

R a b b l e

a chapbook companion to pwa-tem



Liminal

adjective

- 1. relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.*
- 2. occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.*

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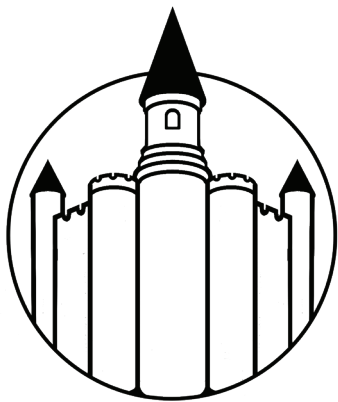
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"Tell the rabble
my name is Cabell."

— James Branch Cabell to his editor, to help people learn how to pronounce his name. Cabell used the word derogatively but we are taking it back. These pages will showcase the writing and illustrations of our rabble—the ordinary students of VCU.



pwa-tem



Gray Skies

Luke Campbell

Leaning up against bricks beside the open window,
my jeans stuck to the squares of the asphalt quilt
porch roof that scratched my bare feet.

I witnessed the sky grow pale in moments
where the celestial bodies switched shifts, an innocent pause
for a child to reflect upon her silvery breath in the winter,
an unassuming gray—The color of her delicate skin
and her hair teased with anxiety, sticking up in all directions
and falling out on her cloudy hospital pillow,
the same color of the milky preservative pumped
through one of countless tubes diving down her esophagus
damming up the incessant flow of calculated insults and self-pity
spewed over all the old birthday cards I still kept in my room.
The gray sky polluted her panicked eyes, anticipating night.



Man in the Moon

Lauren Chartuk

January 20th – The cabin at the top of the mountain is an almost ideal location for observations of the moon. I have arrived four hours prior to a waxing crescent. My assistant, Alexander, has already covered every light source with red paper to ensure no interference. Each year he finds me a new cabin to stay in and observe the moon; after 8 years he knows what I need. I chose this time to park the car at the bottom of the mountain and hike up. The equipment weighed me down. 1.7 miles up the mountain revealed nothing but wilderness and scarcely an animal, which is good for my purposes of only observing the phases of the moon.

Waxing crescent – The cabin is dank with moisture from the mountain; the small cot is only big enough to fit one person, possibly two sleeping closely together. The table tucked in the corner of the room fits my equipment. I struggled to lift my gear onto the table, which began to wobble under the weight. I felt initials carved into the table but the buckled wood warped the names to be illegible. I can see my breath inside the cabin but a small wood furnace warms the place quickly. I'm glad to be here alone. Alexander would complain at the cold; I imagine him sitting in the bed huddled in clothes and blankets.

Waxing – I am afraid to leave my telescope outside. Every night I set it up along with my journal and a small table, and after I collect my data I bring it inside with me. The mountain is prone to tumultuous weather, rain or mist or fog could come at any moment.

It was cloudy tonight. During the day, it rained. The cabin's roof is sound, except for one leak. The leak splashes water to the floor 1.8 inches from my cot. I put a can down to catch the rain. I emptied my can four times today. The storm must be at the town below, pouring buckets of rain onto the people moving back and forth in the shops. Alex is probably in the town; he always sat at the window of my office watching the water drain from the gutter with big wide eyes. He is wet from all of this rain on my mountain. This rain could flood the town, running off of me. I worry my can will overflow in the night.

First quarter – It was nearly bright enough to see the craters dimple the surface. The night was perfect, not a noise on my mountain. The red lamps barely emit light so I do not use them anymore. My eyes can see better without them.

The stars were too bright tonight. They pockmarked the black sky. I squinted looking through my telescope, the moon elusive behind the glare of those damn stars. They get in the way like crowds of people blocking my view, always complicating things. They outnumbered, overpowered the moon. I let the moon go, undetected. My telescope pointed out the window while I slept.

Waxing Gibbous – To the naked eye, at a lower elevation, this moon appears to be full. Those people in the town below see my moon but they don't understand. They don't know that my telescope sees the sliver of dark space that is left to be filled. They don't see him.

The moon dazzles me. Lighting my surroundings, I could see the recess of green around the cabin. The maze of trees cast shadows onto the space around me. The shadows danced as lone clouds dappled the moon.

Oh, if Alex could see this, his bright eyes gazing at the moon. The moon reflecting in the forever wide-open disks of his pupils. His mouth drooping slightly agape in something like awe and amazement. He might even ask to sleep out here, to take in the stars – no, more so the moon. The moon winked at me as I carried my telescope in.

I woke up from a nap to
the moon peering into me;
the wide bright face took a
whole pane of the window.

The white reflection of the
moon had a bluish green tint
of something like death.

Waning Gibbous – It was cool tonight. I felt shivers through the night within my cabin. The wind blew through the wooden walls with whispers and gusts. I could not sleep. I thought of Alex, sleeping, his moon starting to wither away. I wonder if he could feel it dwindling. I wonder if he thought of me on this mountain.

Waning – There was a meteor tonight. It slid past the top of my mountain. At first it seemed like a

flashlight across the pale of trees. I looked at the trees surrounding me; the branches waved, the trunks big enough to hide bodies, to be bodies. I went inside with my equipment. The door on the cabin – made from one sturdy chunk of wood – does not have a lock.

Third quarter – Half of my moon is gone now, dissolving into the black abyss. The rest of it looks moldy, a deathly gray pockmarked with patches of black. I must have lost two days, the moon changed so fast. There was a storm and I slept. The nights are colder, the silence of the woods is the same, still and observant.

Waning crescent – The nights are darker, draining the light from my cabin. Through the fogged window pane, I can see the shape of the moon. I used the small, empty table to cook. I run my fingers over the faded initials and can feel the letters. A... W...

It rained again today. The roof dripped and dripped and dripped. I stayed in bed, wincing at each splash of water. Everything is damp. The window is fogged with condensation; I cannot see anything.

My equipment is ruined, waterlogged with every leak. The feet of my telescope are muddy, as if it was left outside. When I moved it, I could hear the water within it, trapped.

I woke up from a nap to the moon peering into me; the wide bright face took a whole pane of the window. Its craters are big, wide eyes of shock. The white reflection of the moon had a bluish-green tint of something like death. No, by my measure it should be waxing, not full and round. This large object was something else. I walked to the window and saw Alexander, come to check on me

with his moon-like face. His skin a porcelain white and his cheeks rounded into his jaw in the most beautiful way. I ran outside to him into the brisk air, around the corner of the cabin. I saw nothing but the edge of trees 20 meters off. I called for him, nothing but silence returned to me. I echoed his name off the mountain and the moon reflected it back to me.

Waxing crescent – I laid next to a fallen tree, my head propped on it's body, watching the moon. One branch bent down to me, caressing me with its mossy tendrils. The tree nearly felt like flesh, soft with decay. The bark of this tree felt pillow-y as a jacket would. This forest of the decayed and renewed smelled of must.

Everything is dark. Only the stars are left, flickering in and out, laughing at me. My moon is gone, faded into the black, consumed by these stars. They grow brighter and hotter surrounding my cabin. I must leave. I need to get to the trees, just beyond the field. I can barely see the edge of the pines and oaks, my oasis...

I trip over my fallen tree; the smell of rot erupts and consumes me. I look at my leg covered, wet and sticky. I feel grass under my cheek and turn my head to see my moon. A fallen tree with a wide, round face and skin that looks white in this dark night. The moon's large dark eyes see me, knowingly. The stars coming toward me light my fallen tree. He lays there, damp with my mildew, his mouth agape in something like surprise. The stars come closer. I climb on top of him, protecting him from these burning stars. I can never leave this cabin. I take my moon into my hands and bring him into our cabin. Oh, Alexander, I will always protect you.

Chinaberry Trees

Clarissa Kendall

We used to lay beneath each Sunday,
hungry, hands like mouths on our answers,
like tarnish on silver: didn't we know

the roots would stay - rely on the shade -
permanence and god and love, as the wind?
Didn't we know invincible? And what
do we know now? Her father owned guns.

my father was one. Watch her walk away,
steady the ark of herself on the bark
of Chinaberry Trees when the wind blows.
Always, see the brilliance falling out of

her, falling out of me. I can still feel
the fall. We used to know invincible.



On the Things which I do not Discuss

Olivia Carter

I.

he said it'll never happen again.
i believed.

II.

i made pilgrimages
to the edges of my sanity.

III.

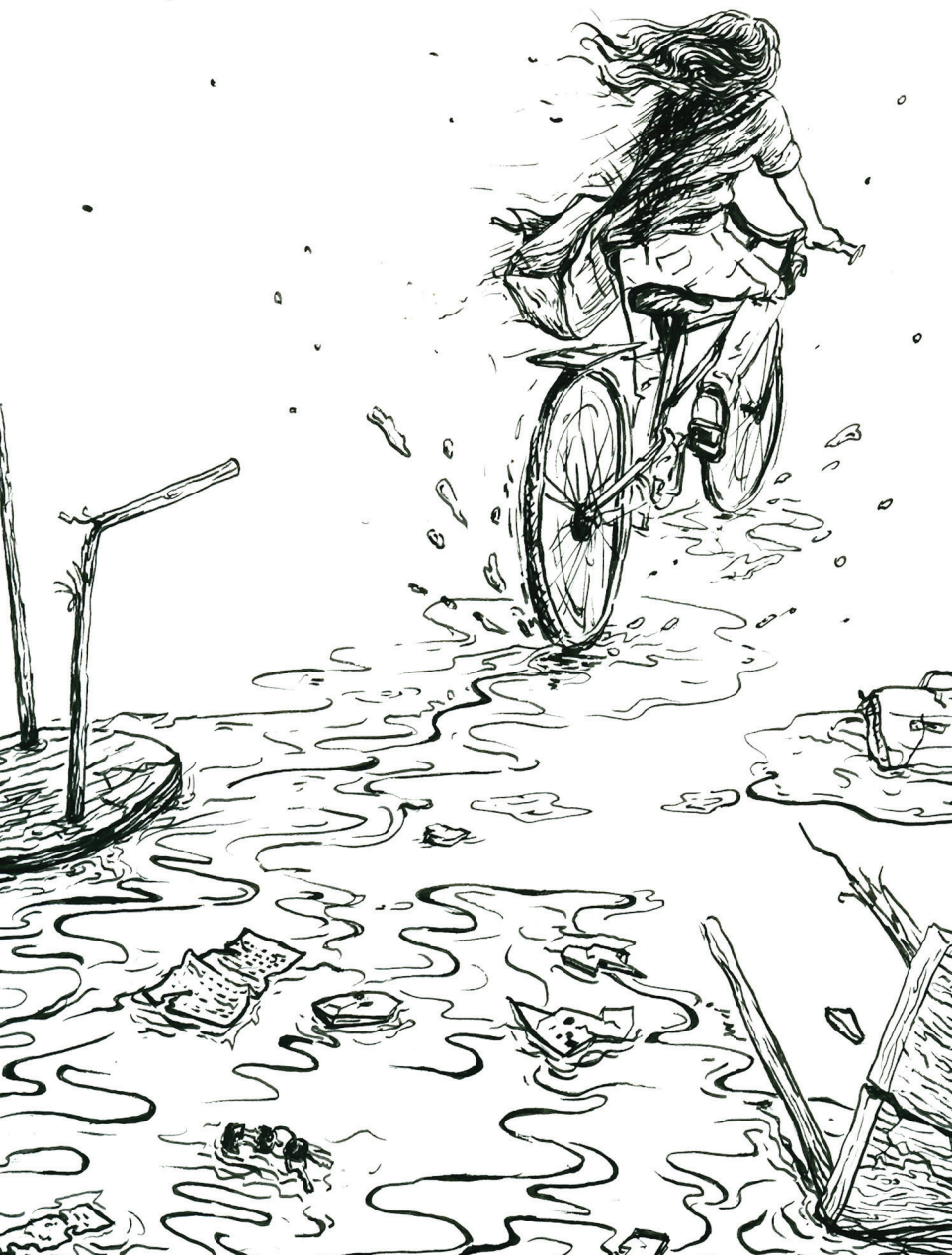
the war raged on
and the trenches became home.

IV.

i pried open my bitter jaws
and confessed his sins.

V.

I left.



Tuesday Night is Family Dinner Night

Luke Campbell

Sitting on the toilet in *Nuevo Mexico*,
I scroll mechanically through Instagram,
long ago having finished my business there.
A Mexican opera fills the air, loudest
in my haven of patterned tiles.

I savor my time away from the booth filled
with loved ones and plates with refried beans,
enjoying my favorite part of family dinner.
I take deep breaths of spearmint air freshener,
preparing myself to return to the polite attempt
at conversation, which my family executed with the grace
of blind monkeys tasked to a game of volleyball.
Serenaded in Spanish, I gather my thoughts, pull up my pants,
and prepare an outside-the-bathroom version of myself.



Unseen of the Streets

Anya Sczerzenie

Unseen of the streets—you dash in front of a car, the flash of your red jacket a flying leaf in the wind. The driver brakes, but by then you're already gone. He doesn't even see you leave the crosswalk, one of your steps at least two of everyone else's, slinking your back to the alleyways and staple – studded telephone poles. Unnoticed, like the stickers on apples and the cigarette butts littering the front walk of what should've been a smoke-free zone, the smoke dissipating on the wind faster than even you do. Through the street walled with windows and sneering faces and people who move slowly, too slowly for you with their headphone-blasted music seeping into their brains and making them forget you're there, you run too quickly for any net to catch, for any well-meaning solicitor to stop and shake you down. Slapping your feet on the concrete to the beat of your transient heart, you dart between the familiar and the unexplored, the buildings you swore were in different configurations last time you looked, but the hot blood rushing to your head keeps your eyes from focusing. Another intersection, another bus shrieks, nearly running you down. The streets begin to melt. All are the same, all pointing back the way you came, the sidewalks writhing snakes not fixed to the earth. With every direction leading to nowhere, you slide down your own racing heart and stop to catch your ragged breath—

—and finally, you are seen.





Get a Grip

Dakota Morton

The Virginia sun beat down on everything in sight, bouncing off cars and tin roofs like giant polished mirrors. Tall wooden power lines dotted the broad neighborhood street, humming steadily as though they too were growing tired of the Southern heat. Kitty let out a sigh as she bent down to rustle through the basket of clean clothes next to her feet. She retrieved her delicate white slip and carefully pinned it to the clothesline in front of her with a wooden snap. Her mama gave her a whole set to match when she was first married, but all of the other pieces were ruined one way or another. Once it was in place she noticed the slip still bore a slight red stain down the front; her husband Tom said it was a lesson to teach her for “mouthing off.” She shook her head, ripping down the garment, remembering her mother’s advice for marital life: “In all these years with your daddy I’ve found the best thing to use is a bit a peroxide for the blood. Bleach just won’t cut it.” Kitty clenched her fists at the thought, pulling them close to her sides.

Her soft, yellow linen sundress clung to her body and she could see sweat beginning to bead on her chest. She flipped her head over and shook out the damp blonde curls with her fingers. While her head hung upside down, her eyes scanned the overgrown weeds and blackfoot daisies blanketing the backyard. Her gaze paused for a minute on the large tin trash cans huddled by the back fence, and for a second she thought she saw a flash of white. Kitty closed her eyes and flipped her head back up, carefully pulling the ringlets around her face.

She opened her eyes and hung the last few garments in the basket up to dry. Her toes scrunched in the wet grass under her feet and she pondered lying down in it, knowing the inside of her house would be no cooler than where she presently stood. She lingered there for a moment, fiddling about in her pockets until she retrieved a cigarette case and a book of matches. She held the thinly hand-rolled cigarette in her teeth and with a quick slash brought it to life, inhaling deeply. She started towards the back door, but again a flash of white caught her eye. As she stared, it became clear to her that the glimpse of white was actually a sleeve, and upon closer examination, that it was attached to one of her husband's dress shirts. She trotted towards the can scoffing as she lifted the lid to retrieve the shirt. Tom was always wasting money they didn't have, and she resolved to remove the stain with the hope of saving a few dollars. The screen door slammed behind her as she made her way to the washroom, her slick feet sticking to the yellow and green linoleum.

She tossed the shirt and slip onto the lid of the washer while she fiddled about for her spray bottle. She clutched the neck of the bottle and spread the shirt out in search of the stain. Her eyes wandered over the seemingly pristine blouse, puzzled. Then she smelled it: the sweet, artificial scent of cheap perfume. She fiddled momentarily with the fuchsia stains along the collar before she picked it up and tied it around her waist, stubbing the cigarette out on the hood of the washer.

With sloppy motions Kitty rushed through the garage and grabbed a pair of gardening gloves and shears, thrusting her size-five foot into Tom's massive rain boots. Her feet sloshed back and forth as she made her way

down to the tiny creek that ran along the other side of her chain-link fence. As she approached the tree she'd been searching for, a sense of calmness took over her. Her breathing slowed, and with cool hands she moved the shears towards the weed that sprung from the base of the tree. The branch snapped like an open palm to the mouth as it fell into her gloved hand. Slowly now, she moved towards the house, her sense of urgency gone.

“In all these years with your daddy I’ve found the best thing to use is a bit a’ peroxide for the blood. Bleach just won’t cut it.”

When she reached the back door she removed the cumbersome boots and dress before making her way through the washroom into the kitchen. She pulled down her grandmother’s mortar and pestle and proceeded to grind down the poison oak from the creek into a thin paste. With a teaspoon she slid the paste into a mason jar, and walked into the living room to fetch a decanter of bourbon. She poured it into the mason jar and placed a thick layer of cheesecloth over the lip before sealing it

shut. She stood over the porcelain sink and methodically washed her hands, then all of the dishes, and rubbed her fingers raw with a bleach rag. Dropping the rag onto the green countertop, she walked to the bathroom, where she stayed a long while under the water huddled in the corner of the bathtub.

She heard her mama's voice ringing in her ears over and over again:

“Get a grip, girl!” Screeched the voice over a boiling tea kettle. “You stop that before I give you something to cry about!” Heavy boots hitting the floor. “It is your duty as his wife.” Mine – mine, not his. “You’d be lucky if any man could stand ya!” Don’t leave, can’t leave, no money in the mattress, just one more month at the diner, that’ll do it. All of those months trying to save ran together, all of her mama’s words garbled into one as she desperately tried to grasp something concrete, only to meet the hot water rushing from the spigot. Her head began to spin and she placed it between her legs to stop the ringing. As she stared between the blur of mascara, her eyes landed on several large bluish marks snaking their way up and between her thighs. After a moment she lurched forward and cut off the water. She dried off and went to the washroom where a floor-length mirror covered the back of the cracked wooden door. She stood there in the afternoon sun and took inventory of every scar that covered her naked frame. A shudder rolled over her as she traced her hands down her bruise-marked neck to her black fingerprinted hips. She picked up the stained slip from the washer top and wiggled it onto her still-sticky skin. She then grabbed two highballs from the bar and poured herself a glass of bourbon and water on ice; the

other she strained from the mason jar and topped with a cherry. Then she waited; legs crossed, perched on the edge of a straight-backed-chair. She'd left the door just so the screen was open, and exhaled long trails of smoke towards the black mesh as the sun began to set. The radio at the other end of the room hummed out "There Goes my Baby," and the cicadas wound themselves up and down in accordance with the tune.

Tom burst through the door not too long after and walked past his wife with an air of indifference, not bothering to look at her as he made his way to the bedroom.

"I can't stay," he called to her. "I've got plans with the boys downtown, don't want to keep 'em waitin too long." He rushed into the living room in a change of clean clothes and picked up Kitty's cigarette case from the table beside her. "Honestly," he said sneeringly, as he lit one of her cigarettes, "I wish you wouldn't go on like that, it's indecent," pointing at her slip. For a moment he relaxed back into the cushion of his matching chair, taking deep drags as he surveyed his domain. Tom then reached over with his thick hand, grasping the tumbler glass with his irrevocably broken fingers and knuckles, healed together all wrong from years of bare fist fighting, and swirled around the bourbon. He paused for a moment before lifting the drink to his lips, and gave his wife a once-over, his gray eyes eventually locking with her own. Her breath caught in her chest. "Clean yourself up before I get home," he said in an exhale of smoke. Tom downed the contents of his tumbler, and with a slam of the screen door went into the night.

Settling

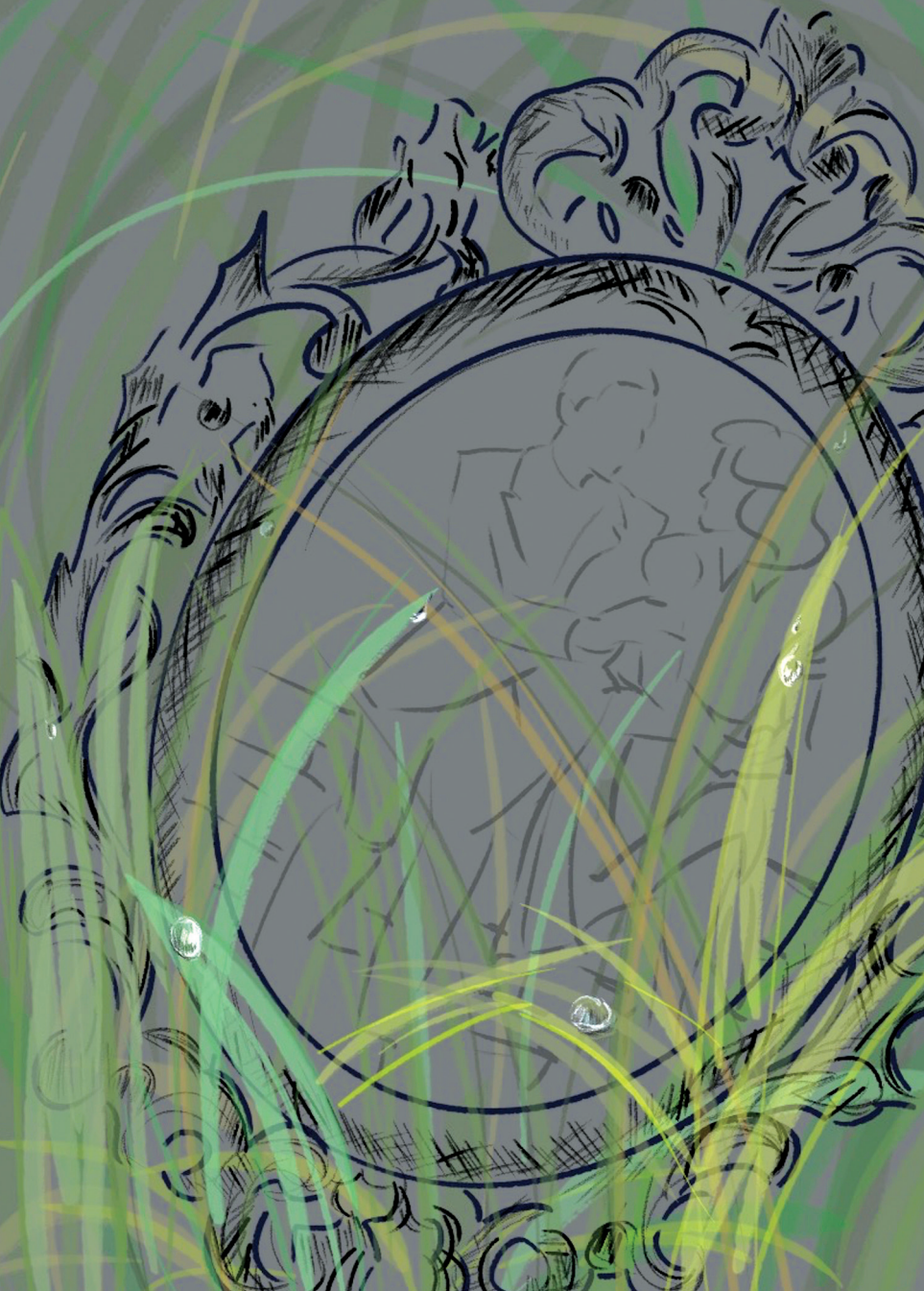
Savannah Aigner

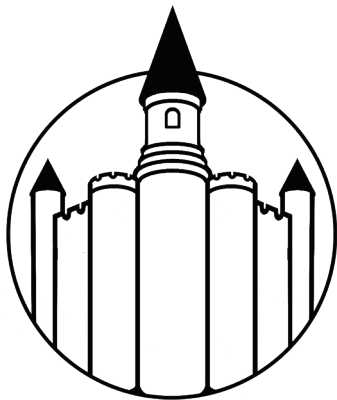
When the dew awakens the stiff leaves
scattered on the cold spring grass,
searching for a place to settle
on the waxy veins
not slipping underneath,
but sliding in unison among the damp heap.

When the life in the womb announces
that its walls are no longer big enough
to house imagination,
a silence, a moment
of uncertainty and fear,
until the light can guide the little being
tiptoeing through the tunnel
met with the mist of a mother's tears.

When the elderly woman holds the frame
of a love suspended in black and white,
born one lustful Friday night but transformed
into a lifetime of memories.
gazing down at her hands decorated by veins
not blue ugly bulges that protrude her skin,
but beating, colorful connections to her heart.

When breathing becomes heavy and memories fade
there is a clear drop on the windowpane.
a foggy breath on the mirror
spreads across the glass,
like the drops on the leaves' skin.





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