Raison d'Être

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On the Cover: Life in Oil Pastel
by Marilyn Hayden
The panorama has left me
stuck like an egg on the equinox-
against gravity nature my momentum.
The phone wires cut the sky
a grid a kaleidoscope
window frames to the clouds-
a cliché painting hanging
on tackily decorated wall.

Everything is either very simple or infinitely complicated.
I haven’t yet decided which,
the impossible fog between polarities.

Like I said- stuck-
in groping mud,
in the quicksand I’ve heard it’s best not to fight,
which sounds hard and easy,
but one can only trust reason
and reason says one thing
cannot be two things.

So back to the original quandary
of these two young girls,
7 years old maybe,
riding their bikes with delicate care
straight lines helmets peaks over each shoulder
before a turn fingers tight around the handlebars.

Programmed safety in a world that spins around a blazing ball
this Impala whipping across double-yellow lines,

something is lost or else it’s been abandoned.
At Robinson and Eighth
a meager man with crooked teeth
shouts for all to come near.
His trench coat dances in the dirt
as he stretches his arms
and bears all he has.

“Look, look, through the glass
see the dreams, the wishes, the scenes
of all the Queens and Kings.
Look, look, through the glass
see the sadness, the sorrow, the scenes
of all the Queens and Kings
dancing in the night, dying in the day.
Look, look, through the glass
see what you will see.
Look, look, through the glass
and see if you find me.

Sizes, shapes, and colors
I’ve got all you need.
Take a mirror, a microscope
and see what you will see.
Look, look,
will you find me?”

“Look, look,”
the echo screams
as a blind shot breaks
through the glass,
and each shard falls
silently, unseen,
splashing to the floor.
Lumière de Soleil

by Katie-Elisabeth Brown

All the Queens and Kings
All You Need Is Love
by Keisuke Kajiwara
Teeth
by Brad Phillips

Cutlass sharp.
Two arced rows.
A perpetuation

Of mahogany
Along the gum line.
I have lost some

Through the years,
They have loosened
And dropped out like stones.

The ice men
Forge harsh bijous
From them,

Necklaces of pixied horns.
Hanging as bone chimes
From their cold necks.

Ornaments protruding thorn like
From their collars of pelt.
Unnerving me, these scavenged bits of my jowl.
Ship Abandoned
by Maria Conti

I remember the day gusts
Of blizzard winds shredded
Our sails. Jumping over
Shards of ice, I rowed the
Lifeboat away, needing
To know I could get
Out
From under the hailstorms
Of your screams,
From Dad's intrusive accusations
To mom's index
Finger, shaking
As it points to the answering machine,
The herald of news
From school. You sat in arctic silence,
Thin lips frozen shut.

I left that ship,
Steering the lifeboat
Furiously into spring, afraid
The oars
Would slow and falter
Amid the patches of ice
On the water's surface.
I wondered
How
You could do it, Jason,
My once-baby brother, now
Packing a razor
Blade in your book bag, sliding
It in the front monogrammed pocket.

A memory of a time
Before unfolded in my mind.
The light-drenched glen, before
The psychologists and
Your stubborn, icy visage that threatened
To capsize our ship.
I had grasped at those shafts of sunshine,
The dust particles illuminating all of us
In the calm. That place was my
Destination.

I now think about the ship that I abandoned,
Why
Couldn't I show you this light?
The way the pale sun crawls
Up each morning, a fragile
Testimony to the beauty of each

Second, the imminence of spring.
And now I speak to all
Of you. I want you
To see the rosebud
Light reflected in the morning beads
Of dew on every blade of grass. I want to give
You these sun-dusted moments.
So I make a slow half-arc
In the waves, turning
The lifeboat around, and I go
After us.
“I swear that kid’s been bouncing that ball since we got here,” Keneon said, jumping to his toes for the third time to peer scornfully out the window at the boy playing alone in the neighboring driveway. The grungy tot, tongue clenched between his teeth, had enclosed himself in a circle of yellow chalk and was intently dribbling a ball as if balancing on a disc that hovered in a galaxy of his own creation.

The strict hollow pangs of the ball echoed off the yellowing brick walls of Melody’s rented garage, now furnished as a studio apartment but still odorous of petrol fumes and sawdust from the previous use. She had been forced to move into it, oil stains and all, after her grandfather, her guardian since infancy, died suddenly two weeks prior from a brain hemorrhage due to a fall. The lease, however, fit the budget of her inheritance, so she couldn’t complain.

“He’s practicing,” she said, a little breathless, puffing a strand of hair away from her eyes as she shoved the last chair into a satisfactory position.


“For whatever it is he will be,” she said wistfully, plopping heavily into the worn plaid recliner, letting her arms drape down the sides like a mother who had finally put her six children to bed.

There is something missing, though, she thought anxiously, sitting up and scanning her new shoebox of a home for what she could possibly have misplaced during the shuffle of relocation.

“Maybe he’s counting until his brain loses track and disrupts his whole rhythm, or he’s counting backwards from some ridiculous number, like forty-four thousand.” Keneon turned from the window, his officiousness temporarily distracted by the newly unfolded décor, a blend of both Melody’s memorabilia and her grandfather’s earthy art. “Looks cozy,” he said encouragingly, tracing the bare walls and secondhand furniture with his eyes. He walked over and lifted one of the three metal figurines from her dresser and rolled it inquisitively between his hands. “These are interesting. Where did they come from?”

“They were Grandpa’s.” Melody said. “He crafted them in his basement as a hobby after selling his bronzing shop. His circuits were a little loose by then – he addressed me most mornings as though I was a waitress serving his coffee - but he never forgot the precise temperature to heat copper for flawless pliancy.” She took it from Keneon and gazed reverently into the sunken yet jovial eyes of the wiry man adorned in a leaf skirt, balancing, in one hand, a candle, and in the other, a clear orb with a tunnel through the middle.

The candles, she remembered. The candles must have been boxed and then left at the house or in the moving van. She had molded them by hand, at first rather proudly, during a class at the art center last winter under the instruction of Ms. Sans, a contemptuously dismissive woman whose hoary hair was wrapped so tightly around her head that her eyes could have popped out. “Coiling the wick within the wax elongates their lifespan,” Melody had contended, her own creative flame extinguished by her weak defense, “and the lumps give them a little character, like
a knotty elm amid a forest of pines." Ms. Sans scoffed. "The wick will lay at a tilt!" And with a roll of her scrutinizing eyes, she turned on her heels and walked away. No, the candles were not candy-colored, pristine columns, but at least they would burn; they would fulfill their purpose.

Keneon looked puzzled. "Why does he hold the candle at his waist and the sphere above his head?" He looked contemplatively into the air in debate over the probability of balance.

"The candle is held below the waist to block backwind and prevent the carrier from extinguishing it with his own breath. The sphere is held above so the wind and sunlight - or moonlight - can travel through it, always refreshing its emptiness." Grandpa was always seeking higher ground. Melody thought solemnly, suddenly overcome by the amplified pulse of the neighbor boy's ball permeating the waxy buildup around her psyche. Not even her equanimity could withstand its persistence.

"Well," Keneon mused, moving back toward the window, "the orb certainly wasn't meant for bouncing. Ugh - We should go over and puncture that infernal rubber ball before I start hurling rocks at it from behind the partition of yews."

The beat of the ball pounded louder and louder as though ricocheting back and forth between the hemispheres of Melody's brain. Her fists clenched and her face winced with the drone of repetition. It builds and it beats, she thought, sweating at the temples, the room tilting, closing in, then expanding, then closing in again, as if she was immured within the walls of a heart. It builds and beats!

"Rest!" she screamed, shifting, internally, from the garage into a different yet familiar room. "Rest!"

Keneon spun with a startled whip. "What the hell?"

Melody turned to look at him, though looking past him, through the window, beyond the yews, beyond the boy, her eyes bleary and bewildered. "I can't take it anymore! I expect majestic swirls of orange and purple at sunset, but the sun just drops to gray, then black, forgetting the light of the day it had and forgetting to tell the moon to take over its shift. I expect any breeze to keep a kite in the air, but it crashes to the ground at launch, tearing as it scrapes the cement. Everybody sees their lever, they pull it or they don't pull it, and, even if they do, the sky hails glitter for them or it doesn't." She sunk back down into the chair. "Mirages are the repetition of failure."

"What are you talking about?"

The echo ceased.

"My candles," she said. "I lost my candles in the move."
I.
daily deliverance.
each rotation brings new blooms,
a renewal of problems and solutions:
a tool to dig
deeper, or out.
view the brilliance of color,
flashing bulbs of cerise
seize attention,
leading the eye skyward.
escape.
or scan the ground: nature’s graveyard.
forsaken petals burnt by the heat
of experience; of life.
natural ambivalence.

II.
the glory of the morning blooms in vines,
a web of interconnected life.
as one dies, another lives,
all sustaining each other.
focus on a bud: alone
and distracted by independence
searching for the light, but remaining in darkness.
futile attempts of growth
impeded by the oppression of its inherent nature.
understand the bud
only in relation to the vine.
there is no other, no individual:
survival cultivated with each overlapping root.

III.
heart watered with vodka
overflows, its banks
carved with acerbic brown streams.
instincts.
the body overrides the mind’s slurry,
propels you to the sink.
mistakes and regrets tumble
as pain and pleasure mourn their exit
with heaving shrieks.
seeds of glory strewn,
primers to another mourning
tilled in virgin soil and drenched in bottled potency.
rancid burn, aroma of sweet poison stings:
the body unaware of the natural
decomposition of time.

IV.

shapes of hearts spill over its petals.
natural image categorized by man:
 imposed synthetic understanding.
plastic identification rings your wrist,
a flower plucked from the vine
and tucked in a warm vase of stained sheets.
the bloom, uncontained, bursts
external from the stem’s foundation.
the petals discolor, retract and fall
into the company of mistakes:
experiences improperly identified.
sanctity lost with each new discovery.

V.
sunrise signals renewal,
petals unfolding in the grace of light
dancing to the crescendo
of youth and invincibility.
opening to the radiance of the sun
casting distilled warmth.
then withering with the reality
of time: by night
its beauty lies forgotten
on shards of concrete.
beauty is but a flash of freedom
forgotten like a drunken night.
Oh To Be Falling
by Dustin Hershberger | Perrico Poetry Award Winner

The vast jeweled lake spread out before me,
Destroying all rational thought,
Conjuring images of sea monsters hiding in the deep unknown
Hell bent on devouring my soul.
Atop this cliff, I cannot tell
Whether that soul is still grounded in me
Or if it falls ahead of me to those eager creatures.

Raw, the stone beneath my feet,
An ancient bone of the earth.
How dare I mount such sacred ground,
Whose sheer face rushes down to the water below?
And how could I know, how deep it goes?
To death and darkness, maybe beyond.

To my back the wind plays in the trees,
Reminding me of safety.
But my path is before me, into that openness,
Where ground departs and all that’s there is air.
Then will I fall to the sunlit water
And feel the waves caress my face.

Fear makes everything vivid, heightens the senses.
I can see the veins on a leaf across the lake,
Hear the whisperings of lovers a mile away,
For fear is strangling me.
I am rooted to the spot, high above the water,
Unwilling, unable to faithfully leap.

Go now, they prod, jump in, they hound.
Take a step, says the quiet breeze in my hair.
My heart bursts out of my chest, for beating so hard.
Here now is the chance to shine.
Never mind.
I almost went that time.

No more, cries a voice from nowhere.
It is time to leap forth from the slick skeleton of the earth
And try my luck with the monsters of the deep.
My mind is erased as if someone hit the delete key.
No thoughts to hinder my descent.
Catching my breath, I gather my wits. One step, two, and I’m soaring.

My ears are buffeted by the wind,
As weightless I glide toward the abyss,
Falling, falling, falling, my only comfort the sun,
Undisturbed upon the face of the water.
And, catching my soul before the plunge,
I enter the object of all my fear.
Elated in that soundless place, I think only of when I can do it again.
Static silver maple, frozen
By early snow flecks,
Shivers against the indifferent
Breeze. Quivering roots battle iron
Soil. Icicled leaves glint sapphire, reaching
For company. The tree alone silhouettes the
Eggshell sky, as I reach for
Anyone.

I wander through the
Supermarket, like a lost
Child, scanning the
Horizon of paper towels and
Ketchup, shading my eyes with one
Styrofoam hand. Searching, watchful, an
Archaeologist looking for history in the
Fruit aisle, a philosopher seeking truth
Amidst the towering display of graham
Crackers. Aisles melt into a dizzying stream of
Nothingness, like cracked peanut
Shells, hollow and empty.
Anxious forehead waits for
Your emerald irises to
Find mine.

Crickets calm nocturnal life, yet
Hydrogen and oxygen atoms rush downstream,
Pounding against steel rocks. The anxious rhythm
Wrestles the crickets’ hum, expelling the calm. Endless
As the silver-stitched clouds, eternal as the moon rising into each
Amethyst night, I wait.
Like a ballerina
Taking the stage,
I step into
The sunlight.

From where I
Am standing,
I see it
All.

But time stands
Still- unmoving,
Unmoving- as
I hold my
Breath and
Fall.

The gentle breeze
Calls my name
As the sun
Warms my face.

This is it!
This is it!
My final resting
Place.

And I join my
Brothers and sisters-
Some yellow, some
Red, some
Brown.

We must all
Take
Our leap
Of faith.

And we must
All fall to the
Ground.

AUTUMN DANCE
BY KLARISA GASKINS

CREEK
BRAD PHILLIPS
A breath of wind displaced by a blow,  
Now gone in the blue light of midnight.  
Wisp of smoke stemming from lit cigars,  
Disappear in the black outside.  
Here I stand amidst friends who, with  
Harsh words and quiet reproach,  
Ignite flames of fury, of laughter, of both.  

The jokes turn bitter, as pain follows them.  
Why do we fight like this?  
Blows raining down upon each other,  
Seeking the open air, and finding only  
Pipe smoke and near nausea.  
Exhaustion washes over us while, in the end,  
We find shelter from the cold snow  
That hinders our pleasure and chills our bones.  

The lash falls, releasing with it caged aggression.  
We all feel the ecstasy of anger  
As adrenaline urges us to harm each other;  
Such friends we are.  
That through all and in all, we resent,  
Yet never hold the grudges that threaten  
To rip curses from our throats.  
We are the elect, above all that pettiness.  

But what is the price, of unrelenting annoyance,  
The desire to batter, an addiction to horseplay?  
When maturity knocks on our heads  
Will we continue in the indulgence of foolishness?  
To scale tall places and fall in wet spaces.  
We are the triumphantly sad ones,  
Oblivious, yet delighted in our own cleverness.
Light fell through black weighted space and was caught –
Contours arranged in the image of a negative God
Beneath my glossy eggshell surface to wait
For their time to be summoned above.
Slid into the still developer pan to cook,
I become the face of the moon.
Dark, then darker clouds spread gradually over me –
Shapes bloom into view. I am wet and new.
Face hits raw stop bath – that’s all over.
I’m still vulnerable to the day –
One extra touch of the light would blot me away.
They’ll fix me.
In the fixer I meet another.
We’re placed face-to-face so we won’t stick.
We slide together, emulsion-to-emulsion –
Whispering our stories of the allotted thousand words
Under the hiss of running water.
Too suddenly I’m peeled away, dropped into the water tray.
I linger in the chemical-sweating bath for the longest.
Pushed by the stream, pulled by the drain –
Turning, like a baby in the womb.
Then brought to light, cleanest I will ever be.
I was – I am – not premature.
My dark parts are dark –
To give to full beauty of spaces between.
I’m not afraid to be seen. The light will not ruin me.
It’s the same stuff I’ve been remade of –
My permanent painted-on skin.
Mother and Child
by Caroline Davis
I gave my first forever to God when I was 6 years old, crouched in the back of a hospital room which had been converted to a meeting place for cancer patients. The bed and I.V. had been replaced with plastic chairs situated in a semi-circle facing a television set. The observation windows clutched posters with optimistic clichés, blocking out those who had no right to attempt to understand or offer their pity.

I faced the wall because mom was watching a video that only grownups could watch. I peeked once in awhile and caught sight of a man with a sad face examining a woman’s breast, her face was even sadder. I continued to study the wall.

I knew somehow that it was all connected, the sad faces, the breast, the tension, the hair on the floor, the nervous glances, to my father’s confession that mom was sick. He said soon, if she didn’t get better, it might be just us guys, and I knew that meant it would just be me. So I studied the chipped white wall in the room that smelled like chemicals and introduced me to death.

Desperate, I asked God what it would take to keep my mother, the white wall, the hair on the floor, and the whispers. His silence asked for my forever and my silence consented. I gave it away many times after that.

So when you ask me for forever, just know that if I said yes it’d be exhaled air, a dissolvable prayer.

And when I say I have no more forevers to give, know that it’s because you deserve so much more than words whispered to a wall.

You get the idea.
I cower
At the colossal
Lily,

The Tower
Of plant
That

I both
Extol and
Abhor.

Orange petal plumes
Coil outward
From the head

Mane like,
And my gaze upward
Is that of a distrust.

Could it not
Bow down
And mouth

A floral guillotine?
A tigress’ sting
Of jabs?

It stands
So malignantly still,
Worrying me with its horrid privacy.
Black Lily
by Julia Kole
Libertas-
sententia militum, prex sacerdotium
vigor heris, fructus operarii
somnium sapientium, incubus stultorum
pater formarum, decus naturae
fundamentum civitatum, ruina tyrannorum
vis sanguinis, honor mortis
spes gentium, consensus colorium
exemplum historiae, monitum postero
amans veritatis, hostis mendacii
socius iustitiae, victor simulationis
desiderium animae, cupiditas pectorium
finis vitae, vox mundi

Liberty-
The motto of soldiers, Plea of priests
Energy of the hero, Fruit of the worker
Dream of sages, Nightmare of fools
Father of ideas, Glory of nature
Foundation of states, Ruin of tyrants
Meaning of life, Honor of death
Hope of peoples, Unity of colors
Lesson of history, Warning for the future
Lover of truth, Enemy of falsehood
Companion of justice, Conqueror of hypocrisy
Yearning of the soul, Desire of the thoughts
Essence of existence, Call of the cosmos
Green fades to brown, yellow, orange, red
And one by one you meander to the ground
Soon you cover any trace of new life
Bothersome to the people who have to pick you up

It is tragic really
Your solemn, graceful dance,
And when you land, it’s over
You are trampled and broke
Dead

Soon there will be a blanket over your flaws
Hiding you from the world
Masking your decay with something innocent and peaceful

But there is beauty in your cluttered, short, hectic life
There is that carbon copy that you leave behind
Letting everyone know
That you
Were here

My mouth forms, "Hey, Grandma!" while my mind tangles and untangles the affection and disdain that surges through my nerves. You stare at me, your eyes recognize but your mind forsakes.

We sit in the artificial living room with her artificial family of invalids and nurses. One scurries by, "Hello Ruth." She digests the words and replies, "My family came to visit!!" No, your son came to visit, but I came as penance. But I am never coming back. Ever.

She sinks into her son's arms and the sane parts of their minds assess their misfortunes. Her eyes reflect fear: light fading into darkness. She cannot remember, but she knows she is slipping away. Her hands claw for life and land on his shoulders and she buries her head in his chest: "I just want to die."

_Harden your heart, young girl, and no one can touch you._

Her son prompts: "Mom, why don't you show her your room?"

"But Dad, why?" I just want to do my time and get back to my life, not this earthly purgatory of the lost and helpless.

She seems to understand and straightens up into a C-curve and reaches for her walker. Scoot up a little and remind your feet that they must be on the ground to support you. One, two, three ... four. As her fine china bones rattle into place, I notice her white shoes, "Easy Spirit." I stare at her sweatpants with her name Sharpie'd on the waistline and watch her old legs drag her mind through the door frame.

Inside: white, blank, empty. The room is accented with a collage picture frame of someone's life - faces without names, stories without a narrator. She smiles like she knows, but her eyes are empty.

I smile at her as I wheel around to hide my face. "This is a nice room, Grandma." Your life is death and all I want to do is mourn you.

My Grandma turned to me, "What did you say your name was again, hunnie?"

_Harden your heart, young girl, and no one can touch you._

"Grandma, I have to go to the bathroom, I'll be right back." I stride to the door, not daring
back at her longing – or worse – her happiness. She has no idea what is going on. I have no idea what is going on. We are both happy in the lives we made.

**

I reach the car first and flick a locked handle. Before my father can fish out the keys, I hear sirens. Flashes of red, blue, white: flashes of death.

The medics saunter in through those same automatic doors. They do not rush because it was his time. He, just another person who existed in Grandma’s artificial family, was abandoned from the world he knew. Died as he was born: alone. Place him in a coffin; once in the ground he will be forgotten.

You don’t have to be in the ground – I’m forgetting you like you forgot me.
Piercings
by Amanda Crookston

Piercings
Hide the holes within
Tattoos and ink
Cover up the skin
Bits of the soul
No place to hide
Angels and demons
In the mind collide

Humility
by Amii Youngblood

Small fingers clench tightly around the pencil bearing white knuckles and crude words. The white paper echoes scratches from the blackboard.

Taught to replicate the lines, tears fall to unsteady hands. The R does not curve the way it is supposed to. Perfection in her Majesty’s eye ruins her desire to script.

Choked on oral words, she set her pencil down. The tapping noise from the chalk stops causing two spectacled eyes to magnify the heat surrounding the girl’s tears.

The fire scorches her paper and cradles her hands. There was no need to push her to perfection because, inside, she has already inscripted her love.
MATERNAL INSTINCT

BY MARILYN HAYDEN
Contributors

Alissa Brooks
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Maria Conti
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Amanda Crookston
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Rachel Gift
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Marilyn Hayden
Dustin Hershberger
Keisuke Kajiwara
Emilia Kandl
Julia Kole
Rachel Leisure
Ben Louis
Brad Phillips
Joey Romar
T.J. Sandella
Jessica Shoemaker
Amii Youngblood

Life in Oil Pastel
by Marilyn Hayden