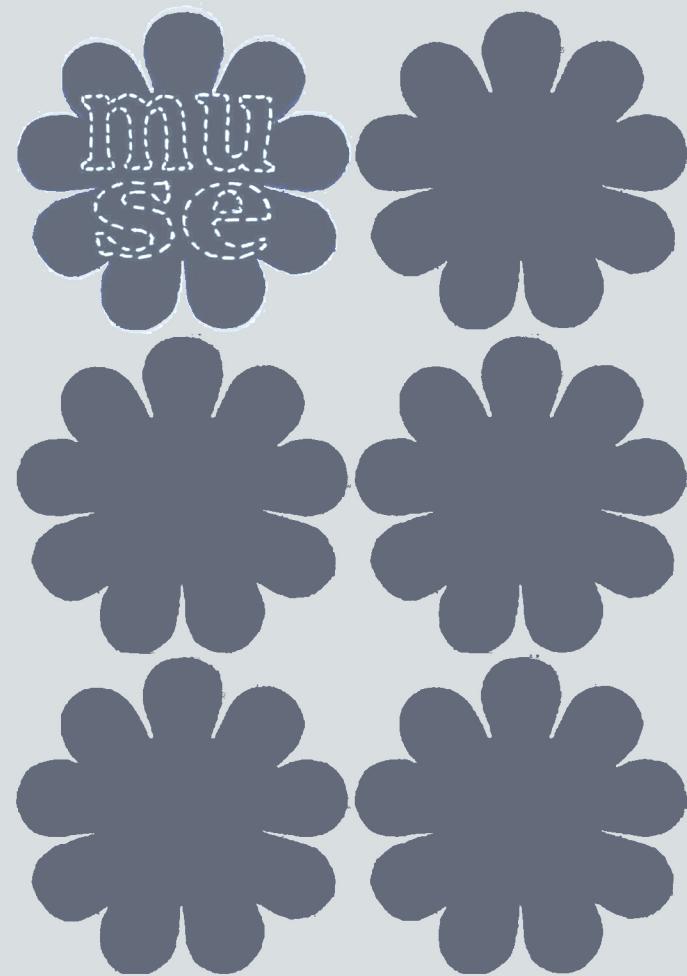


a collaborative journal



imagine





Dear Muse...
Happy winter ✨♡!!

Welcome to this exciting and special issue, the last in the seasonal cycle! As we come up to a whole year of Muse, I've been thinking about what we've created and what the next year will bring.

Thank you SOOO much for all of the support + collaboration, it's been so fun and inspiring to bring together the work of so many talented people, and make friends along the way.

Happy musing - always!

Dani♡♡♡



Candlefire chandelier

girl, settle back in.
bask again in the orange glow
of the vanilla candle's flame.
stain another acetone cottonball
dark with chipped polish;
repaint those bitten nails
neon pink like we are again
circle-talking seventeen
spooning cookie dough
straight from a lukewarm plastic tub
that at once seems bottomless and too shallow.
tell me old friend lies,
pretty words with white bows:
how you will use a crochet hook
to stitch me into my wedding dress,
how when we are old and widowed and rich from our stories
we will move together into a house that smells of vanilla—
then lie on your back so the three-wicked candle above us on the table,
in the mirror of your eye, becomes our future home's chandelier.
let me see you again as I saw you then:
baby blanket blue eyes, bassinet brown hair, acne frosted cheeks,
warmth, truth,
lantern pupils.
ask me again to write your story for you.
one last time, let me tell you no.

Sarah Watkins



Xuwei Qiao

The Fever of February

we are holding hands in the afterlife
but in reality—it was just a dream
i woke up with your voice in my mind as if i could recall
everything about its qualities

i told you once you let the snowfall—
february fourth, a cold night
a warm cup of chai
a journal entry
that i'll take care of them in this lifetime
and as they turn to stardust
you'll be waiting on the other side
for their return

you let the flurries brace their fall on my window pane
a rhythmic pelting and a familiar sign—
somewhere
across the distance and mortality between us
i held a funny feeling in my chest
a burst of laughter
and a desire to cry
maybe the snow fell because it meant you visited
just to laugh at my nonsensical grievances
so you told me
i was being silly
as i wrote on the page
felt like the pen was gliding as if you took control
and then you said farewell
and the snow stopped twinkling under the streetlights outside
bereavement and emptiness
but the exchange felt like the warmth of a candle
dimly lit, wavering with imbalance

and there i sat,
in the fever of february,
with the spark of your lost life
blowing out.

can you hear the birds?

Muskan Thakkar

Progress

Losing you
Would turn the sea
black from blue
During high tide
I'd look for your eyes
In sea foam
Your face is a
constellation under construction
A beautiful mosaic
You are perfect
But your understanding of this
Is in progress
You are a string of stars
Left untied
By your uneasy eyes

Bella Melardo

it symbolises so much more?





Balkis Hmida

Balkis Hmida is a Tunisian writer, poetess and artist based in Paris. With two published books; *Fleur Intérieure* and *Perles Passées*, she writes about self-love, healing, and living for the hope of it all.

When did you know that writing would be a big part of your life - how did that journey begin?

I always knew my love for writing, but at first, growing up, I had no clue I would end up a writer. As I grew, I remember thinking journalism was way more reachable than being a full on writer, so that's how I started! First by being a journalist, then slowly and as life unfolded, I started writing for me and from a place I truly loved which is poetry & novels.

Do you have a piece of work that feels the most "you"?

My second book! I poured all of my being on that poetry collection. After my first one, where I wrote about themes such as self love, how to deal

with moments of doubts, toxic productivity, that book was overall very joyful and giving lots of hope. Therefore with my second, I wanted to show that even deep wounds could heal and that we do evolve and change for the better. So it talks a lot about reconnecting with our inner teenager, meeting the darkest parts of ourselves so we can shed light on those (because after all, they really aren't that scary).

If you could send a note to your future self from this season, what would you want her to remember?

Oh my god, I would love to just tell her she rocks, that I am so proud of the road we are taking. I want her to know that whatever she does, it's all gonna be fine as long as we breathe, feel and love.

What has slowing down revealed to you, has it changed the way you approach creativity?

Absolutly! I truly think it has changed the course of my life haha, I was slowly heading for burn-out. One of my main ordeals was to find my own pace and basically not fall into the trap of life is a race.

Social Media has made it so normal to create more, publish more, do more, that it really got to me. I used to think I never did enough. So this past year was really crucial, for me and therefore, my creativity. It all comes down to creating for one's self. Now I approach creativity as a fuel for my inner fire, where I used to be fueled by outside validation.

How do you find a balance between creating for yourself and sharing your work?

That's something I am still vigorously working on. It is oh so easy to fall into the trap of creating for social media. However I am more and more trying to create first, then sharing it if I feel like it. So lately I have been doing it like teenage Balkis - creating whatever while watching my favorite cartoons lmao. Not instagrammable, but the butterflies are back.



Current small joy?

Daylight lasting longer
Harry Styles comeback

Early bird or
night owl?

Night owl haha
please let me sleep till 11am

A word for
2026: Fun!

Fave book of
the moment?

Rouge by
Mona Awad! OBSESSED

Your creativity in 3 words?



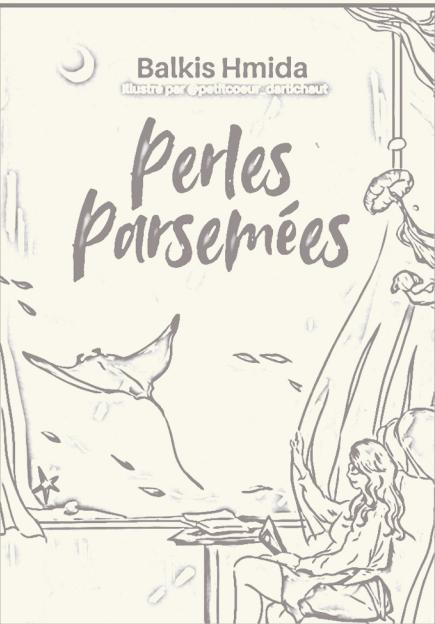
As I am currently writing my debut novel, I will tell for that project
(but applies to all truly):

Poetic + Witty + Introspective

fleur intérieure



Balkis Hmida
illustré par Margaux Carré



Find Balkis' books and follow her creative work at [@h.balkis](#)





Mockingbird

there is a mockingbird in the winter night
perhaps it is one of god's little angels
sent to heaven in a some marching, holy array
she sings my sorrow and all things i cannot remember
i do not mind her voice, remembrance is shallow
like marks on graves or sand castles in august
when i'm old and still so young, my desire will have left me
to know anything at all will be burdensome
i envy the words the bird sings loud,
because they are just words
just words in a crowd

Victoria Pontillo

Carry Homeward

It isn't the cold that falls—
but the silence that follows.
A blanket stitched with quiet
spread over everything.
The ground wears it like an old coat,
threadbare and heavy with memory.
Streetlights hoard holly-springs
for cardinals to carry homeward.
And in the melody
of bird-flight, of traffic lights
of lover's words met unspoken
under evetime glow—
The bell tower sings an advent-merry,
drowned out by London's snow.

Claire Kroening



Xufei Qiao



Divya Sanas

Nat San-Go



Serena Gezmer

Xinfei Qiao



Lauren St. Aimee



slow burn

the sun retires at four in the noon,
leaving the sky a bruised violet
that smells of woodsmoke.
the world is contracting,
pulling its edges tight against the frost,
and i am learning the architecture of the dark.
i do not look for a bonfire.
i look for the small,
stubborn heat of a thumb against a match,
the way a single candle
can make a cathedral out of a kitchen chair.
inner warmth is a slow-burning discipline.
it is the tea steam fogging my glasses,
a temporary soft-focus on a jagged year.
it is the weight of a heavy cashmere coat
that feels like a lover holding me together
when the wind tries to unspool my ribs.
i am pocketing the glow:
the orange peel oil on my cuticles,
the hum of the radiator,
the way your voice sounds through a phone line—
a thin, gold wire stretched across the snow.
the nights are long,
but i am no longer afraid of the dimming.
i have turned my heart throbs into a lantern.
not to light the way,
but to keep the frost from settling on the glass.

Veronika Safarek

Will-O'-The-Wisp

Who goes there?

glowing bright
shrieking shrill cries
through the night?

Who goes there?

far beyond the lake
floating right
above the wake?

Who goes there?

and do I heed your call
forth through bog
and pickerel tall?

Who goes there?

I'm here, yet cannot see
my own, worn eyes
deceiving me.

Who goes there?

your screeching yowl now ceased;
heavy breath all I hear
in brackish swamp deep.

Who goes there?

I shout for help
as my legs buckle, suck in
with a squelch.

Who goes there?

a hopeless attempt,
to free myself
of vengeful contempt.

Who goes there?

I cry out to the night.
I shriek shrill
and I glow bright.

Maxwell O'Toole

Candles and Lanterns

I lit lanterns for myself when the world grew too dark - when it became harder to see the version of me I had always envisioned. I wanted to be anything but constant, anything but trapped in a quiet loop of routines that no longer fit, or conversations that felt rehearsed rather than lived.

During frequent power cuts, I could feel the darkness seep into my messy, cluttered, chaotic room - and into me. My body seemed to dissolve into it, slowly falling into a void. At first, I found comfort in those power cuts as they gave me an excuse to forget the chaos, hiding it gently beneath a blanket of deception. But comfort soon turned into suffocation, and suffocation into self-doubt. The familiarity that once gave me peace made me blind, caused me to stumble, and left me tripping over the mess of the person I am becoming.

Since then, I've started an (un)healthy hoarding habit—candles, especially scented ones. I've also begun hoarding hobbies: writing, photography, painting, reading — name it. Maybe I took Sylvia Plath's "don't let your figs rot" too seriously, but the dismay of apathy frightens me far more than cleaning dried wax off a wooden desk. Well, the conclusion to the monologue is: even if the light is borrowed, even if it drips and stains, it is still light.

Alisha Nasim

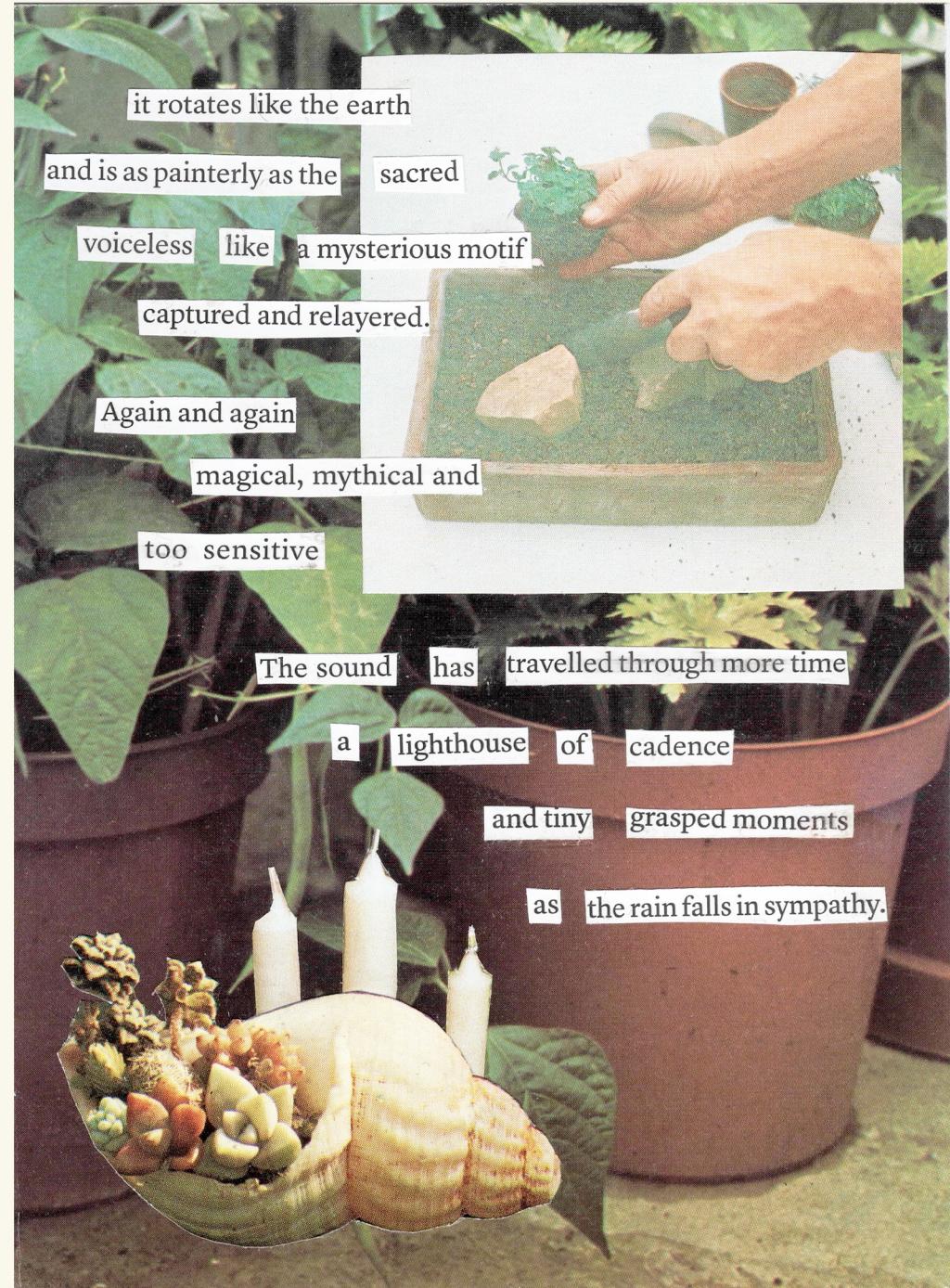


Carmen Ruiz

Xuwei Qiao



Lara Kester





Hara Kostopoulou

Carmen Ruiz

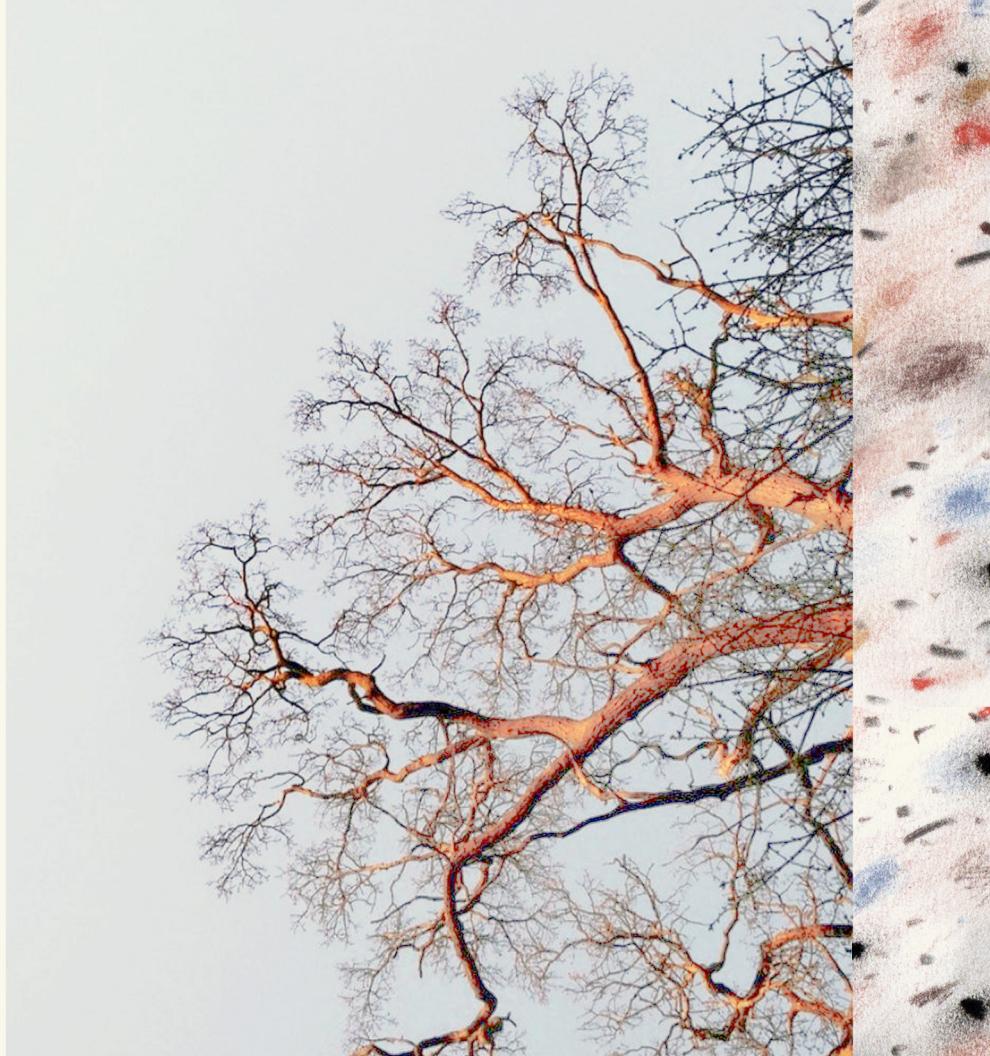


A study on light

light gets stuck in the late hours, river of flowing warmth, pooling around a sidewalk. it captures thousands of images per minute, camera flashing quietly, disturbed only by rain and the occasional step, ripples dancing with the light. ever-growing it migrates, from the traffic lights to those of the streetlamps, light flows through Bucharest as naturally as rivers do elsewhere, in a place that knows nothing of bruising violet light and furious tones of red. light pools around the ankles of weary corporate workers, slowing their hurried steps for a brilliant second, around the thin wrist of a teenager, struggling to light their cigarette, around the paws of a small, old dog, paddling about next to its owner. light gets stuck in the late hours, as thick as honey, dripping down beanpoles, old buildings facades, slithering quietly in all the in betweens, slivers of life and death. Bucharest is drowning in light, too much of it, the night skies as bright as the day, traffic red and taxi headlights sickly yellow and soft pink night light and pure white glow of hospital ceiling neons.

Lee Vandeleur





triptych for that someday

i. the drive / the sun / the sky's ever-blushing crimson
hand on my knee / sitting shotgun / windows wide.
and suddenly you know: the thousand pinkish sunsets
and all the stars in the sky
and you are *all you could've been.*
no need

to spin it

all

into a dream:

no waves crashing solemn,
no sunlight dancing upon,
no sand spilled on dirt in poetic perfection.
and yet, you are happy: wind / freeing your hair
knees / bruised in sand. and yet / you are.

"

ii. there is a crack somewhere
in my head / i'm convinced
it's where the tears end up / when they
roll in through my ears.
there is a hole in the middle /
of what should be a hill / they dug it up
in their tractors. there is hole in the middle /
of what should be my mind
filled with words unsaid / victories uncelebrated
ice creams melted / papers ripped / bridges burned
that i am never *all i could've been.*
and it

spins

all

into itself.

"

iii. the nod / the hold / the crackling of wood
glowing red / before fading / to ash.
do you think wood thanks the fire
for letting it glow for a moment
before it goes forever?

there is a tenderness
in living everything once
in letting it mingle in memory.
all we could've been.

no need

to spin it

all

into what doesn't need to be.
they tell me, someday you'll see it.

Ara Djati'



Felicity Zhang



Sophomore year, midwinter

midnight:
in the white noise,
the crt tv fingershock kind,
we drink in the heavy smell—
parking lot asphalt, churning exhaust,
giddy watermelon gum breaths—
and order the cheapest food we can
which we chew through bubbling laughter in the front seats
until small-ticking time ticks larger.
you are golden in the floodlight, you before you cut short your hair,
and I before I grew mine long am stark white in the glow of the order menu,
Heiress before my days of Aeropostale Peach and Daisy.
with our bare faces, we play dumb together,
fidgeting with our meal's toy, talking our throats raw,
smiling our cheeks tired. then
we two fools drive the speed limit in a four-walled storm,
our windshield an astigmatic constellation
of the stoplights ahead and floodlights behind.
when later I sink into my lofted twin bed,
though it is deep winter,
for the first time in a long while,
I feel like a little girl in a princess dress
exhausted from an endless summer day.

Sarah Watkins



Porshe Caina

A Blaze in the Night

He walks through the night
in hopes of finding salvation
between the blinking lights
of a 7-eleven and a liquor store.

Winter came quickly this year,
and the hole in his shoe, he can
no longer ignore. Cold wet hands
grip his socks and pull him down.

Down to the frozen ground
where college grads' dreams
go to die in the firm handshake
of a trickle-down-economy.

The TV in the shop window
plays an ad about the holidays,
happy people with full bellies
curled around a lit fireplace.

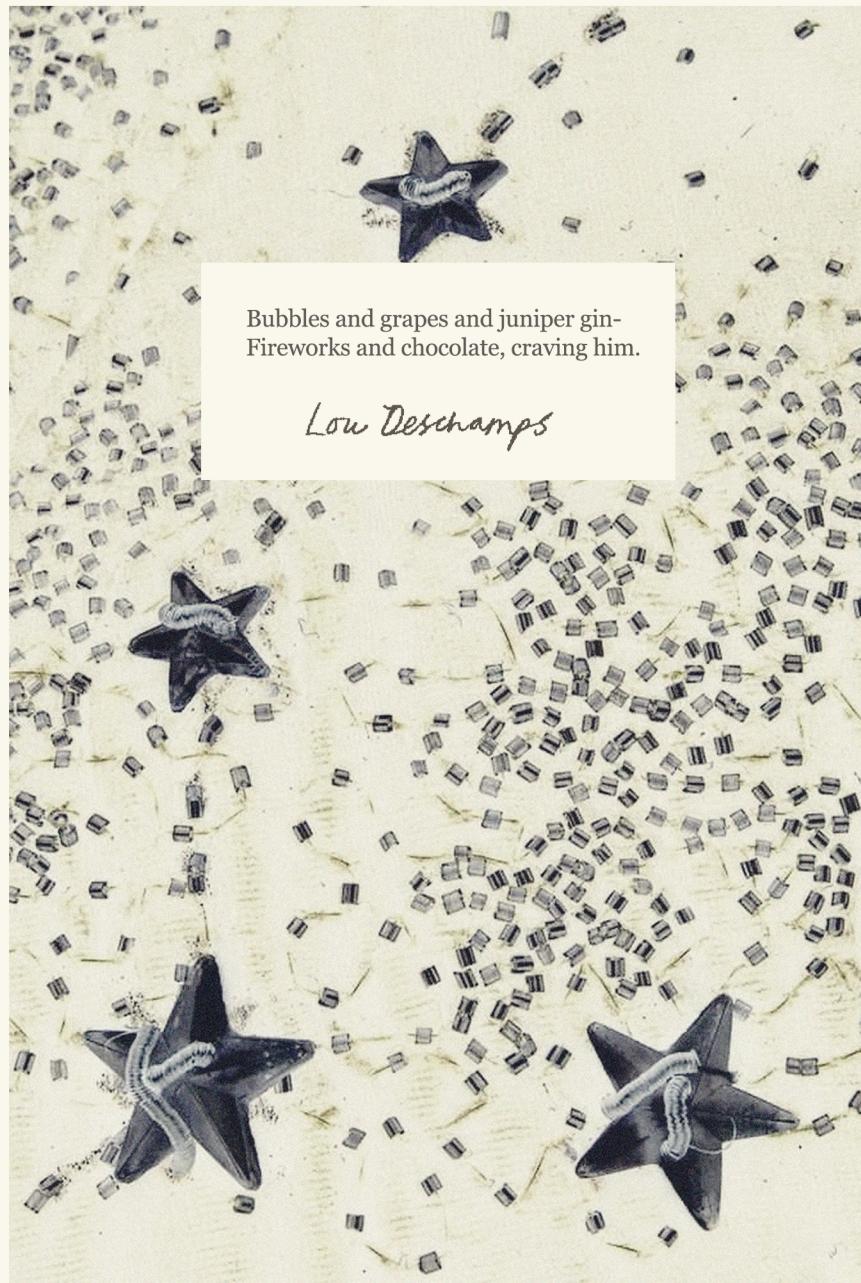
He watches the fire engulf
the log, longs to feel the heat,
to be consumed by the blaze
of a fundamental creative pursuit.

And his plea echoes: Oh, take me
by your hand, Prometheus,
let me shine as bright as you,
be immortalized in tales of awe.

For I cannot stand to be kept
small, smaller than what I have grown
to be in those sun-filled days
of youth's tender embrace.

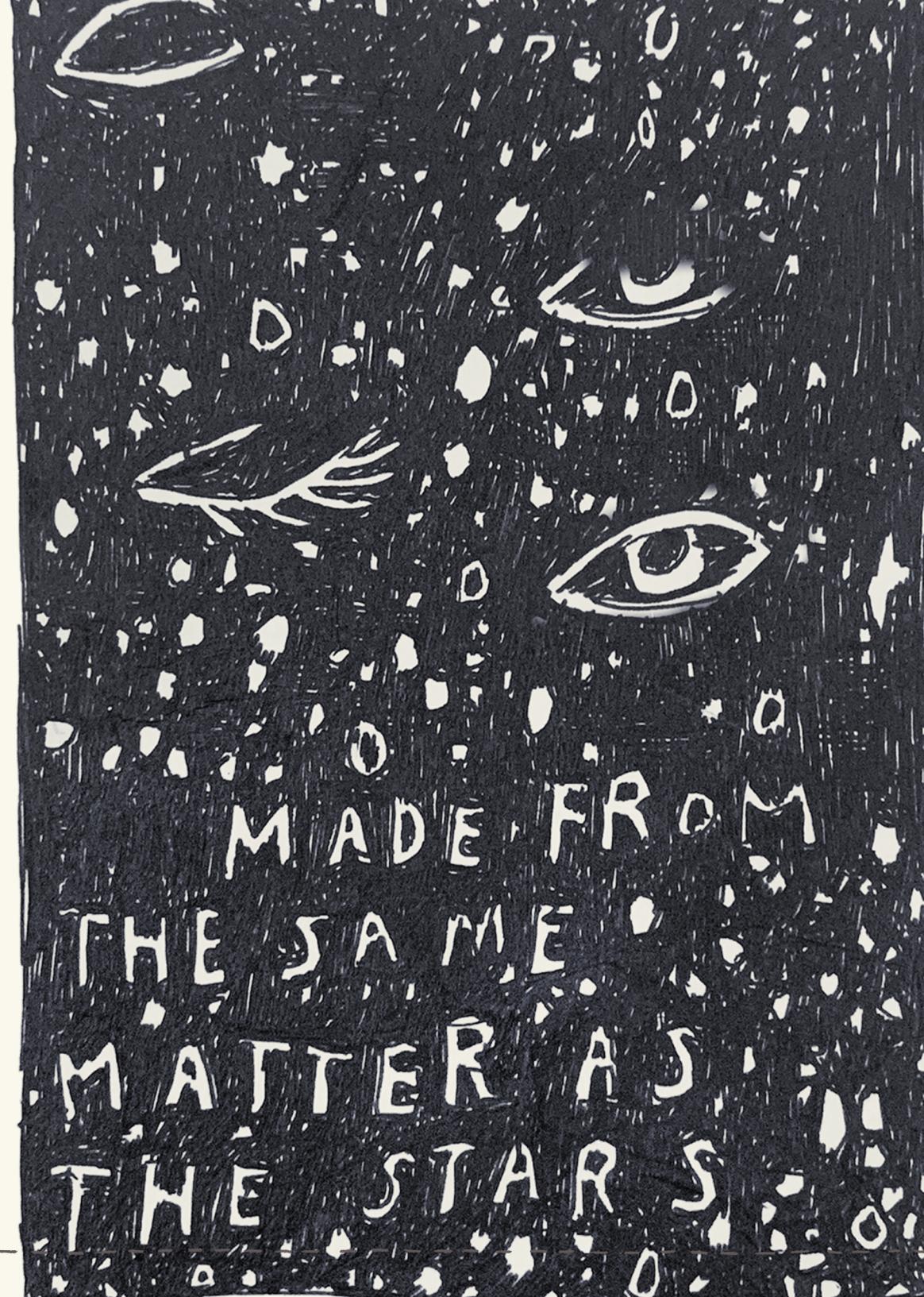
Shivering, his hand reaches for the fire,
a guiding light in this winter night,
the colors flicker, a new ad comes on,
replacing all bravado with bitterness.

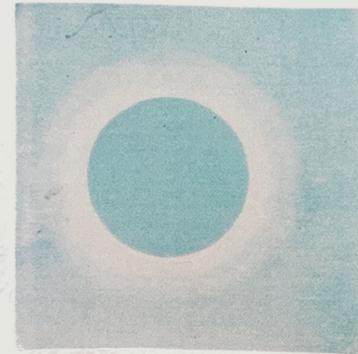
Alison Ehninger



Bubbles and grapes and juniper gin-
Fireworks and chocolate, craving him.

Lou Deschamps





Carmen Ruiz

Blue conversations

"I spy with my little tired eye..." I say into my flip phone, voice faltering, as I try to come up with something to say. "Come onn," I hear from the other side, slightly distorted from a weak cellular signal, "you need to be proactive to battle the post-Christmas blues" "I know, Marla," I whine out, "I just miss you, you know I hate being alone. Especially this time of year, the days between Christmas and New Years are always the hardest."

"I know you do," I hear her exhale yet another puff of cigarette smoke, as she stops me mid-sentence. She knows if I keep going another breakdown will ensue. "I'm with you in spirit...Now tell me what you see"

"There is a man playing some wind instrument," I force myself to say, staring into the window of one of my neighbours across the street.

"Oh, no, none of that, Lena" I hear her protest, "give me the details, the little things"

"There is an old Brezhnevka in front of me, 20 stories, maybe more. The blue hour light makes its unlit windows look like eyes that follow you, as you walk by. The musician man is on the third floor. He looks old..."

"How old does he look?"

"Maybe sixty, you know I am bad with age. He looks like his name would be Ove. Sometimes I hear him playing in the odd hours of the night. It used to bother me, you know, but with time I grew to enjoy it, especially with my insomnia." I hear her humming, as if

insomnia." I hear her humming, as if understanding, and opening a CD case. "I think he doesn't quite understand how good he actually is, that's why he practices so rigorously. He looks like a perfectionist."

"What about the window below?"

"There is a couple. I watch their window sometimes when I get bored. They're the type that can make you feel lonely, even if you are in the most loving relationship."

"So my love isn't enough?" she teases. "Tell me more, Lena."

"I've thought about who they are before. She seems like her name is Paula and his is Chris. I think she's an artist, because they have an atelier. He seems like a finance guy, the boring type, God knows what she saw in him. But when they are together", I trail off," it looks like a Hallmark movie. Watching them really makes me miss you, you know...especially when I know you won't be coming back for weeks because of your business trips."

"Tell me what they are doing now, love."

"He is tickling her, as she's taking a huge red ball off the tree. I can just see the whole thing falling down in mere seconds..."

"Lena, I'm really sorry someone is calling me on the other line. It might be important I'll call you back soon," she blurts out, the buzz of an ended call deafening me, the silence after even more so.

"Okay, I love you, Marla..."

Anna Chakarova



You Are My Sunshine

you are my sunshine
a song with a dark meaning
a song that quite doesn't fit here
because our love is not fleeting

you see, my sunshine is warm
she's kind
she's smart
she's a-z
1-infinity and everything in
between

my sunshine, she may be too
good for me
she may be too perfect
too lovely
too kind
for me to rightfully call her mine
but she says it's okay
so i continue anyway

my sunshine says she loves me
it's a strange thing to hear

when relationships up til now
have only been riddled with fear
a strange thing to know
that the person she loves is me
myself all on my own

my sunshine doesn't care
what's happened in my past

she wants to watch me grow
to watch our love last
she wants to hold my hand
and every time i cry
she wants to wipe my tears
before they even reach my eyes

there's nothing more to say
but there is more to feel
she makes me feel this way
and nothing has ever felt so real

my sunshine makes me smile
my sunshine makes me laugh
my sunshine wipes my eyes

anytime i cry

and though she's far away
i feel her all the same
i feel her warmth
her kind, loving embrace

a thousand miles is far
but love stretches further
she surpasses the bar
that i had set for my future
she makes me think im something
never that im nothing

for what more could i ask?
i already have it all
my sunshine, my sun shine
i love you most of all

Caroline Giboy



Anna Kisanova



Thank you ❤!!

Lara Kester Anna Chakarova
Nat San-So Lou Deschamps
Carmen Ruiz Hara Kostopoulou
Veronika Safarz Caroline Giboy
Shira Bar Alisha Nasim
Anna Kisanova Balkis Hmida
Bella Melardi Victoria Pontillo
Sarah Watkins Xufei Qiao
Claire Kroening Muskan Thakkar
Lee Vandeleur Lauren St. Aimee
Porshe Caina Serena Gezmer
Felicity Zhang Alison Ehninger
Ara Djati Divya Sanas
Maxwell O'Toole