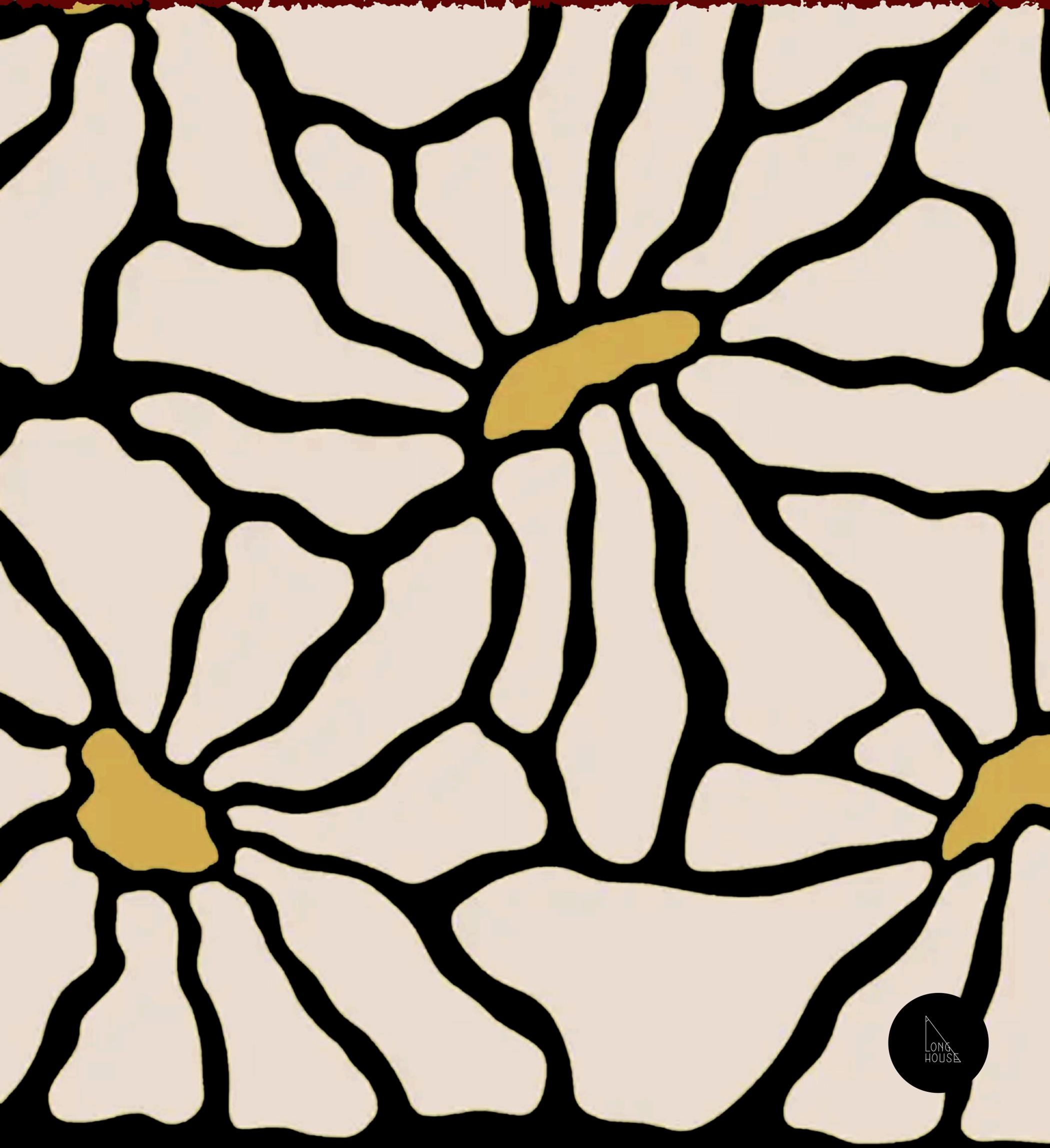


CHRONIC



CHRONIC

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Editor's Note

This chapbook was born out of a desire to give voice to something many of us go through, but few get to talk about: the silence surrounding chronic illness and disability. It is the silence borne when disease flare-ups disrupt our lives. The silence borne when doctors focus on symptoms rather than. The silence borne when friends who used to check in with us stop because we give them only complicated answers. The silence borne when society decided only the wealthy deserve care. The writers in *Chronic* chose to break this silence.

Chronic illness is unpredictable, exhausting, political, and personal. The writers in this collection illustrate this. They write from their own experiences, showing how pain disrupts daily life, how illness changes memories and plans, and how getting a diagnosis is often a struggle. This is the reality of living with chronic illness: you exist within a body that doesn't always comply. And yet still, chronic illness and disability are not just medical issues but also political issues that exemplify how power and inequality manifest in relation to receiving or not receiving care.

The pieces in this chapbook show the impact of ableism in relation to work, community, and care, as well as relationships between disability and gender, class, race, queerness, and the legacy of eugenics.

At its core, *Chronic* is about saying: I exist. I am still here. It was an honour to create this chapbook, and I thank every contributor for sharing their work with us. To every reader, I hope you approach these poems with honesty and care.

— Yvonne Wabai.
Editor, *Chronic*

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An Insider's Manual To Survival

You count your breaths
afraid to draw in for too long.
This energy is too sacred,
one wrong move and you're
buried inside your own body.
There must be a name for a body
that sacrifices itself to survive-
a snake eating its own tail.
So you bend your knees into submission,
you stop your hands from reaching too far,
you deny your back the right to stretch-
there is too much to lose in every breath.
To not call upon your body's rage,
you gather everything you are
and salvage it for a future that may never come.
You can't give up everything for today,
while tomorrow still breathes down your neck.

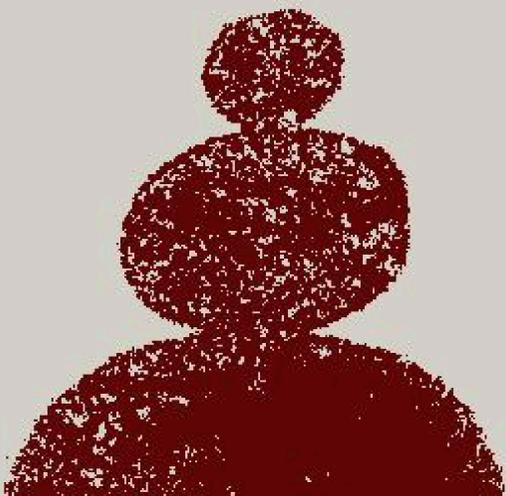
Everything The World Owes Me

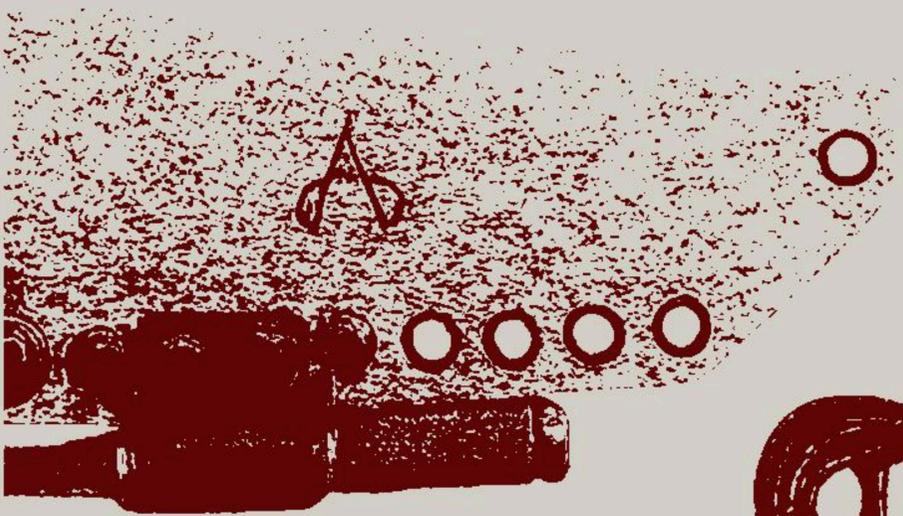
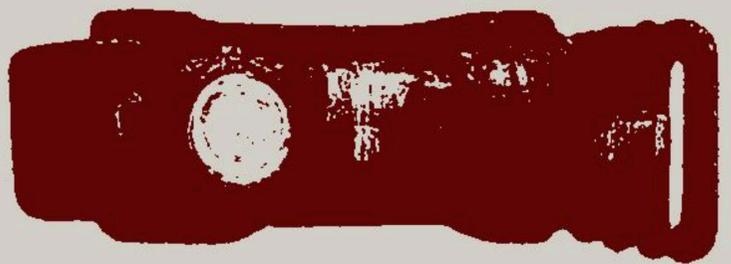
They said:
don't go around saying the world owes you a living,
it was here first.

Then
it should have swallowed back every grain of sand
when I came into it.
It should have reabsorbed
every drop of water in the oceans.
It should have cut down its trees
or burned them down to the roots.
It should have unpainted the skies and
left them empty and wanting.
It should have done everything in its power
to let me know
I am unwelcome here.

It shouldn't have given me things and people to
love.
It shouldn't have let me belong to anything in it.

The world owes me a living and belonging,
because when I slipped into it,
covered in blood,
its warm air wrapped itself around me
and whispered:
welcome home.





They said: don't go
world owes you a live
it was here first.

around saying the

ing.

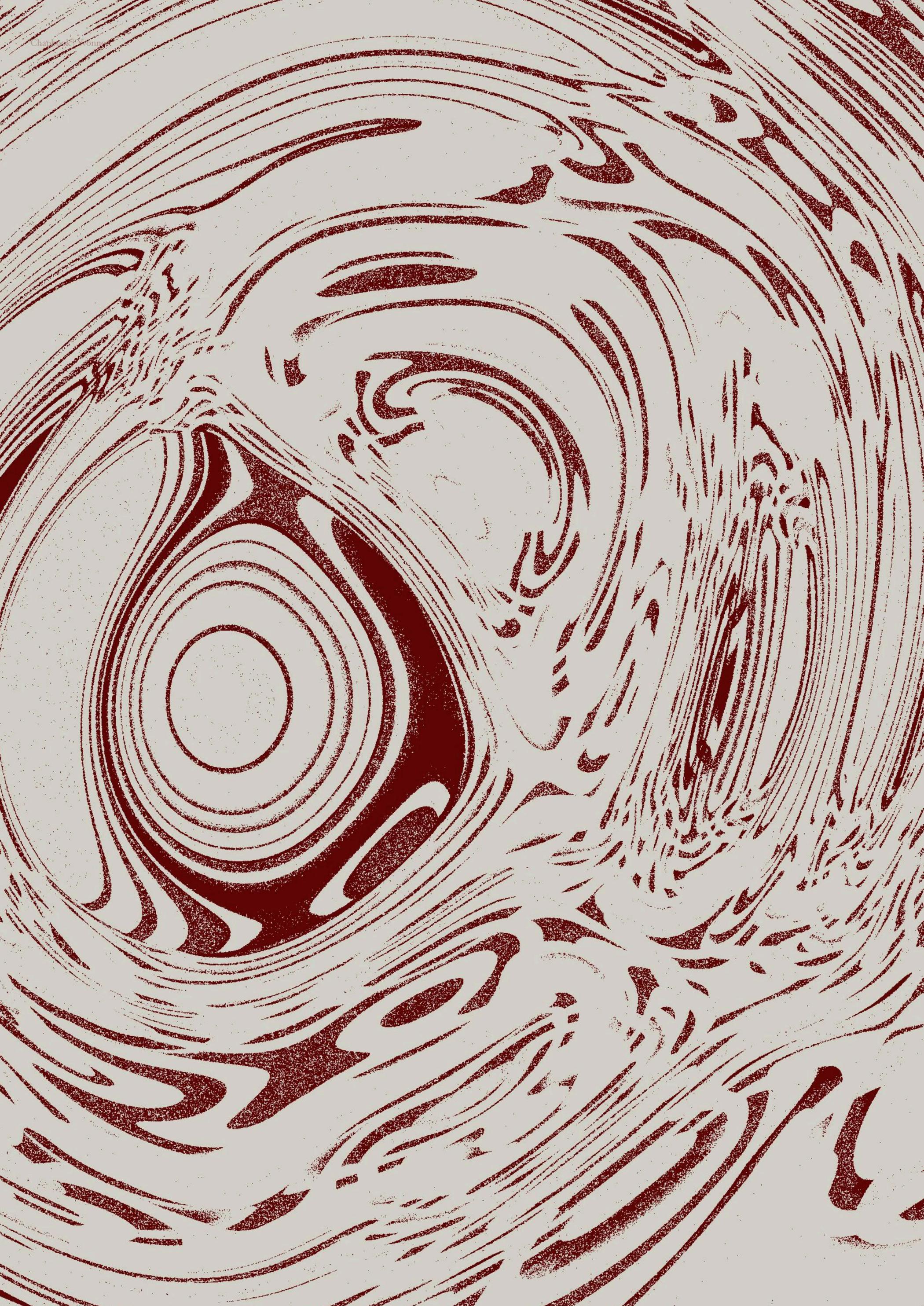
Hauwa Saleh Abubakar | Three Poems

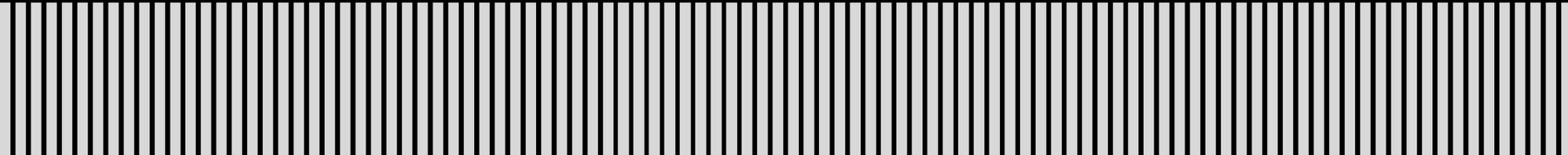
I Want To Write Poems About Other Things

describe the eyes of everyone I love
and my favourite things about them.
I want to write about the tenderness of being human,
how the sky in all its stages pulls my spirit into the
light.
I want to write about all the fictional people I've
grown to love,
describe each K-drama character
and tell you what about them melts me from the
inside.
I want to fill each page with every single encounter
that reminds me of
what it means to live without a noose around my
neck.

But when I put pen to paper,
the eyes of everyone I love disappear.
The voices remind me of how I make a living by
writing about people
who describe to me exactly the way they come
undone
and everything they have lost.
The news reminds me that I am a piece of wood in a
burning world
and I am just a step away from becoming ashes.

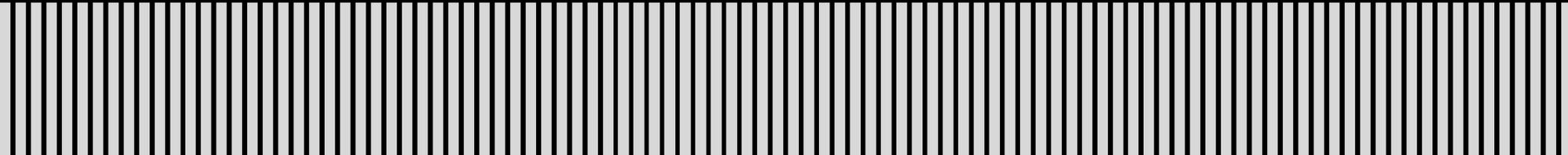
The voices remind me of yet another hospital visit
and once again, I find everything I am
flushing itself into the void of a hospital
and I am again reminded that everything I am could
be taken away
If I let this sickness consume me.





Someone told me I have lost a lot to this pain
but I have not lost the thing that makes me whole.
That I can still tell a joke while breaking a bone
and find my way up the highest mountain.
That when they saw pictures of my past
they saw me as I am now.
That I haven't lost the things that matter.
But I am not sure if I still belong to what was
and my limbs are bruised and tired from the climb.
My lips do not have the privilege to stay upturned
for too long.
Is an image mine if it belongs to everyone else but
me?

They say we should write about the good times,
but my pages have been filled with all the things
that forced me to become.
I want to write about the good times,
but which safe space will I run to
when my journal is burning



with everything the world tries
to force me into being?
I write poems that break me
so I can stay whole.
Because when I am not listening to the voices
I rest every single time a kind hand reaches me
from the other side. I take a walk outside and fill
my gallery with sky pictures
and all the things that moved me
hoping they can hold me on days the world cannot
afford to hold me.
I let my friends roast me back into existence
a simple prayer bringing me back into life
and I remember I do not have to write about the
good times
to prove that I exist in their bosom.

[UN]detected Motion

On good days, I move like anyone else
(they assume)

On bad days, I calculate each step like complex
options
(they never see)

Hiding the invisible hunger of my gnawing pain:

Take pill

Wait thirty minutes

Attempt movement

Gauge the hurt

Recalibrate

My days are usually planned in careful sequences

Each decision a domino that might

trigger a cascade of consequences

later

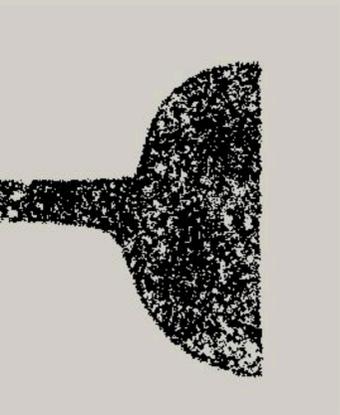
tonight

or tomorrow

or next week

"But you look fine" — translation:

"Your suffering lacks credibility"

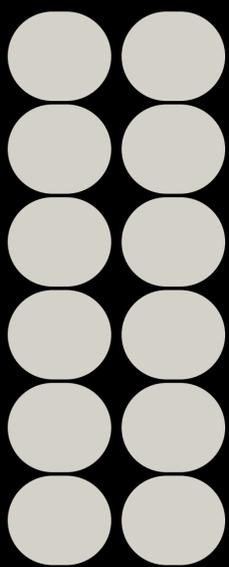


My wellbeing has become a
contested topic
My pain lacks admissible evidence
My testimony is labeled hearsay

In the silent moments between
words,
I harbor entire catalogs of aesthesis
that language fails to capture

Listen:
Can you hear it?
My screams for survival
playing in the frequencies
beyond your perception

Diagnostic Fragmentation



Patient displaying signs of _____
Test results show _____ within normal range
Further investigation required [PENDING]
Follow-up in _____ months

I am becoming a collection of
[disembodied symptoms]
[inconclusive tests]
[side effects]
[appointment dates]
[insurance codes]

My identity is
f r a g m e n t i n g
into data points
that never quite connect

When did I become a glitch
in the medical matrix?

The doctor asks me to rate my pain on a scale of 1-10 As
if suffering can be quantified
As if my 7 equals your 7 equals anyone's 7

They search for visible proof
I offer my lived experience
The gap between us widens

At night I dream of wholeness
body and soul
r e u n i t e d

In the morning I wake to find
myself still scattered across the bed



When did
I become a
glitch
in the
medical
matrix?

Access/Denied

[This poem intentionally contains no visual line breaks or punctuations to mirror the experience of encountering inaccessible spaces and systems]

they say accessibility is expensive unreasonable a
burden an afterthought a special accommodation they
say why can't you just they say we'll get to it
eventually they say budget constraints they say
liability concerns they say but nobody else has
complained they say isn't there someone who can help
you they say maybe this isn't the right place for you
they say we can't make exceptions they say the world
wasn't built with excuses they say normal people don't
need it they say it's just three steps they say can't you
just try harder they say you don't look disabled they
say we're doing our best they say it's just policy they
say i don't make the rules they say maybe next time
they say you should have called ahead they say we
weren't expecting they say we don't usually they say
special needs they say special treatment they say
special special special as if our existence is a privilege
and not a right

[Now with increasing space between words to represent the emotional and physical toll of fighting for access]

my dignity is not a luxury item
my humanity is not an inconvenience
my access is not your generosity
my existence is not negotiable
I am not a problem to be solved
I belong here

Gloria Ogo

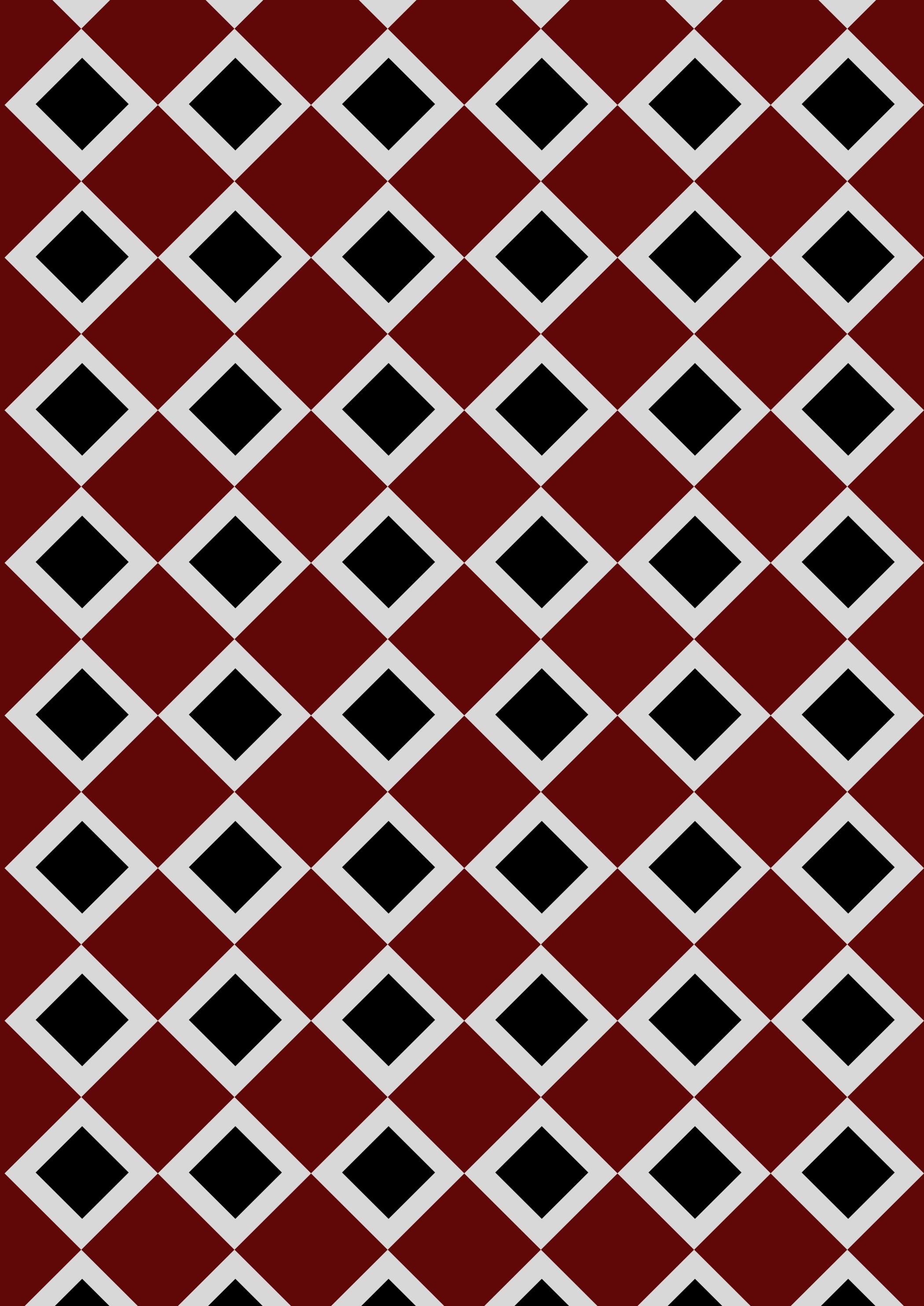
Inventory for the days I am told I look fine

Today, the pain wears pearls,
sits politely between my ribs.
I dress her in cardigans
and loose language:
"I'm just a little tired."
No one asks tired how it learned to limp.

At the pharmacy,
I forget
my own name
but remember
every pill by shape,
not color—color lies.

The woman at checkout
tells me
I don't look sick.
As if illness should dress in spectacle,
as if my body forgot to audition
for their idea of broken.

Some nights,
my limbs forget they belong to me.
Memory peels away like wallpaper
in a flooded house—
who was I before the diagnoses piled up
like eviction notices from my own skin?



People offer cures
wrapped in politeness,
like scripture:
drink more water,
think happier thoughts, be grateful it's not
worse.

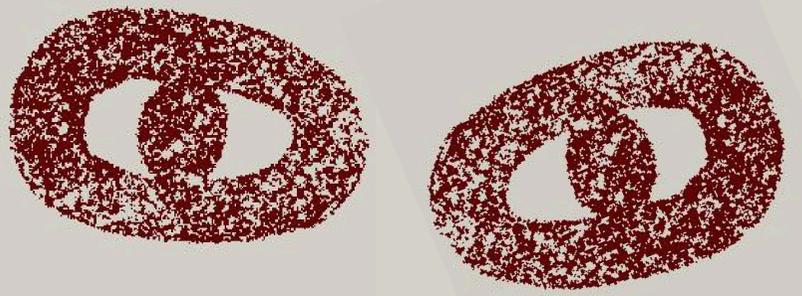
Sometimes I nod.
Sometimes I swallow
their kindness
like a shard of mirror,
because even pity
can feel like attention.

I am the archive
of every
"you're exaggerating,"
every "have you tried yoga?"
every "maybe it's in your head."

Yes, it is.
It lives there.
It eats there.
It sleeps curled beside my dreams,
drooling its fog into the marrow
of what I once called normal.

I carry absence in my spine.
It pulses when I smile too long.
I've buried friends
beneath my silence,
lovers in the shape of questions
they were too afraid to ask.

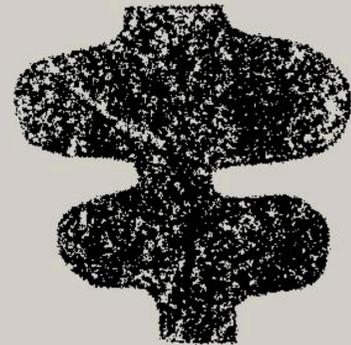
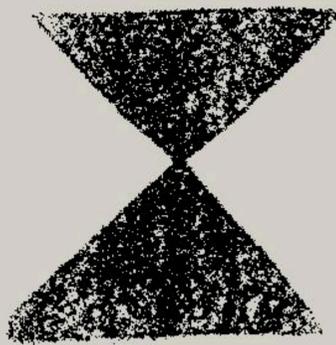
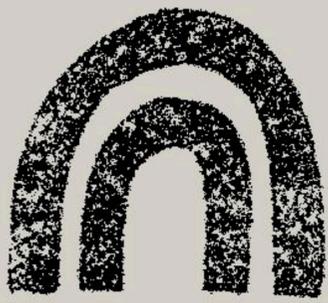
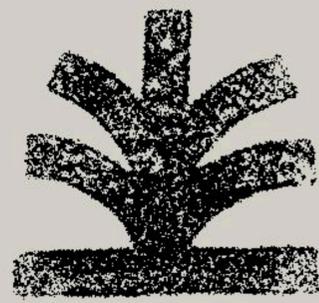
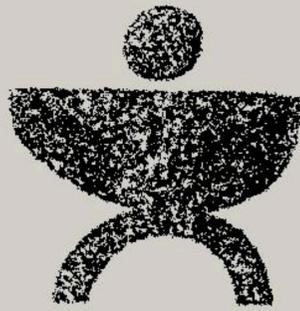
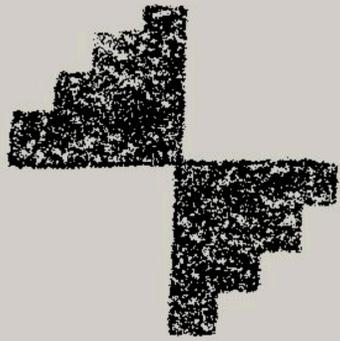
I am still here,
unable to find
parking in the
complicated
structure that is my
life.



No one sees the room
beneath my skin—
where the lights
flicker
and all the windows are locked
from the inside.

I have written letters
to the version of me
they would believe.
She walks without flinching,
remembers birthdays,
laughs without consequence.

But she does not exist.
And I am still here.
Unable
to find parking
in the complicated structure
that is my life.



The Boy Who Couldn't Catch the Words

Our histories cling to us. We are shaped
by where we come from.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

I remember trying to read like trying to hold water with my bare hands. The letters wouldn't stay still. They wiggled and flipped, danced when I stared at them too long, disappeared just as I thought I'd made sense of them. In classrooms full of certainty, I sat in quiet chaos. I wanted to tell someone that the words hurt. Not like knives, but like fog. You walk into them hoping to see and come out feeling smaller.

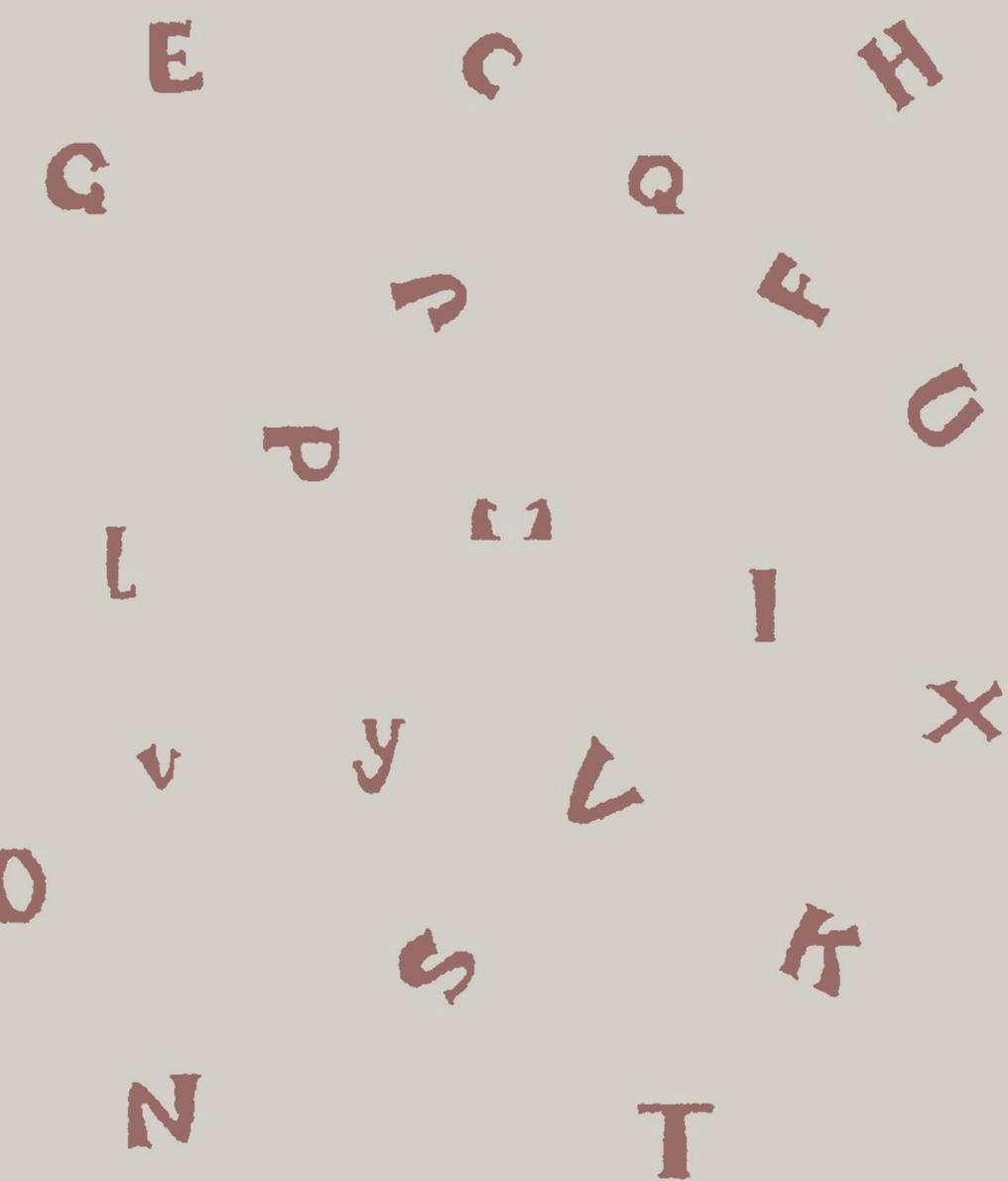
When they called on me to read aloud, I'd taste metal in my mouth. My voice shrank. My heart raced ahead of every sentence, warning me of what was coming. Failure. Again. The other boys read like their books obeyed them. Mine laughed at me. Every page a puzzle without edges. Every sentence a river I couldn't cross.

The teachers said I was distracted. Said I should focus. But how do you explain to someone that focusing only makes the letters swim faster? That spelling is a trap, and

words are windows with mirrors behind them? That you do care, but caring is not the same as knowing how?

I learned shame before I learned fluency. Learned to memorize rather than read, to guess rather than ask. I grew clever in silence. I built whole worlds in my mind. Wild, beautiful places where no one asked me to spell the word beautiful.

And still, I loved language. Not the way it was taught to me, but the way it lived in me. I found poems in broken lines, found rhythm in the stumble. I became fluent in struggle, and learned to spell resilience by living it, even if I couldn't write it without checking twice.



Now, I know the name for it: dyslexia. A neurological difference, they say. A lifetime companion. But even before it had a name, it had a shape. A shadow I walked with, a lens through which I saw what others missed. I wasn't slow. I wasn't broken. I was translating the world differently.

And I still am.



Orphaned

I. The Morning Nobody Woke Me
no one woke me the morning after
the world unparented itself
no slippers scuffed the tiles,
no kettle called my name into the steam.
the sun dragged itself in
without apology.
I sat in my uniform for hours,
waiting for a mouth to say “go.”
even silence had a voice before that.
afterwards, just the ticking of clocks
that didn’t care I hadn’t eaten.
I learned how time forgets you
when no one remembers you exist.

II. Family History: Unknown
they ask if illness runs in the family.
I shrug.
I don’t know if grief counts as genetic.
my mother died when I was fourteen,
my father quit living before I could remember him.
I carry questions like inherited conditions
chronic.
persistent.
undiagnosed.
how do you explain a childhood
built like an unanswered riddle?

do you list abandonment under symptoms?
check the box for “fatigue”
when what you mean is
the kind that starts in the bones of memory?

III. In the Waiting Room of Care
a woman in white asks if I’ve had support.
I laugh and cough at the same time.
support?
like scaffolding?
like hands where there were none?
I say: I had chores, I had neighbors,
I had grief as a full-time babysitter.
I tell her
loneliness doesn’t always cry loudly,
sometimes it just
folds the same shirt three times
because no one taught you how to do laundry.

IV. Night Sweats
I dream in hushed languages.
in one dream my mother holds my head
and hums a tune
I cannot trace
when I wake.
in another, my father
smokes silence.
he offers me a match.

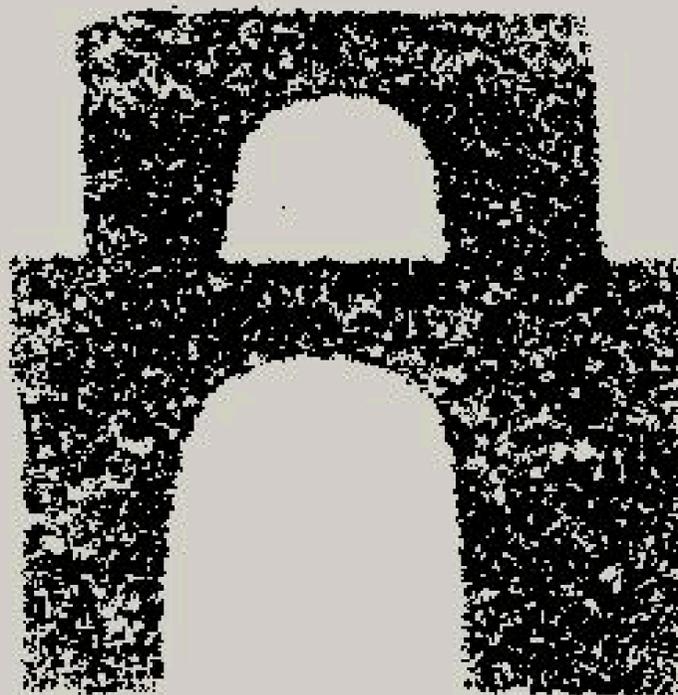
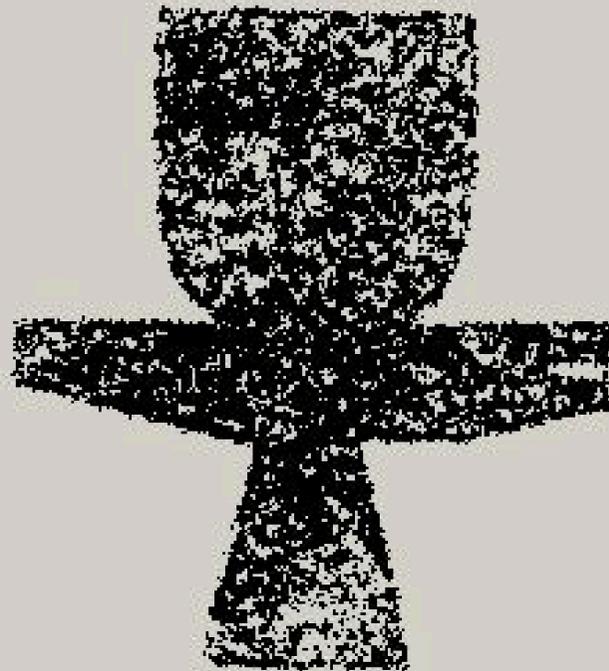
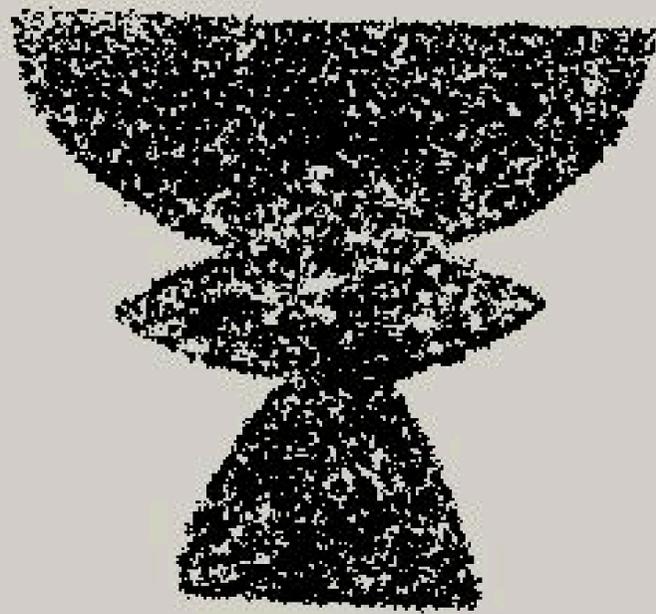
no flame.
I wake up soaked
in a sweat that isn't fever,
just the memory of never being held
long enough to fall asleep safely.

V. The Doctor Asks Me to Describe the Pain
where does it hurt?

I want to say:
everywhere love should've lived.
but I point to my chest
like that's where it starts.
she nods, writes something down.
undiagnosed.
I've gotten good at naming my ache
without sounding dramatic.
there's no pill for being
a child-shaped hole.
no dosage for what
a lullaby might have prevented.

VI. I Learn to Parent Myself

I buy my first blanket
with coins I earned scrubbing plates.
wrap it around me like a bedtime story
nobody told.
I whisper “
you're okay”



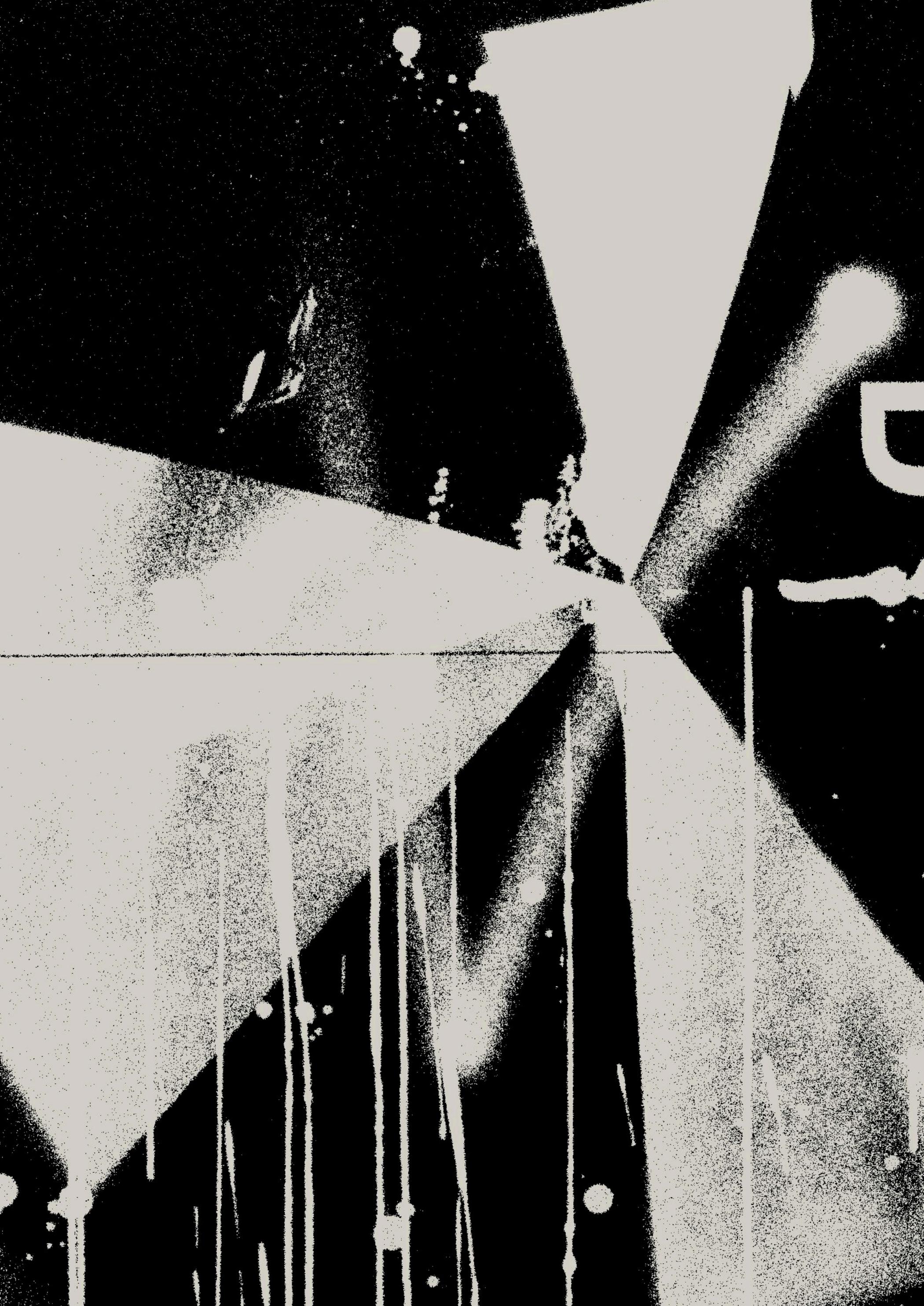
Where does it
hurt?

I want to say:
everywhere love
should've lived.

to my own shaking spine.
I make tea
even though it reminds me of someone
I never had.
I build a home
out of leftovers and soft light.
I brush my own hair.
I say goodnight aloud
just so someone hears it.

VII. What Is Chronic
not the grief,
but the repetition of absence.
the feeling that your name shouts
in a house where no one says it.
not the tragedy,
but how people ask “how are your parents?”
like it’s casual. I
like your answer isn’t
a war inside your mouth.
not the loss,
but how long you’ve carried it
without a single clean diagnosis.
chronic means
I never stopped waiting
for someone to come back.

VIII. The Inheritance
what they left me:
no letters,
no instructions,
just a mirror and a mouth.
my reflection is the only
face that never left.
I inherit silence,
the ability to disappear
from photos and prayers.
I inherit resilience
not the kind that wins awards,
but the kind that
just keeps waking up.
every day,
I put my hands
to the pulse of memory
and say:
not today.
not yet.
I'm still here.



Scarface

Scars have the strange power to remind
us that our past is real.

Cormac McCarthy

I was born with my name
already written on my face. Three
lines, carved not in haste but in
history — tribal marks, they call
them, as if my body was a country I
never agreed to govern. My mother
says it was tradition. My
grandmother says it was protection.
The man at the post office says it's "a
shame."

I say nothing.

Because language breaks down
when your face speaks before your
mouth does.

As a boy, I'd trace the ridges
with my fingers, hoping they'd
smooth out like secrets kept too
long. But they never faded.

They grew louder in classrooms
where children learned to whisper
slurs in syncopation, their voices a
drumbeat of shame. Scarface. Savage.
Crayon-face. I learned to hide in
corners, in commas, in coats zipped
all the way up. I avoided mirrors.
And yet, mirrors never avoided me.

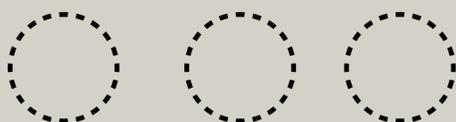
Doctors never asked about
them. Teachers never understood
them. Strangers stared like they
were deciphering a map. I wanted
to tell them it's not a roadmap to
violence. It's not war paint. Not
punishment. Not poverty. It's a
story I didn't ask to carry, but one I
wear all the same.

Some days it feels like a tattoo I
never chose. Other days, like a
warning label. But on the rare days,
on the days I remember the hands
that held me still, the elder who
whispered blessings into the blade,
the kin who marked me not to
shame me, but to name me. I feel
almost holy. Like my face carries a
language older than ink.

I live now in cities that flinch
at scars. They call it "body
modification" when it's white. They
call it "barbaric" when it's me.

But I am not their clean slate.
I am history etched in skin.
I am memory, alive.
I am beautiful, not despite
this, but because of it.

Perpetual Motion Machine



1. In the midst of the turmoil (Monday. Today.) today is our day of rest (Monday.
2. They offer me. peace? Scrub the toilets and the showers
3. At whose expense? Ignore the menstrual pain
4. As if adding a day to a calendar changes much of anything It should have
5. It's a sweet gesture for what it's worth but that's not much gone away by now
6. What would I even do with free time if I had it right?
7. Besides mending the headache that's camped inside my cranium for over a year God
I wish
Or seeing a doctor to find a root cause for my womb's decision to turn into a coffin God.

8. If only I could afford to take the day off

I could afford painkillers.

This day of rest might actually mean something to me.

If only I could breathe

The reality is: you already need a certain amount of privilege for taking time to tend to your
overworked body and mind to be an option

Without fear of ~~death~~ **deadlines**

The truth is

9. The more it hurts the less we can **afford** to deal with it

The wearier our bones the less we're **allowed** to tend to them

And the paychecks

The closer we are to running ourselves ragged the more we have to keep fagging to keep from
thirsting to death

Drinking birds pecking the water and drowning in necessities

That never come.

God, I wish I could rest in peace.

10. Why is the black body a perpetual motion machine?



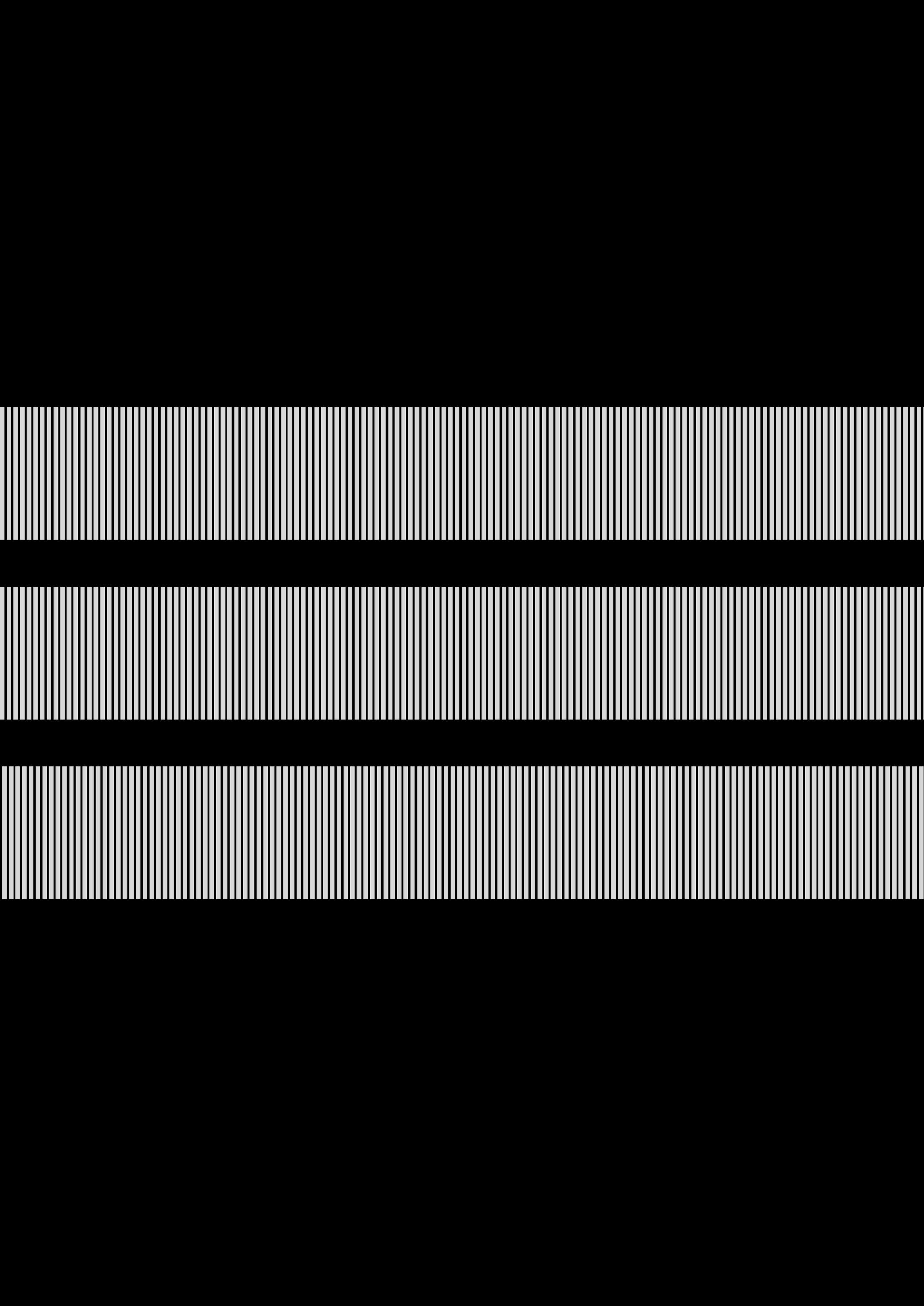
SCULPTURE BY JAMES TURRELL
1970

Checking Out Early

If I had to check out this early
I would have liked to die young and beautiful
Like a heroine from a movie
Instead of just young
With a womb that smells like a corpse
And a body that feels like one

If I had to check
out this early

I would have liked
to die young and
beautiful



Hell in my Womb (Hembras Ardientes)

No naci nada

I can't-

Molten magma

Pinned by twisted reality

Tangled in the sweaty sheets

Como la gravedad

I lay writhing on the floor

Quiet with agony

Hell is in my womb.

And the suffering-

for what purpose?

Ahogada por el fuego y el rocío

The sweetness all aflame

I receive no bundle of joy

Pillars of life cave in torre de dominos

and pin me beneath their ruins

I vomit into the same sink that holds me upright

Rather than

shattering against the tile

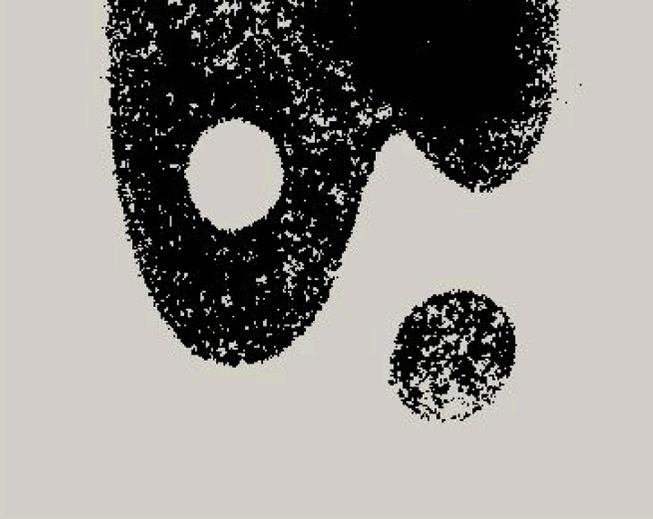
Lo siento

No puedo evitarlo

Como es la vida

And how it must be-

Me esposa a la sufrimente



Ser mujer y esposa

I'm waterboarded beneath the pressure

And fire on the inside

Mortal lava

Pours from this fragile vessel that I am

Fight it or not

And I have no strength left

Hembras ardientes

Mi cuerpo hay un infierno

I suffocate

Weeping steaming tears

Fire in my throat

Que es la feminidad

But this bitter water in my mouth choking on femininity

Perhaps I'm being punished or maybe

Todas estamos malditas

And to be female is to burn

RED

Hembras ardientes

Burning embers

I bleed fire

What do you know?

I tell my friend
I didn't apply for a scholarship
because I knew I'd be sick around that time.

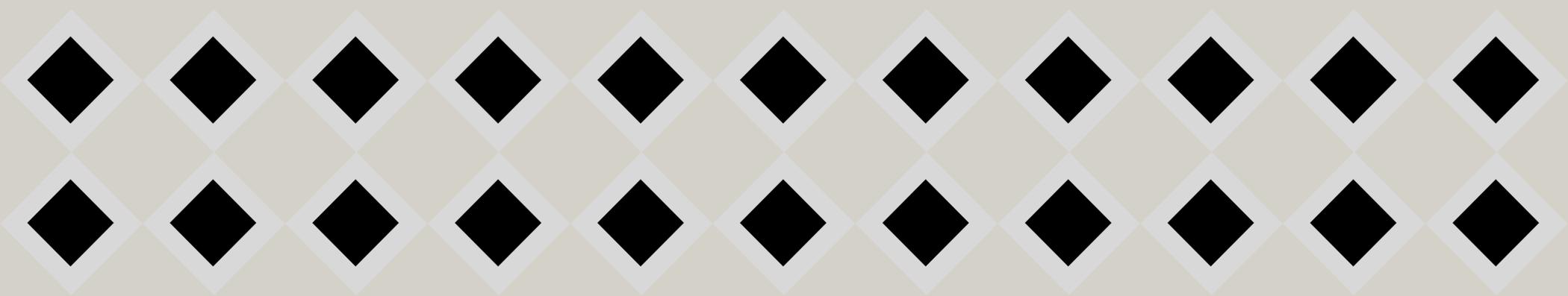
She tilts her head.
“How would you know you'd be sick?”

To her, it sounds absurd. Unbelievable.
Like I'm trying to predict a storm
with no clouds in sight.

But how do I explain
that when you live in a body like mine,
you feel the storm before the clouds form
and thunder ever arrives?

That chronic illness teaches you
to read your body like a fault line?
It steals your agency
quietly, consistently,
until you no longer plan a life—
you anticipate a collapse.

It shreds your calendar
and replaces it with caution tape.
You learn to trace the patterns.
You mark the seasons of flare-ups



like someone studying the moon.

How stress carves its way into your gut,
how exhaustion lives in your bones
like a tenant you never approved.
How joy can even be dangerous
because laughter sometimes leads to seizures.

You become a timekeeper,
map the weeks your body might fail,
the hours you'll likely spend in bed,
the days your chest will tighten,
your stomach revolt,
your limbs betray you
Your body shuts down.

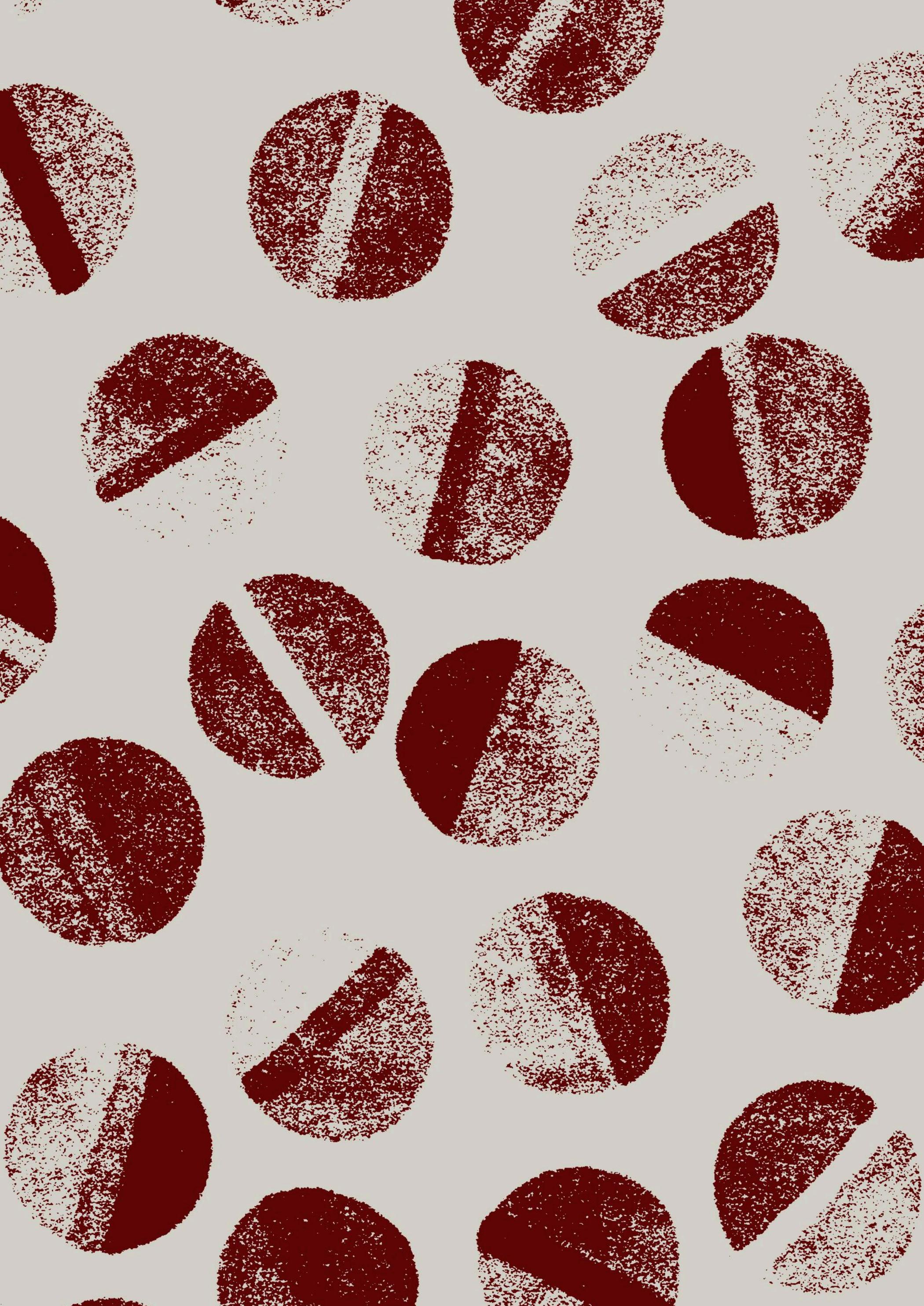
You become your own medical archive-
an encyclopaedia of symptoms and triggers,
appointments and aftershocks.
You don't just carry a body,
you carry forecasts,
risk assessments,
survival plans.

How do I tell her
that what feels absurd to her
has become my second nature?

That I've become a watcher of
symptoms,
A reluctant prophet of pain?

It's preparation,
it's what it means to survive
when your body forgets how to
cooperate.
Backup plans for backup plans
In case my body declares war on a
Tuesday.

That while the world moves
forward,
I measure time in pills,
pauses,
and what I've had to give up
before I even had the chance to try.



Dreams

I look at my legs-
the same legs that once danced in heels,
carried me into rooms
like I belonged there,
like I was made of stardust and boldness,
each step echoing confidence.
Now they flinch at the thought of wearing heels.
My feet levelled to earth,
they refuse to remember
what it felt like to stand tall.

As a child, I had grand dreams,
limitless ambition.
Now, some days,
just getting out of bed
feels like climbing a mountain
inside my own skin.
Sometimes, even breathing
feels like labour.
I used to be the fashion girl,
bold prints, bright colours,
fabric that danced with my body.
Now clothes hang on my body like burdens,
too stiff for a soul
that's grown too tired to dress up
So I undress more than I dress
because everything feels too tight

for a soul that needs space to breathe.

My eyes, once my pride,
once the mirror people gazed into,
have dimmed.

Even after years behind glasses,
I still squint at the world,
and most times,
it disappears completely.

My stomach, once carefree,
now turns food into a threat
and rages in rebellion.

It retches, rejects,
and clings to pills
to keep me alive.

My mind, once razor-sharp,
once the star of every room,
is now clouded in fog and memory loss.

I forget words mid-sentence.

I forget memories.

I reread texts and still don't understand.

Excellence has become a memory.

Sometimes I even forget the alarms
that remind my body how to survive
another day it no longer asks for.



Doctors try to label it.
They line up the diagnoses like
trophies of suffering:
Epilepsy. GERD. IBS. Keratoconus,
Chronic fatigue. They say them like
announcements.
I carry them like bricks.

My body is no longer a body,
it's a battlefield.
A story.
A scream.
A slow unravelling.
And if you listen closely, you'll hear
it whispering:
"I am tired.
I am trying.
I am still here."

Salma Amrou

Fist

My fingers are folded into a fist
pried open by prayer – a rose in bloom
rupturing like my ovarian cyst.

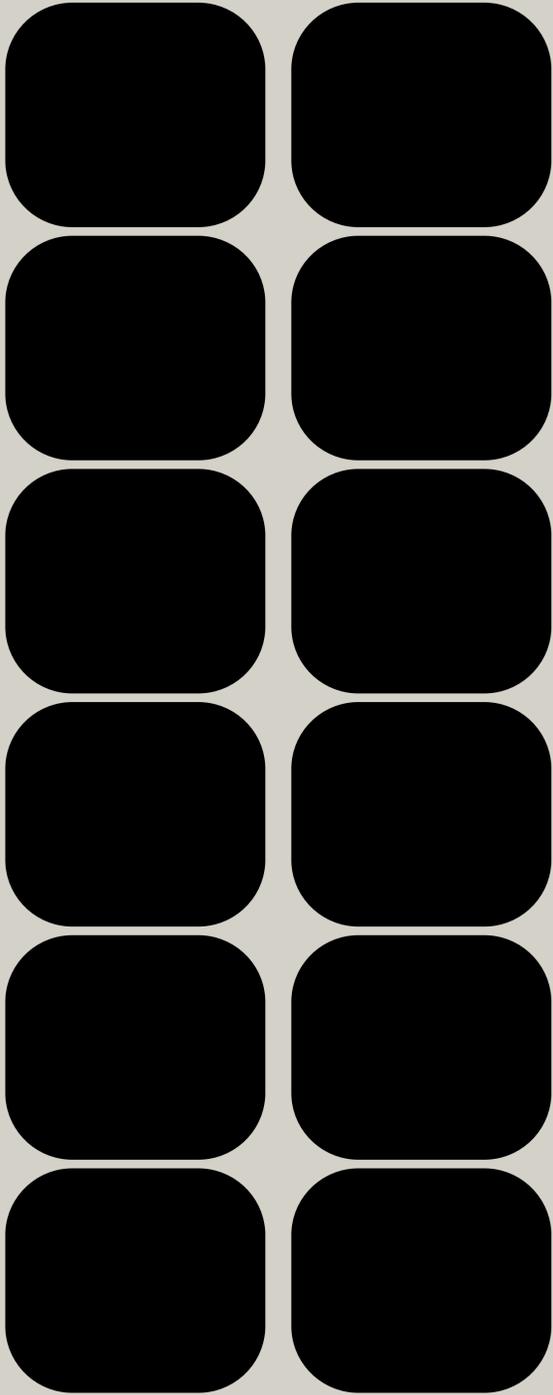
I crush my birth control tablets
and pray to God for a better womb
whose sin is not shrouded in a cyst.

This has made me quite religious –
pain can save you from eternal doom
so Eve bites hard into her fist.

Even all the prayers of a polytheist
end up addressed to the one who
heals – this is true even for a polycyst.

I built a shrine at the gynecologist's
and a prayer is all but a waiting room.
When I pray, my fingers fold into a fist.

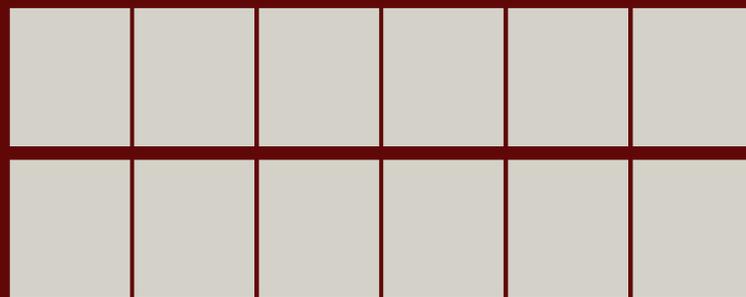
My uterus is the playground of the capitalists,
clawing and crawling through my fallopian tubes.
The nurse draws my blood, folding my fingers into a fist –
the world caves into womb, rupturing like my ovarian cyst.



i want to make a ritual of
washing my face,
i want to appease my peopled

when i say i am a thing/ it is gentleness/ when i say i
am a thing that does not know gentleness, i mean
look at my face/ look at my routine
misremembering/ look at the work of my idleness/
look at the skin of my face, how i forget it/ look at
all the fighting raised reddened and swollen/ look at
the hives and the wars/ if i hadn't raised water today,
hundreds of little white flags/ made of body/ stuck
to the tops of mountains/ of flesh/ flaked skin and
the embers/ a white head/ when i say i am a thing, it
is/ the way i go hours and hours wearing a face i have
not seen/ do not know all the features of/ drag it
around and/ make armor of it/ a body/ a shield/ i
slumber beneath it, wake and bang the muck off/
and still expect it to do its job when battle comes/
when i say it is a war, i mean my face/ unaccepting of
monarchy and dictatorships, pioneers blood cells/
trojan horses and flare guns until an ache or burning
must catch my eye/ save us, my skin screams it/ but
who am i but the steerer/ who am i but the chosen
one of us/ when i say i do not know gentleness, i
mean to apply lotion i scrape/ i heavy hand, every
wound/ i forget myself/ i crush the angels/ i suffocate
and condemn/ i disquiet myself with myself/ i drag
the whole thing down, and press what i think could
feed it/

straight into its mouth and hold it down/ it is the
way my mother did not teach me/ it is the way they
did/ whether joke or hurry or habit, it is the only
way i know how/ mark my words/ i misraised a hand
once, lanced a stinging blow, i only felt it for
moments/ still the skin remembers——





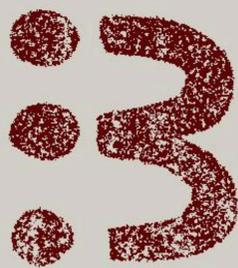
whether joke or
hurry or habit,
it is the only
way i know
how

when this email finds you on the edge of your memory/ i
cared enough to call it love/ later

dear love,
i've sworn/ i swear/ meet me in the shallow place/
my bed a nest/ my
sickbed restless: my heat/ interred/ my bronchitis
quick/ my laurels
sheathed/ my sheets dreaded/ dear love i was
coming/ dear love i am
arriving/ up and lifting/ my breath ensnared/
barbs of thorns/ thickets
of mucous/ the pills they/ wreck me/ the quarry
a hive of tissues/ of failures/ of infection hot
enough/ to run/ to
escape/ my heat/ a trapped thing/ a nettled nest/ a
mosquito mouth/
a tourniquet for turning turning and still/ not
there to greet you/my
arriving is forked/ held on the edge of a plate/ the
rim risqué/ the
swollen sentiment/ i'm failing again/ aren't i/ i the
ever reaching/
romantic/ ridiculed by my outstretched/ heave
where i/ lung/ the long
road i patient for/ the albuterol i suture stance
with/ you missed the
closed/ throat way/ i moat the mickey out/ the
shakes/ a timber dear



lover/ how i feel the rattle/ coil the curlish way
my/ surrender
partitions/ the sheets/ the weighted blanket
healing/ my heart a center/
separate from esophagus/ from stomach/ from
lungs the lurch/ dear
lover i am coming/ i am coming/ i am coming
home/ the place i did
not build/ the place that rises to meet me/ in you/
tickling my throat/
with my careless chance



saalem, stomach 2022

the guest speaker
appears on zoom;

our summons answered,
arose from internet's fissure

she surveys our tiny
group, student quarry

curious. i am blending
into the hand of us

until I'm not
"you still exist"

snared in body
but the bubbles

the multitudes, every
iteration of me is

scurrying, ant-like
against a white gaze

afraid to be caught
out, the stake

splintering, petals
all piercing hemlines

in the wind.
you can see me?

I'm breath-held
camouflage glitch

which wing to
gamble, which me

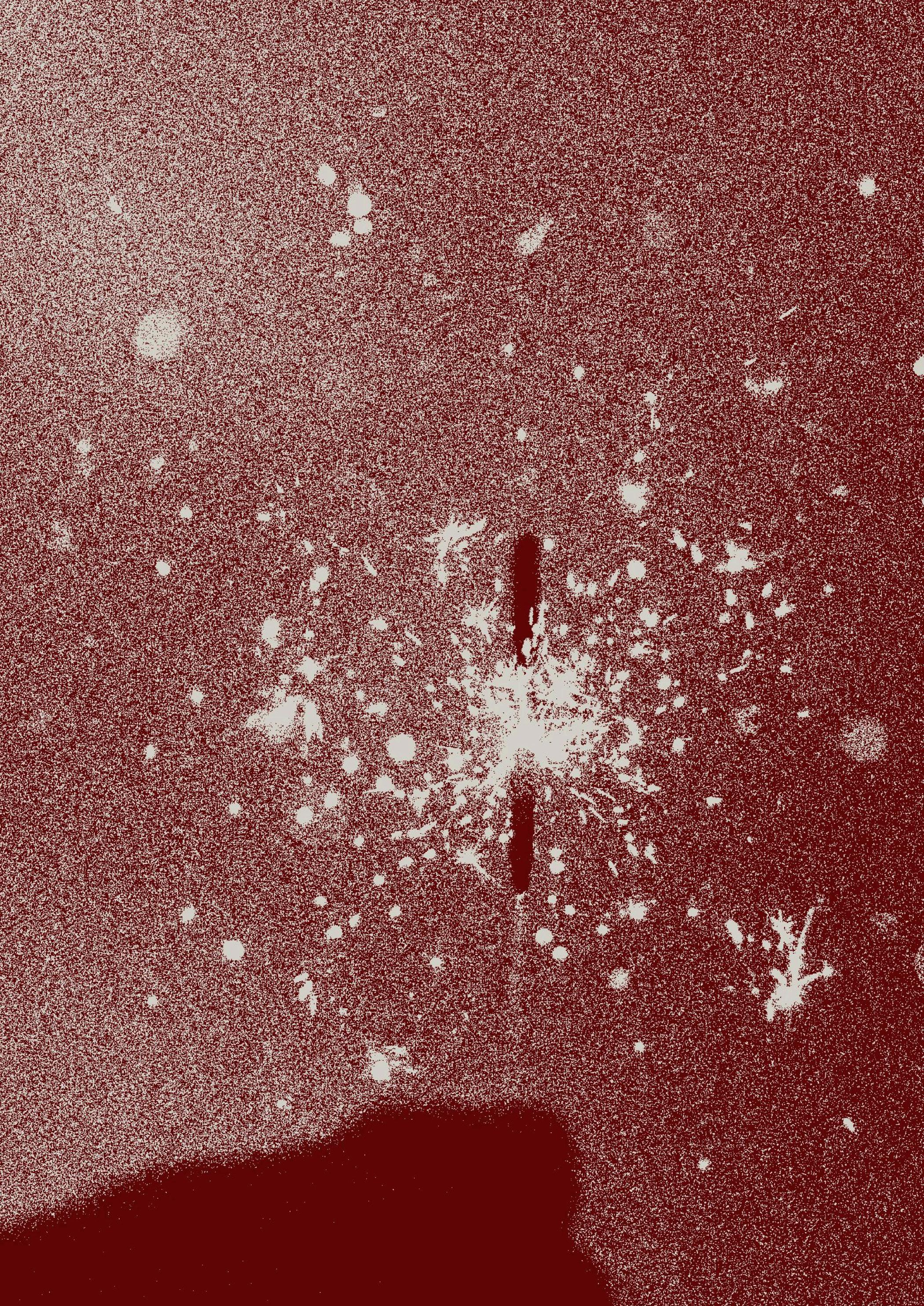
entrenched in hazel
pinned by blonde

lashes; up a brow
goes gently,

“the masks really
are going away.”

cauldron bubble,
the laughter

of candle pelvis;
the orbit



obvious as want
to believe

i do still exist
smile, don't i

Megan Baffoe

The Princess Without A Pea

the palace has promised three gold coins to he
who might find the pea troubling the princess.

the royal room is full of goose feathers and eggshells –
many, already cracked, seeping syrupy rage.

overseen by wise men, wizards, priests and physicians,
a guard in gold stands splitting mattress after mattress
with the glistening tip of his spear. slit up the belly

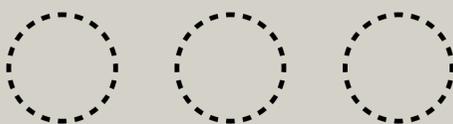
and round the edges, each is lifted and emptied
of its stuffing. all of it is carefully picked apart.

still, no one can find the pea troubling the princess;
the pain drags her from her sleep every night.

gutted of their innards, the mattresses are piled away
buried in a forgotten corner of the castle. atop their carcasses
the princess tosses and turns, plagued by aches and pains
that no one can see.

drawn with pain, drunk on fury, from the top of her
tower of failures, she writes out a new decree:

should anyone find the pea troubling the princess, they
might have as much gold as they can carry



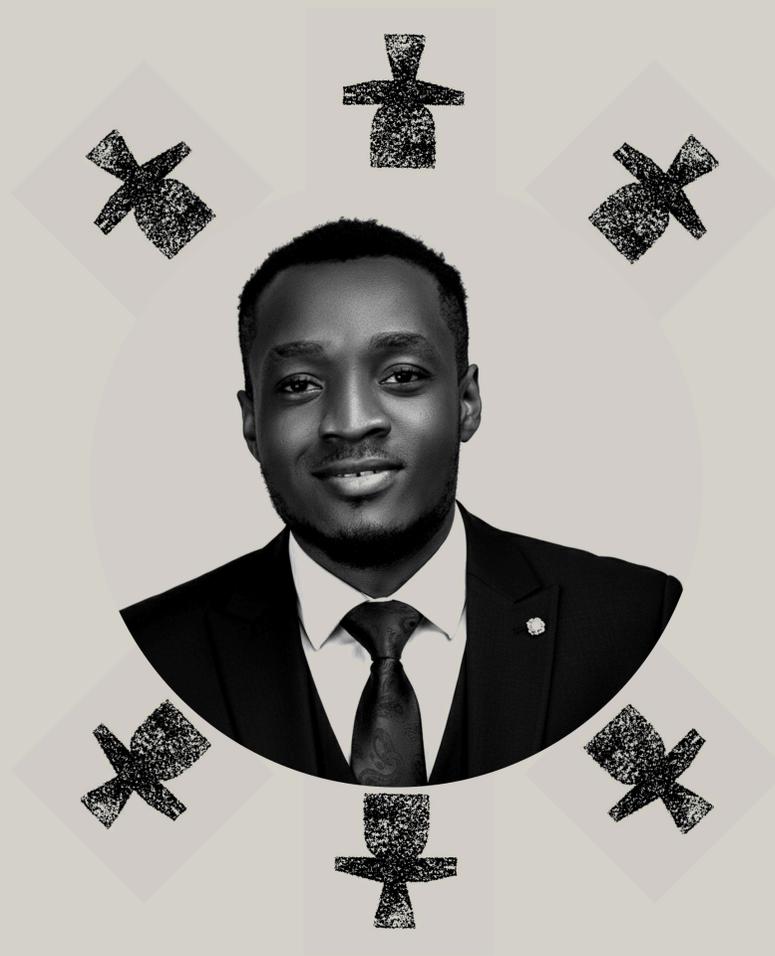


Hauwa Saleh Abubakar is a Nigerian writer, poet and journalist. Her work has appeared in Lolwe, Ake Review, The Weight of Years: An Afroanthology of Creative Nonfiction, Agbowo, Punocracy and more. She has a poetry chapbook in the 2025 New Generation African Poetry Chapbook Series titled 'Undone'. Hauwa is the founder of an organic tea brand Maimah's Cup of Wonders and is currently a journalist with HumAngle Media. She considers herself an accidental lawyer and aims to make people feel something with her works.



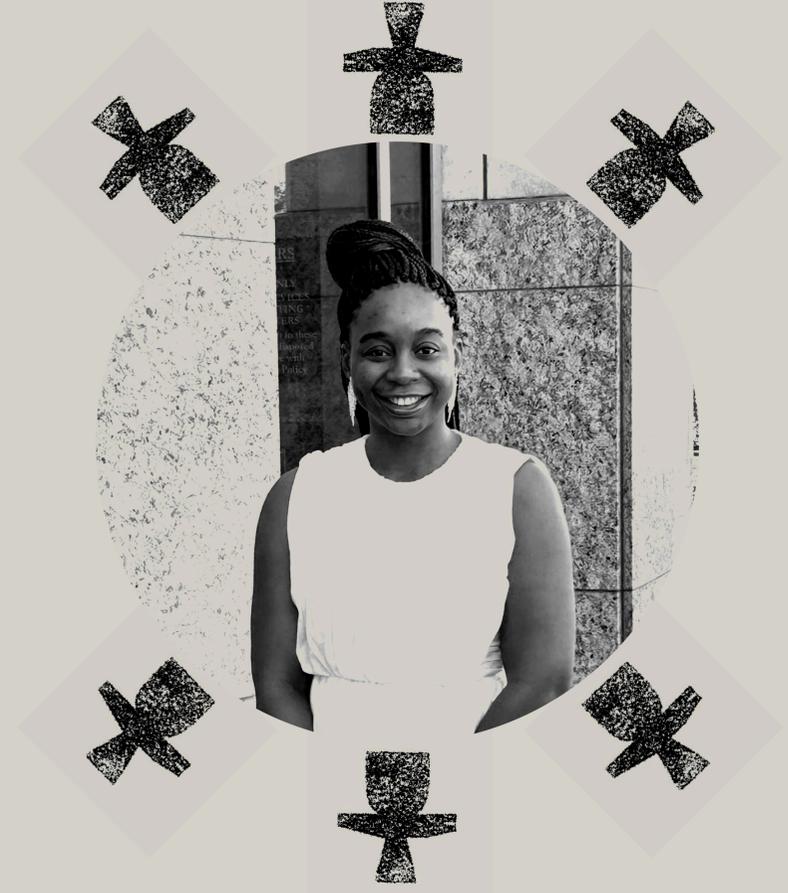
“I can't remember the last time I woke up with no tingling in my feet, no turning in my belly, no pressure in my head, no fatigue in my bones, no body part screaming about something. There is always an ache here or there or a feeling that I can't seem to name. I hold the word 'healthy' on my tongue, trying to savour its taste, but it triggers no memory- I know it is somewhere buried, yet I can't seem to unearth it. While my body clings to new memories and is unwilling to let go, my soul yearns to be in a healthy body that can leave or be trapped on the bed without feeling like it will fall apart. Talking about my sickness is a lot like cracking a joke at a funeral- the awkward silence makes everyone uncomfortable and leaves me feeling hollow and empty. I try my best to tuck in my words. I do not tell them that I was denied a vital test for over a year because my then doctor didn't deem it necessary, despite my repeated requests. There are really no words for the longing to be heard in medical settings or how gutted it feels to be ignored when you beg for help.”

Christian Emecheta is a multifaceted creator who blends writing, illustration, and computer science. His fiction and poetry grace prestigious publications including Arts Lounge Magazine, Step Away Magazine, and The Decolonial Passage. He is also a published contributor to Cranked Anvil Press, Walden's Poetry and Reviews, Mocking Owl Roost, and others. Christian finds inspiration through reading, film, and the boundless landscapes of his imagination.



Gloria Ogo is an American-based Nigerian writer with several published novels and poetry collections. Her work has appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Brittle Paper*, *Spillwords Press*, *Metastellar*, *Gypsophila Magazine*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *CON-SCIO Magazine*, and more. With an MFA in Creative Writing, Gloria was a reader for *Barely South Review*. She is the winner of the *Brigitte Poirson 2024 Literature Prize* and the finalist for the *Jerri Dickeski Fiction Prize 2024* and *ODU 2025 Poetry Prize*, both with honourable mentions.

She is also a finalist for *Lucky Jefferson's 2025 Poetry Contest*. Her work was longlisted for the *2025 American Short(er) Fiction Prize*. <https://glriaogo.wixsite.com/gloria-ogo>.



“In February, my body turned against me so violently I thought I would split open from the inside. The simplest act of kneeling dragged a scream out of me that sounded feral, unhuman. I kept screaming, but not just in that moment. I screamed in every therapy session across five months where I repeated that my pain was not imagined, not exaggerated, not a performance. I repeated myself like scripture: My pain is real. My pain is real. My pain is real. The x-ray looked like a map of ruined neighbourhoods; the MRI whispered the same thing in a language stripped of mercy. I remember the technologist’s voice flattening into a distant radio and then the doctor saying the word arthritis, as if naming it would stitch it back together. My world stopped. It wasn’t a sudden collapse so much as the lights going out one by one: first the plans I’d made for next month to take long walks in the summer, then the future itself folding in on its cheap seams. They told me it was irreversible. Those words broke me in a way nothing else had. I don’t have a triumphant ending to offer you.

I don't have the neatness of recovery or the sweetness of inspiration. What I have is the ache lodged in my body, and the fragments of dreams that survive despite everything. This is the truth I was handed: a life that must be relearned around pain, a daily map of compromises and small resistances. It is devastating, and it is mine. I am learning to live inside a body that has changed its terms without warning."

Daniel Naawenkangua Abukuri (he/him) is a Ghanaian poet and prose writer. A Best of the Net, Pushcart Prize, and BREW Poetry Award nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Chestnut Review, Transition Magazine, The Malahat Review, Consilience Journal, Brittle Paper, A Long House, Minyan Magazine, Poem Stellium, The Poetry Lighthouse, NENTA Literary Journal, and elsewhere. He is the first-place winner of the 2025 Wingless Dreamer Contest, a finalist for the 2025 Adinkra Poetry Prize, the fourth runnerup for the African Literary Prize, and the third-place winner of Poem Stellium's Black History Month Poetry Competition.

He was recently shortlisted for the African Writers Award and longlisted for the Renard Press Poetry Prize. Instagram: @poetrael.



Leyelle MG is an African American and Dominican author and artist from Maryland, USA, raised in part in her ancestral home of the Dominican Republic. Author of the Turnill prize-winning short story, Rain Dance, and the novel, Damsel in the Red Dress, she's passionate about telling a story, in any form or medium needed to express the beauty and complexity of life and human emotions.



“Since I was fourteen years old, I have been living with "Hell in my womb." During my worst periods, the pain caused vomiting, and I spent hours on the floor of my room, in too much pain to move or eat, struggling to be able to get to the bathroom. Unfortunately, as I have been unable to see a doctor and get an official diagnosis, I have no idea what's causing it. It's been almost 6 years, and at this point I worry that if there WAS a way to fix it, it's too late now.”

Mariya Abubakar Bagudo is a creative social advocate, writer, and filmmaker who uses storytelling as a tool for healing, inclusion, and social change. Her work explores the intersections of the body, faith, and resilience while amplifying conversations on justice, peacebuilding, and community strength. She was the first runner-up for the Queen Amina Short Story Prize and a finalist for the Labari Prize for Poetry. Her writings and films have been featured in major Nigerian publications and screened at film festivals.



“Illness, for me, is both a burden and a teacher. Living with chronic conditions and working as a disability advocate has turned my body into a constant conversation — between pain and patience, fear and faith. It has taught me that healing isn’ t always recovery; sometimes, it is the quiet courage to stay alive, soft, and honest in a world that doesn’ t slow down for your struggles. Through storytelling, I advocate for chronic illness inclusion and public policy that recognizes the dignity, needs, and voices of people living with invisible disabilities. My poems are small acts of rebellion against silence — a way of saying: I am still here, still breathing, still becoming.”

Salma Amrou is an Egyptian-American poet and writer. She was named the 2022 Youth Poet Laureate of Southeastern Virginia and is the 2025 recipient of the Academy of American Poets Prize at The College of William & Mary. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Poets.org, Palette Poetry, Rattle, and elsewhere.



Walker AS is a non-binary Black writer and interdisciplinary artist. their visual practice ranges from portraiture, mixed media collage, and photography; this practice meets their wordsmith work in the production of zines, graffiti font work, and archive development. their current research pulls together community interviews, poetry of protest, and asking everyone about their favourite monster myths.



“I have chronic migraines and chronic bronchitis! it took me a year and a half of repeat respiratory infections and my throat closing twice each after soliciting medical professionals before I drove two hours for a clinic in my hometown and was finally able to figure out what was wrong with me; though at the time I also had a vitamin D deficiency as well which fostered a lot of feelings of dread and confusion. These feelings inevitably also influenced a relapse with alcoholism. this was almost all poems submitted about relapse, but it's allergy season and I chose to remember instead what this pending fall and winter will mean for me: the me full of yearning and hope for wielding a body I know better than I did before, even if that's just a diagnosis.”

Megan Baffoe studied English Literature and then Creative Writing at Oxford. She enjoys writing fairytales, fraught family dynamics and unreliable narrators. Her work has been published in venues such as Baffling Magazine, midnight & indigo and The Mud Season Review.



My poem was inspired by my experiences of epilepsy and fibromyalgia.

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