excerpts from *Scrim*
by Haidee Kotze

Woman with headlight

After DJ Opperman

You mount the small bonewhite
prick of consciousness to your forehead,

name it hapgood, or
some such lilted spell you can

pit against the dark
washing in from the bitter hem of the world.

Your light is a quiet orphan
etching the woodsman and his wolfish axe.

His axe hunts its hunger through the felled forest.
He swings. Coilsprings of stars

boil soft tentacles out of treetops.
The resinous blinks of small animals

fleck their fall through the ring of your light.
The stunting of it all. It snuffs your skull.

The mouth of the lake slowly clots closed in the night.
Still the tide pulls. You are mopped up by ocean,

the crunch of marsupial teeth.
From the dark the woodsman and his wolfish axe

demand a forest. Make us a forest.
Why is there no forest, wife.

You're just a spell-ridden woman
reluctantly hinged to the light on your head.

In a forest you could be a moth,
eyespots gleaming like gods on your wings.

Resurrections

You turned my dead language
with your toe.

There was gasping. A guttering of mud
from the lungs.

From among
the mourners pegged
like spindly tents against
the night

I ask

Why. The dead
are so peacefully unvoiced. Listen
to them softly simmering.

You say

I did nothing. It was you
who made it grab my ankle.
You called it up
with that larkish trill

hiding behind your teeth. Nobody heard.
Just me

and your dead language
twitching in the soil.

I say

No. You lie.
Look. Your lie squats
like a rutty toad on the roof
of your mouth. You

needed it
to speak
my names. You turned
it over, gravelly tongue
to the light. For this.
This.

No

you say. No.
Begin
again.

*

You turned my dead language
with your toe.

I say

How could I defy
the lamps of your eyes?
My words
swarm to them.

I needed it
to speak
your names

I say

I needed you
to speak my names.

Horoscope

our fortune is in the stars
sandwiched in butchered paper and days
we have buried our heads into
inhaling skin of fish salt of chicken oil of snake
ink and pulp extinction soups

to be sure
we're not dead yet though soon we will be
we may yet discover piety barefooting it over three-corner jacks
or settle for a murmuration of syllables roughshod to the dawn

there is some kind of sum of years and houses
and girls and roads
I have to show my working but I've forgotten what to carry
there's always a remaindering
always fevered screws untethered across the page
injured and painfully cocked to
our soft-puddinged heart dying at a slow boil in its crock

how child-eyed to think the effervescence of sorrel
would resuscitate us
the many-fruited napes of neck countermand
our rot
sentiment is deciduous but sorrow not

Hummingbird postcard

i walk all day trafficking postcards to you in my head
i drink slow-drip coffee late into the night
watch people and birds

i'm still waking up at 4 am part habit part hunger
all that walking in circles and also the dust in my mouth which
i keep bare and turned to the weather just in case you call
but that's a different kettle and i need mine
to make tea for chestnut bread and tangerines on the balcony
i try not to think about endings their tender rot
rises up from the drains

people make hummingbird love charms
roll up the poor brittle-boned dead thing in photos and names
then douse it in honey and oils carry it everywhere
turned towards you a little jar
of fragrant always-famished bird echoing your heart
i've been thinking about that
the drawers of dead hummingbirds we hoard for love

anyway i should go write when you can?
it's beginning to feel like home here
this place of guessed-at syllabaries

Twice over

We baked that cake twice
over. We'll remember

that. The Friday night. The boy
with his head over egg whites and flour
knotting the yellow light
between us. The winter evening flush
against the house. The slow

showing we save for small
hands. This is how you measure. This is how you whip.
This is how you make your wrist do the tender work
of folding. Between us

    we showed him the slow temper of love
    while the moon brewed like a fat ball of dough over the city.

Even so, we burnt it. Not much, just

so it wasn't Right his face said
solemn over the singed crumbs. We looked
at each other over
the kitchen over his bright head. We said

There is more flour. And eggs and sugar. Mandarins. Oil.
It's early.

And so we baked that cake
again. We'll remember
    that.

Nightfall

the sky is a lungful of old fags
    a concoction of bird circuitries crackling
        through the mist pooling towards the riverbank
can you hear me over this?
the wind buries itself in potholes
my long divisions of follies drag their cracked heels over the grass
we're empty tins you and I
    a harness of static biting into our aluminum ears
everything's coming up welts

the night siphons the light off into its drawers
    a turmeric wash briefly ladled into dark corners
do you remember how you used to say I was your echo?
you always were an astringent animal
    legible only to me or so you said
        with your blonde mouth bristling on my blonde thighs
you cracked me like an existential egg

I'll leave the door ajar
  wind! salt my heart against this pulp
  this orphaned plunder
I'll leave the door ajar
will you come? and bring inklings in a basket with my name?

the moon hangs like a hushed ball of naphthalene
    scenting the triage of us laid out on the lawn

Leaf

Time leafs through us
love
a lithic riffle palming a pared earth
to a perfect bare balance. You are

an orchard of planets
sown under my skin, your
sweet pear-templed sorrow swallowed by
the sea's spell. How

your plainsong spine quivered in your body
vaults the pitch and quaver of the earth to ring
a pure-tempered flint in my skull,
an incandescent burn buffed against
the dark. Time

trammels us
love
our gauge of words a fine-smocked net for flocks of scales
silver-flecked trembles
unfurled across space. Someday perhaps

I shall sail these salted seasons
with your map curled in the peat of my chest
one day
chance upon your mouth's careful chalk
a carbon cosmos
chiming in my hands.

Dig

The archivist
dead in the kitchen, eyes
mothballed to
the ceiling

won't speak,
his tongue
a broken yolk
in its nest of teeth. Nothing

here to be found. Perhaps,
though, a picture
of you – your eyes oars,
or silver tacks –
tucked into

his skull, ready
to pop up like a slice of toast
at the slightest
lull. Even this

if we hold it up:
time jumping like
a trout between us, or
just a curdle of synapse
and light? Who

knows. A splash of ink
under a nail may well
give away

my heart. But we
really can't tell the disguises
of skin apart, not

without gloves and
spades. Nothing for it
then.

When they come
to dig
they'll find

you
packed tight like
a cabbage,
me
your quiet stalk.

Envelope

You made your mouth
an envelope

and when
I looked away

sent it through
the blinds of my ribs.

In the slipstream
of time

it flails
like a trapped

bird against a window
its wings

a semaphore
flickering against

my bones.
But up here

even feathers
have weight:

your envelope
is a lung

full of lead.
Having to choose

between breath and thrall
I ball it up

and let it fall.