skinned, often wearing rumpled clothes. Those do not define me. Maybe I need to find god. Maybe I need to give up pot, maybe I should stop drinking coffee? Maybe I should.

Maybe I should?

I cannot hold my breath for maybe baby. I'm afraid to forget where I came from. I am listless, all I see is you. The memories haunt me on the subway train skirting along the metal tracks, nothing blacks out this silence. The paintings bright lights, no nothing. It rings, louder. How do we heal? How do we take ourselves back? How do I?

How do I realize and repeat advice to me, encouraging to taste again.

Submit to the thought, let it fall. Maybe I could ride a bus until it stops. Cognizant assimilated with sadness. I built us a throne, I put us there, we both shook and shook—testing what it could withstand. I think we both did lousy turning our heads to the cracks in the foundation. Maybe I could go back there someday, maybe I could? Maybe I should.
Young Warrior

I am here to tell you to keep the language of courage and love on your tongue
Don’t let the haters get you undone

We are off to a ceremony - Areitos - stomping and clapping our hands
To awaken the warrior spirits who fought for our land
Women and men who refused to be slaves
My mother told me that we are as Taino as we are Black
And that these light eyes were given to us by Spain

But don’t get it twisted, we don’t forget and we don’t forgive
I am not American, I am Native
To the mountains of Ponce, land of Agueybana
To the corners of Fordham Road and the South Bronx
To the Atlantic waters where some of my peoples people lie under the essence of Yemaya

Young Warrior you are part of a circle
Where dreams and nightmares meet - like a dream catcher
Where spirits pray and sing and dance

Spiritual paths are many
When you praise, praise yourself too
See you are here today because you have survived something, or many things

If you are a warrior for the light, one who fights where there is pain
If you believe in love and the power it holds
If you believe in freedom and peace
Then you and me, we are comrades
I have your back, call out to me
I will follow your tracks

Young Warrior reach out your hand and with your fingers read the braille coding of the Earth
Young Warrior on the cliff before battle I will hand you a gift, ink filled with ancient and new wisdoms
So that you may write on the scroll of your life a story for your children, and your children's children, and their children
Romantic

I actually like the name of Lord Byron even though I have to read it for the test tomorrow. It sounds better than George Byron. Too many people called George make the name sound like, The Dog's Story, a movie for dog lovers to cry. I cannot deny that being a British poet in the Romantic Movement sounds cool. Like a gentleman who kneels down and waits in front of a lady's front door, not the guy who sings off-key and looks up at a window. He says, “I am taking you out tonight.” This era is about elegant and delicate smiles and actions! It’s not just poetry for us to memorize. As a result, I give up on reading and scamper from my dorm.

Sam is drinking a Carlsberg. He sits next to me in the living room and stares at me frivolously. “What? You ain’t going to drink tonight?”

I’m taking another Carlsberg from the floor. “I’m fucking drinking.” I thought that the Carlsberg brand was from Ireland so I checked online. It’s a fucking German beer. Everyone checks online to find out every single information. I kinda like it because it feels I can go anywhere at anytime if I want, even when I am sitting in my tiny room with my foreign beers. Carlsberg feels like it could be an Irish drink because it is a gross green color and there is a butterfly leaf on the top of the R in the logo. The print is jumping as I stare at the label, almost a welcoming sign to an Irish bar that I went to one night. I didn’t get why Irish bars are so unique. People dressed up in tacky green, and the worst part was the little plastic hats. One of them was an elf dressed in a green suit with a yellow beard who grabs me with his long and skinny fingers. I just love it. I love people that dress up without any reason but to get drunk.

Reason and logic are too serious to even think about. Beer is nothing to think about, either. If Carlsberg is an exotic foreigner, Bud Light is a cheap prostitute who wears suspenders. Heineken is a kind of international person who shows up out of nowhere and smiles all the time with no personality. I love Sierra Nevada just because of the Autumn Brown Ale. Autumn is an esoteric word. It’s not the withered leaves that fall in the park. It’s the chill and dry air that swirls around you when you open the door in early October. No one really knows what’s going on with beer. I prefer not to think too much about it. If

Young Warrior, in the darkness before battle follow the scent of your own courage
And if you are scared, it is ok
Because courage is not about not having fear
Courage is about standing up even when you are trembling in fear

It is about summoning up all of the love inside your veins to shield those in need
It is about willing to sacrifice your own comfort for someone else
It is about letting yourself love even those who you don’t understand
It is about seeing someone weak and lending out your hand

So Young Warrior, keep the language of courage and love on your tongue
Because each moment, is an opportunity to take a stand

Young Warrior, I salute you.
Enamorada

Teach me a new way
A new language, to speak it
Breaking the silence

Carve it inside me
Scar me braille semiotics
From your skin to mine

I desire to stay
In the space between your hands
Know it in my veins.

Orar

Quiero que las diosas nos amen
Como nosotras a ellas – y que decoren nuestros corazones

Porque estas cuatro paredes son el templo
Tu cama el altar
Y nuestro sudor
La ofrenda.