

# XO 16

For those who dwell in the blur.

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## Queen & Queen an exchange between Empress Nur Jahan and courtesan Anarkali

Empress Nur Jahan was the wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, and is famed for her role in court politics during her husband's reign. Anarkali was a (perhaps fabled) dancer in the court of Jahangir's father and is famed for her tragic romance with the prince. Although prominent figures in the life of Jahangir, the paths of these two women never crossed. The following sequence draws them together and explores their lives and the paths they walked.

*nur jahan*      light of the world      born: 1577  
name at birth: mehr-un-nissa      one sentence  
description: the twentieth and last      wife  
of emperor jahangir, married 1611      one more  
sentence: the only empress to have a coin struck in  
her visage      another sentence: the scandal  
of being a widow the scandal      another      another  
another imperial court at her knees      divan empty  
of emperor      but there is light      in the palace

there is      light      the world's inception here  
lahore walled in      the memories      eyes closed

there is dust there is brick there is breath

-

*anarkali*      pomegranate blossom      born: ???  
name at birth: nadira begum or      sharf-un-nissa  
not that it's the name that matters but      the question

the question: who could have been a garden,  
octagonal      a saint's muse      (aside from  
the empress herself)      dancing girl      of  
lahore before the prince and all his wives  
the first lover left behind

the emperor caught a touch – no      a glance was  
all it took

if nur jahan was a scandal this  
illicit

& anarkali, made majnun between the brick walls  
the first bite of pomegranate at season's change  
splatter of blood on sandstone      small traces of self  
was it the emperor who loved her      or the city  
that did not forget?

1611            it's springtime            nowruz some time  
before the century's turn            time for the world  
to start anew

at the bazaar she meets                      the once-prince  
now-emperor                      so struck by the light exuding  
from her presence  
  
  (the embellishments of history  
an earlier meeting                      a long time of loving)

however and whenever that first meeting  
occurred now a public proposal, a swift  
wedding nights lit up in sequence

the emperor stumbles with poppy seed and  
distillations and nur jahan takes the stage the  
land the treasury

a garden blooms in sun      the world flocks to light

—

*unknown*      the only known the want for a tragic  
love story

speculate a meeting: anarkali in the throes of a twirl,  
braid flying, bells chiming                      our to-be-emperor  
slumped back, alert                      *what beauty! what beauty!*  
love at first sight plays its mechanisms                      (whose  
sight first)                      watch love, those sustained  
longing glances, the way one jerks the head ever so  
slightly                      to say, *join me behind the fourth pillar*  
*in the courtyard at midnight*                      it is a new moon  
tonight                      blow out all torches                      love is guiding  
light enough

(pause; the tender moment  
before love's tragic head rears)



*nur jahan goes hunting*                      all the strength to call  
an empire to heel                      four tigers, six bullets, an  
accuracy unmatched                      what couplets would  
form today what tests of strength                      what of  
the four tigers turned to pelts                      what ways of  
passing each long                      restless day with all this light

after sunset                      the sky still bright                      such little sleep  
all the flowers torn                      to reveal a naked stigma

-

*every day is a dance*                      anarkali takes the center  
in the palace of mirrors                      her lover behind her; in  
a glance                      a plan laid out                      half-moon nights  
are for the river                      water hides the mingling scents  
the clear view of all gardens from the upper balcony

how long till the inevitable crashes

on anarkali                      the hunter is not a dog but a father  
dishonoured and dishonor                      falls on the beloved  
not the lover

*anarkali!*

*anarkali!*

the walls still echo her name

*tomb of nur jahan: shahdara bagh, lahore*

the way of kings                      archway to the empress

after rain the plains soft with dew and the footprints  
of late washed clean              the tomb plundered of all  
the stones                      all the marble              stripped bare

but the body remains              still elevated

honeycombed ceiling drips              a sweet afterlife no  
sound from a body that rests easy              her daughter  
by her side sharing                      the garden's curvature

the caretakers pause beneath the arches

-

*tomb of anarkali: south-west of the walled city of  
lahore*

*"Ah! could I behold the face  
of my beloved once more, I would give  
thanks unto my God  
until the day of resurrection."  
— Emperor Jahangir*

so do lovers today lay down under moonlight in the  
gardens of anarkali                      whether the tomb once  
housed              a body at all              or the soul lifted the  
body out of enclosure              the cenotaph whispers a  
song              not a single splash of colour except for the  
yellow of age

from tomb to church to archive                      story carries  
architecture              carries history

a heavy love lost amongst the brick              break slabs  
against tomb's concrete and maybe

some trapped voice of soul flies out

the sheer luminescence of jahangir's tomb

watch the long shadows at midday

spectre of emperor

lingering

those jewel tones, long

passageways meandering to nothing

time has always been short                      time to lift up  
skirts and run                      bells jingling around the ankles  
are a map                      if someone listens                      close enough



the empress's fruit knife        jade handle        hilt  
studded ruby    know all the colours each    precious  
moment holds

*squawk squawk*        hear the parrot in the empty  
garden late at night

scandal makes itself        the worst is already done a  
first marriage        a first husband long gone

sit under the tree in late summer breeze        hold  
the mango    its pit slides out of hand        not only  
honoured with a coin struck in her name but a mango  
famous for sweetness and heft

nur Jahan        the world's light        sitting in the  
orchard        she blooms

-

pomegranate        the fruit that needs the fingers dug  
in        unafraid of ink and stain        a seed could fly  
out and redden the tile        not be found for centuries  
after        a fruit that could have a longer legacy than  
any pelt or trophy

each pomegranate seed jewels against the tongue

and how we love our love stories    the woman with  
a bazaar to her name        how we love the defiance  
of son to father-king as if we

unwind ourselves from who we are        our bells  
wrapped in chunri        buried beneath the palm at  
the south-west palace entrance every night

how white marble's opposite        was always  
pomegranate

as if consuming love would satiate

nurmahali dress      with its embossments sweeping  
across the floor

                                 she sat      embroidery in hand  
silver and lace and flowers spread in mountains  
around                      see those gold flowers swirled  
everywhere

-

anarkali kameez              like wearing water from the  
river              flowing skirts  
sweeping across the floor

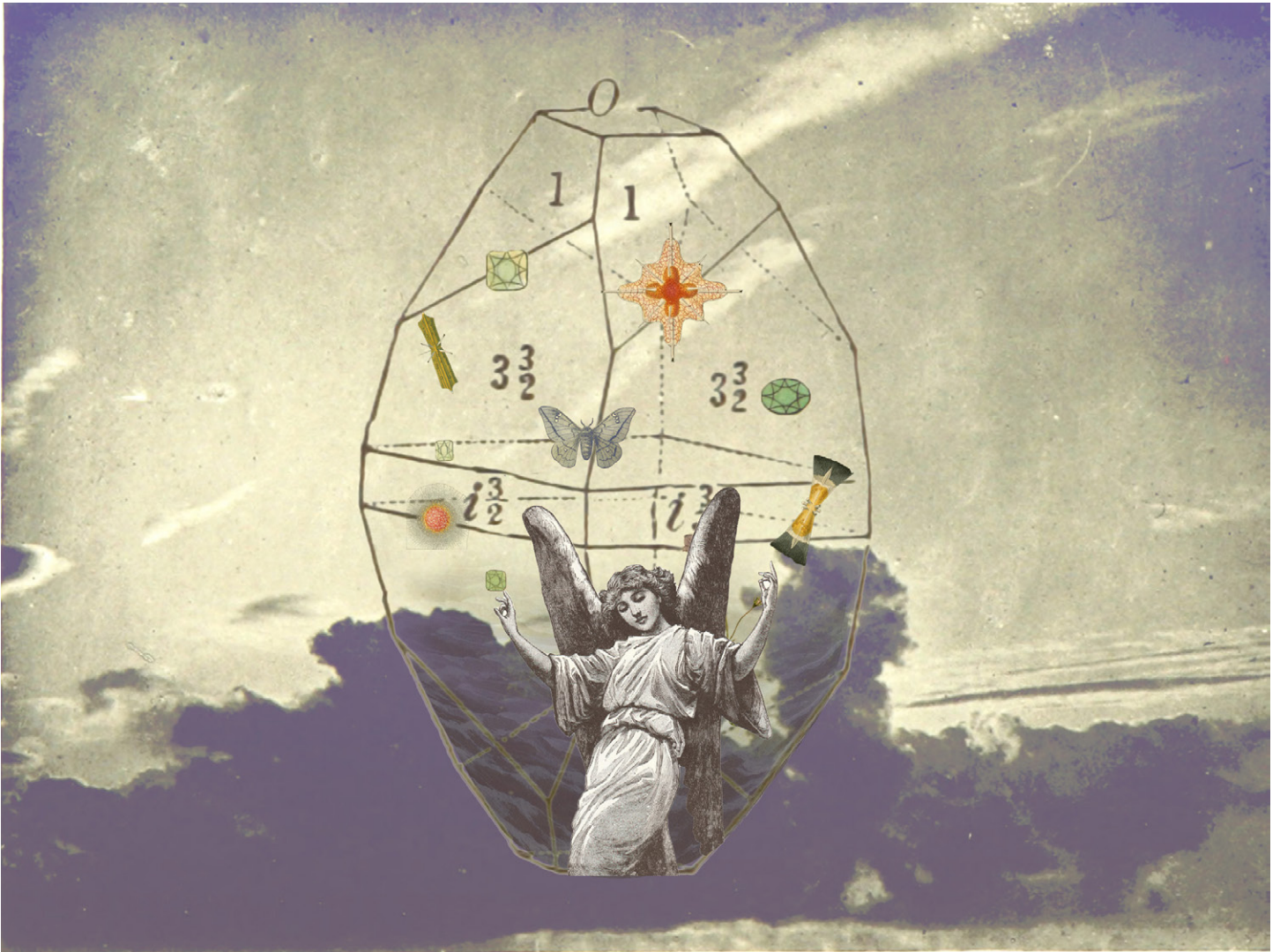
the mirrored hall  
                         reflects a *swoosh*, soft movement  
   such gentle kisses

scrunch up the pleated pants  
even more,                      lover kisses ankle

reminisce the times by the fountain at night

                         water trickling                      background  
strumming

                         play a song and watch  
                         the dress folds dance too



















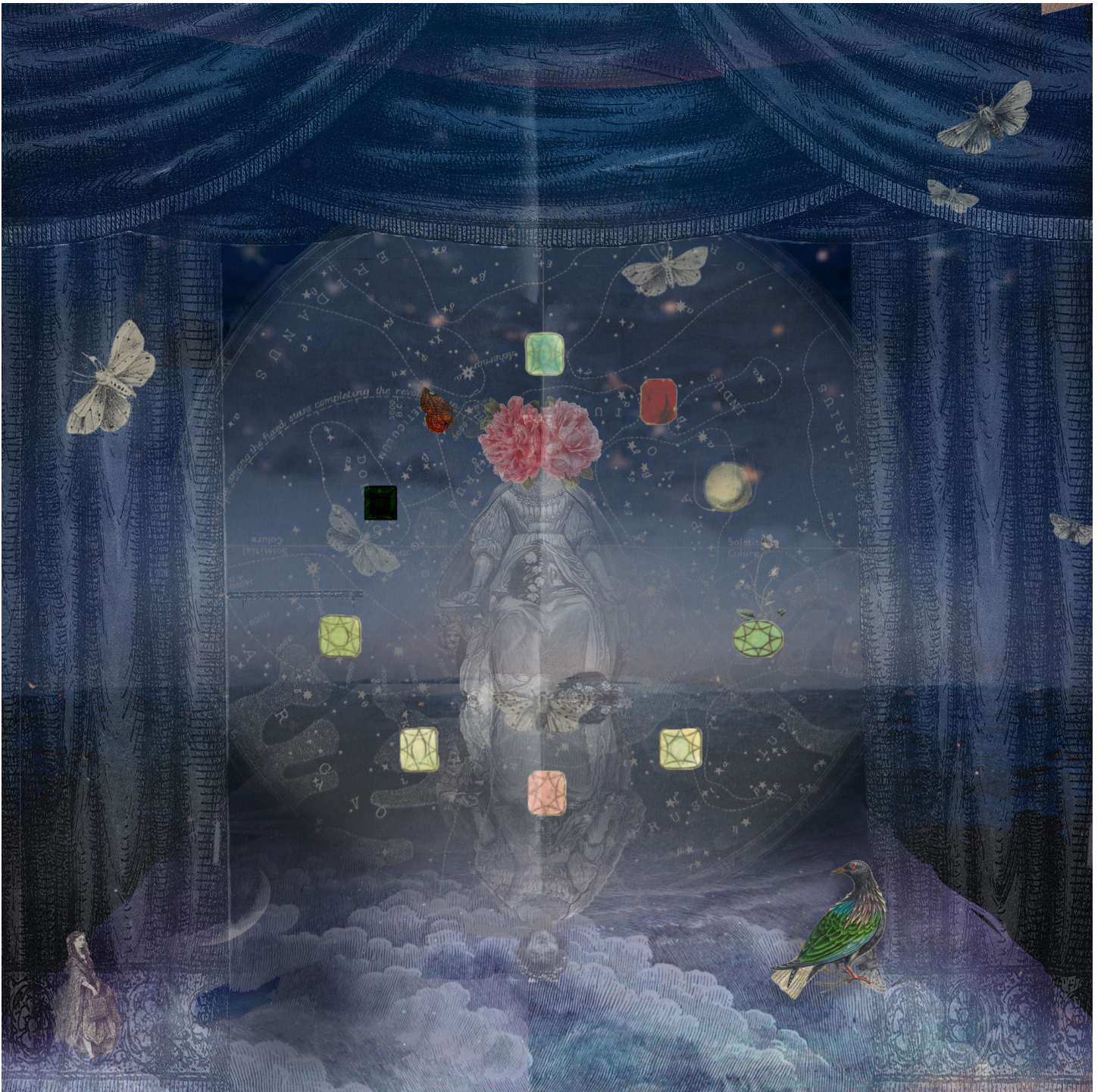














*After the films "Dwightiana" by Marie Menken, "All My Life" by Bruce Baillie, "Ghost Algebra" by Janie Geiser, and Jan Filarski's watercolour "Satellites"*

i.

Stuck in the doorframe were twelve nails. Twelve nails, rising out of the floor. In Rab's dreams, they were a forest. They lengthened and lengthened until they were huge metal pines. While he practiced beadwork with the other kids, he thought of those nails. They were finger-slim, heads like flattened skulls. In the afternoon, shadows squiggled down them. The beads didn't fit right with his hands—they ran away like insects. But the nails, the nails were always there.

ii.

When Rab was left alone, he thought about home. He thought about the long wooden fence at the back of the field. It was like teeth—mismatched, rotten, crooked teeth. In some places, the teeth were coated over with the plump red tongue of the rosebush. The fence was so long it must have come from someone with a very wide mouth. Someone who had to floss with power lines.

iii.

At the centre he knew a girl who liked circles. Mostly, she liked eyes. She liked the black beads that make eyes for birds. She was going to collect crows' eyes to make a necklace. Rab liked her because she said what she thought, even if she didn't mean it. In the playground, they pretended to be pterodactyls. Their toes crusted with red mud like they were bleeding or like they had pinched their skin very hard.

iv.

On the centre's bulletin board, the staff pinned photographs of the children. Rab enjoyed counting their heads. In some pictures, the kids were with their parents. The mothers had thick, red lips. Their lips dripped into their chins. Their chins were basins, baptismal fonts, flowing full with lipstick.

v.

He often told the girl about the long fence at home. He told her how he hated the wire fence around the centre. He told her that back home, the lines on his window sliced the world up into squares. Back home, he diced the road, diced the trees, diced the cars and the cats into rectangular strips. When they came inside, they both hopped over the nails in the doorframe.

vi.

Rab dreamed of big metal trees. They rose and arrowed and angled into prisms. Then, he was lost in a city of them. Their shadows furrowed over him until they covered the sky.

vii.

The girl knew about satellites. She said she could see them up in the sky when she lay on her back. The red mud left thumbprints on her shirt. They were small black dots, she said—the satellites. You had to squint to spot them against the sky. They listened to everything you said. Even your secrets, she said. Rab started crossing himself when he stepped over the nails in the doorframe.

viii.

For Christmas, they sat all the children down and had them make paper snowflakes. The papers were thin as eyelids. The girl poked holes into her paper, holes the shape of satellites. Some of the kids made skulls, or hearts with tubes on them. Rab made twelve slits in his red paper and lied about it. He said it was a fence. It went on the bulletin board.

ix.

Often, Rab dreamed of the nails in the doorframe. In his dreams, he was a pincushion. A nail for each knuckle and two more, one for each shoulder blade. When he was awake, he knelt in front of his paper snowflake and prayed that a mother with luscious lips would take him back behind the long wooden fence. The sky was too big here. It had no lines.

x.

One day, the girl wore lipstick. She made a necklace of black beads in arts & crafts and claimed they were crows' eyeballs. She didn't cross herself when she went over the nails.

xi.

At the centre, one of the kids thought he could peel his veins out of his arms and knot them into a rope. He said he would feed it through his window and climb into the night. The others argued it wouldn't hold his weight. Rab wondered how he planned on getting over the wire fence.

xii.

The nails were skyscrapers in a city. Their heads were so wide and flat they fried the sunlight into scrambled eggs, but at the bottom, they tapered into threads. When the wind blew, the flimsy points wavered and squirmed. Red mud oozed down their metal necks. In the morning it was lipstick. At night it was a different thing.

xiii.

A carpenter was called in to tear out the old doorframe. The new one was smooth and cone-white and had no nails sticking out of it, not one. Rab layered his feet over the flat doorway and looked out. He looked through the holes in the wire fence. He looked and his tongue flushed over his teeth and he smiled with red lips. An enormous mouth.

*After the films "Lights" by Marie Menken, "Carol" by Ed Emshwiller, and "A Phantasy in Colors" by Norman McLaren*

i.

Glad had never forgotten the temples with coloured domes. She remembered them in the dark, those glowing beetles' shells. Even now, she imagined sleeping under them, sleeping away the black. They had smelled of smoke and something heavy. They were beautiful, she told her sister Opal. Don't you remember? Opal told her to go to sleep. Her face was a white worm.

ii.

In the mornings, Glad woke up in a cave. The walls were cragged with holes, lines. She fetched water every morning. Along the path slept creatures with fur or tails. In the mornings, pieces of sun crawled on the ground. She tried not to step on them, because they squelched. Glad smelled nothing in the cave, only dirt. Heard only the dripping of water. At night, the cave was blue. Blue wasn't a colour.

iii.

The shapes Opal drew were simple. River, centipede, house, bridge. They were long thin lines on paper. Glad drew no shapes, but if she could, she would have drawn the temples. The seams of glass like spines. And the domes red, white, pink. She would've drawn stars—long arms with skinny hands. That's what she remembered—Opal remembered only white in the dark.

iv.

Firewood was also Glad's job, one she did in the afternoons. It was bulky in her hands and made her shoulders buzz. The sap plastered her fingers. She streaked them along her thigh, or along the doorknobs of her vertebrae.

v.

The water came from a little neuron of a creek. The synapses were clots of black mud, the kind that heels your feet in stone. Over the hill, Glad knew another family, a couple who saw colours in sounds. Algae webbed on the surface on the water, a huge green spider with a million slender legs.

vi.

When she couldn't sleep, Glad imagined that the dripping of water in the cave was the rock bleeding. She imagined that the cave was a chamber in a big stone heart—the left ventricle, perhaps. But somewhere there was a leak.

vii.

Glad had never carried water or firewood when she was beneath the coloured domes. Her arms were loose then. When the sun shone through the domes, the air, too, became suffused with colour. It was like being inside a teapot. There were six temples and six domes, Glad thought—but she could never be sure of the colours.



viii.

On holidays, Glad and Opal received cards. They were sent by people Glad knew, but she was sure they didn't know her. Maybe her hair and her eyes and the width of her fingers, but they didn't know colours. According to the couple over the hill, her voice was the same colour as pear meat. White but softened by yellow and green.

ix.

Lying in the dark, Glad changed her mind about the cave. It wasn't a ventricle. It was a crease in a brain. The dripping might be spinal fluid. It sounded pale. Or dark, footsteps on linoleum. White lab coats and wheels. In the temples with coloured domes, there were birds in the rafters. They flew: thoughts. The floors were rivers of colour, the domes glass scalps.

x.

When they were lonely, Opal taught Glad the shapes. She had to learn them, Opal explained, in case she ever went back. But the shapes had meaning, and the meaning bled through the page so it couldn't be read, and the pencil gnawed fingertips. So Opal couldn't tell her what they meant. River, centipede, house, bridge. Hand. Eye.

xi.

The creek panted, a fissure in the wind. The fish gleamed as insects, with silver gauze between their exoskeletons.

xii.

In the temples with coloured domes, air slumped with the weight of smoke. Smoke sweet and luxurious and sinewed like honey. Glad had to walk slowly and she was always dragging something. Maybe Opal. Maybe nobody. Something stuck to her arm, something she held onto, an extraneous vein feeding into her internal ones. The coloured domes were so high above her: pink, red, orange, teal, purple, yellow, copper, water-surface-green. Glad had to walk slowly but she wasn't alone.

xiii.

At the back of the cave, Glad discovered a crevice. A thin stream of coloured paint dribbled out. This was the dripping sound. It kissed her fingers with its wetness and it pooled on the floor and ran down the cavestone in sweaty rivulets. Glad thought she might paint something. The ceiling. Her body.

I want two crescent moons on my chest  
loose fitting t shirts and swim trunks and bare flesh.  
stitches like kisses,  
pink lipstick stains across my skin.

I want scars that are joyful  
to keep close to my heart, keep happily,  
press my fingers to fondly in celebration.  
in desire. in worship.

I want to give away binders  
stretched out,  
impressions of a space I used to fill.  
a shapeshifter all this time in the making.

I want to love my body for what it once was  
nostalgic with acceptance,  
and to surely, deeply love it for what it can be.

I see the shapes this body can take  
and I want to write them into existence,  
be my own queer futurity,  
create my own utopia out of flesh and fat.  
an altar atop my chest.

let me dream those crescent moons.  
let me not be burdened anymore.

*I want top surgery originally appeared in Antilang Magazine (now defunct).*

### Harvest Moon is Finally Gay and I Finally Get the Girl

I used to play harvest moon in my basement and  
Imagine the things the characters couldn't say.  
We were friends, beyond the social systems and the accumulation of hearts  
We were more, stolen moments behind the barn  
Two digital femme figures, touch just out of reach  
She would say "oh wow! you're giving this to me?"  
It would mean "you're the only one who understands."  
Behind the screen of a CRT, there's a girl. There's a whole world inside.  
But there's always code in the way.  
I marry the craftsman,  
for the achievement and the loneliness of an empty farmhouse.

In the intervening years, there are other games, other loves  
But none are quite the same.  
A farming simulator is one hell of a first heartbreak.  
When we meet again, it's a 300 hour slow-burn  
I am so very different now. My avatar has changed its shape and  
There is so much to re-discover about one another.  
But I know what I want and the world has opened up to let me have it  
A wedding in town square, a pixelated heart above our heads  
Two digital figures that fit perfectly together.

*Harvest Moon is Finally Gay and I Finally Get the Girl originally appeared in The Winnow's pop culture issue.*

game-making, game-breaking  
banging against virtual walls with virtual fists  
with enough modification  
this game/body/world can be something else  
add sex to Skyrim  
put Master Chief in Smash  
program yourself a new shape, too  
re-skin, update,  
rewriting code is the easiest form of sex reassignment surgery  
and the Nexus Mods clinic is free



no one but me has touched my body in months.  
this is the way to keep safe  
myself, my lovers, my beloveds.  
if I want the community I'm so desperate for  
to survive.

touch is poison, is disease, is violence,  
but so is isolation.  
a zoom call is not comparable to a kiss,  
a text can't fuck me or  
god forbid, touch me in some gentle way.

bodies fall apart in the wake of violence and  
virus, of disconnect  
and distance.  
the weather is getting colder;  
how much longer before  
the chill settles in your bones?

relationships end over the phone.  
i am not the only one to have lost the hands that  
held me sweetly,  
some more permanently than others.

bodies crave justice  
as surely as they hunger.  
what is it like to only leave the house to march?

Rules for a body stuck between a rock and a hard place.

1) **Don't talk about gender, even when you REALLY want to talk about gender.** I get it; you think your gender is pretty neat. That it is electric, is fascinating, is probably what it feels like to shoot straight dopamine into your veins, is better-than-but-also-sometimes-an-impediment-to-having-sex. You think your gender fucking rocks. So do your trans friends, so do the blue-haired androgynes on public transit, so do I. I really, really do. But cis people don't.

2) **You have to talk about gender, even when you REALLY don't want to.** Cis folks have a lot of questions. About your gender, your body, your (and here is when they'll look a little bit embarrassed, maybe even point to your junk) ... parts. Prepare notes ahead of time like this is a school presentation. Every interaction has a mandatory Q&A.

3) **Not all trans-to-trans advice is sage wisdom.** Sometimes it's just bad advice.

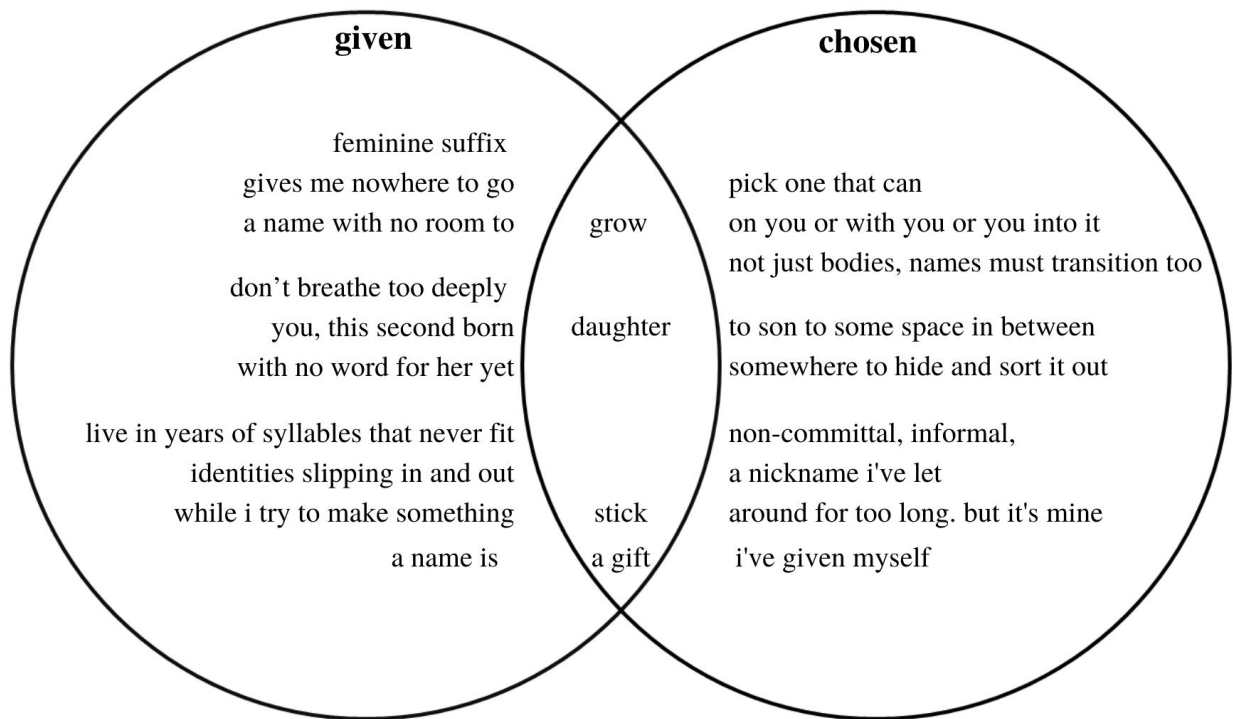
4) **Clothes are important.** They're tools of survival. They're borderline divine. Getting dressed should take you AT LEAST 45 minutes so you can: change your shirt thrice; experiment with a French tuck; cuff and un-cuff and re-cuff your jeans; shift your boobs around your binder until you're flat-ish. You will always be late, but you'll look ethereal, ungenderable, and hot as hell itself.

5) **If you change your name, choose one of the following:**

- a. A reclaimed nickname.
- b. A type of plant.
- c. A character from your favourite video game.
- d. Any 1 syllable noun.
- e. An obscure enough reference to a book.
- f. Something astrological.
- g. None of the above.

6) **There are no more rules.** Survive. Run away from your shitty hometown. Set a cop car on fire. Bake your own bread. Start a lesbian commune. Work on your drag persona. Learn calligraphy. Shoplift from Walmart. Contribute to a community garden. Help an artist make rent. Fall in love with yourself. Live.





*a cento*

I want to change my reality / to install software other than what the manufacturer has made available / when I say I don't want to be human what I really mean is / the transsexual body is an unnatural body / jailbreaking allows the device owner to gain full access to the root of the operating system / it is the product of medical science. it is a technological construction / the process of exploiting the flaws of a locked-down electronic device / what I really mean is I can't stand being human like this / saying body is reality. I want to change my reality / freeing users from the jail of limitations that are perceived to exist / flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born / that means I have to change my body / it's actually really easy to hack your nintendo ds

Aevee Bee and Max Schwartz, *Heaven Will Be Mine* (2018)

David Cronenberg in an interview with *Vulture* about his film *Crimes of the Future* (2022)

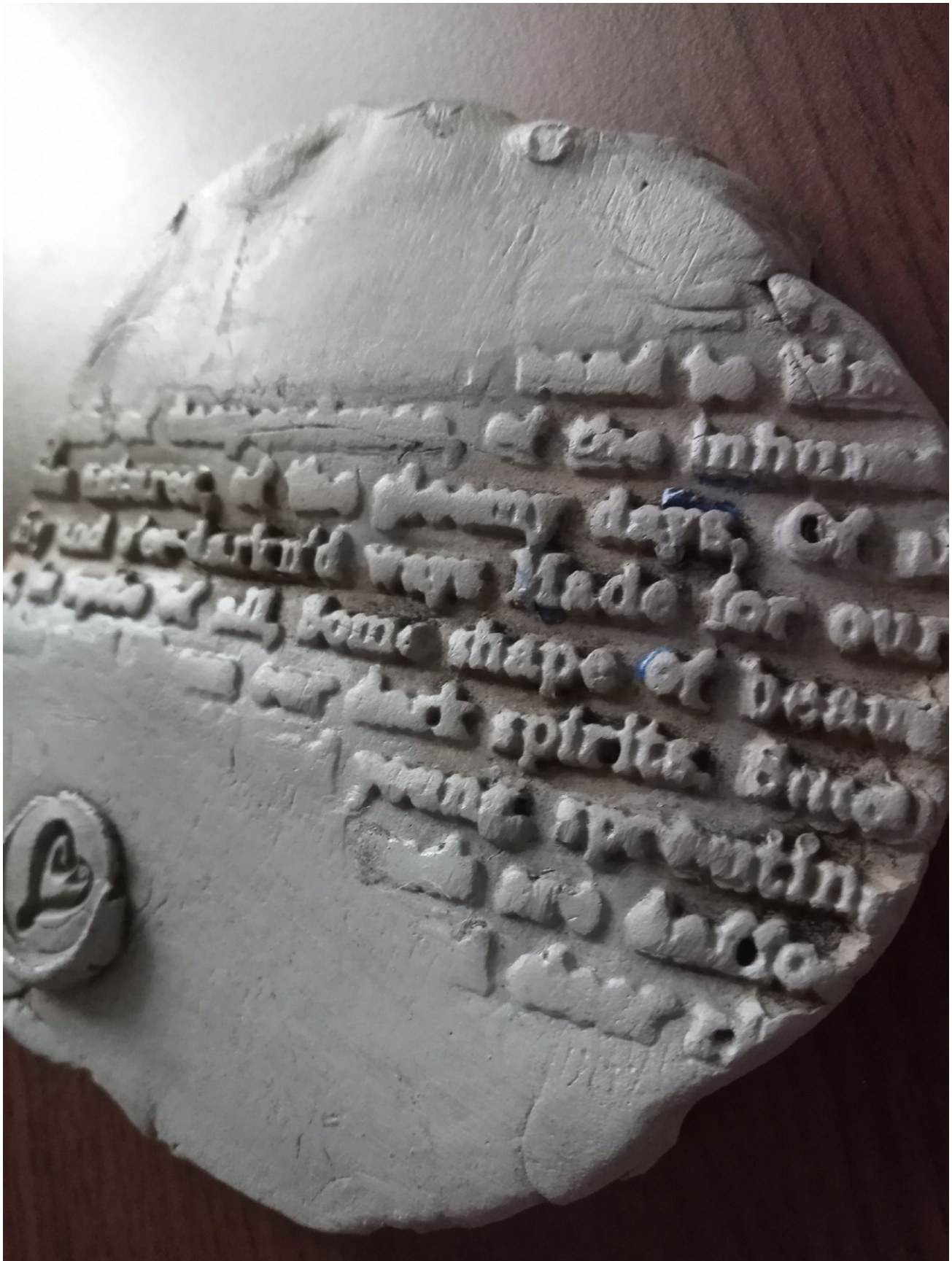
Kaspersky Cybersecurity, *What Is Jailbreaking?*

Susan Stryker, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix* (1994)

"it's actually really easy to hack your nintendo ds" is a meme phrase that has gained popularity with the recent closing of the nintendo e-shop for the 3ds and wii u and the loss of any legitimate way to purchase new copies of a huge amount of nintendo's game catalogue. hacking nintendo ds and 3ds systems is the easiest way to access these games that are now out of production. it is a meme as much as it is a fact, and the popularity of the phrase is an act of resistance to the profit-driven lack of legal game preservation. it's really easy and you should do it.

*it's actually really easy to hack your nintendo ds originally appeared in Sprawl Magazine.*





























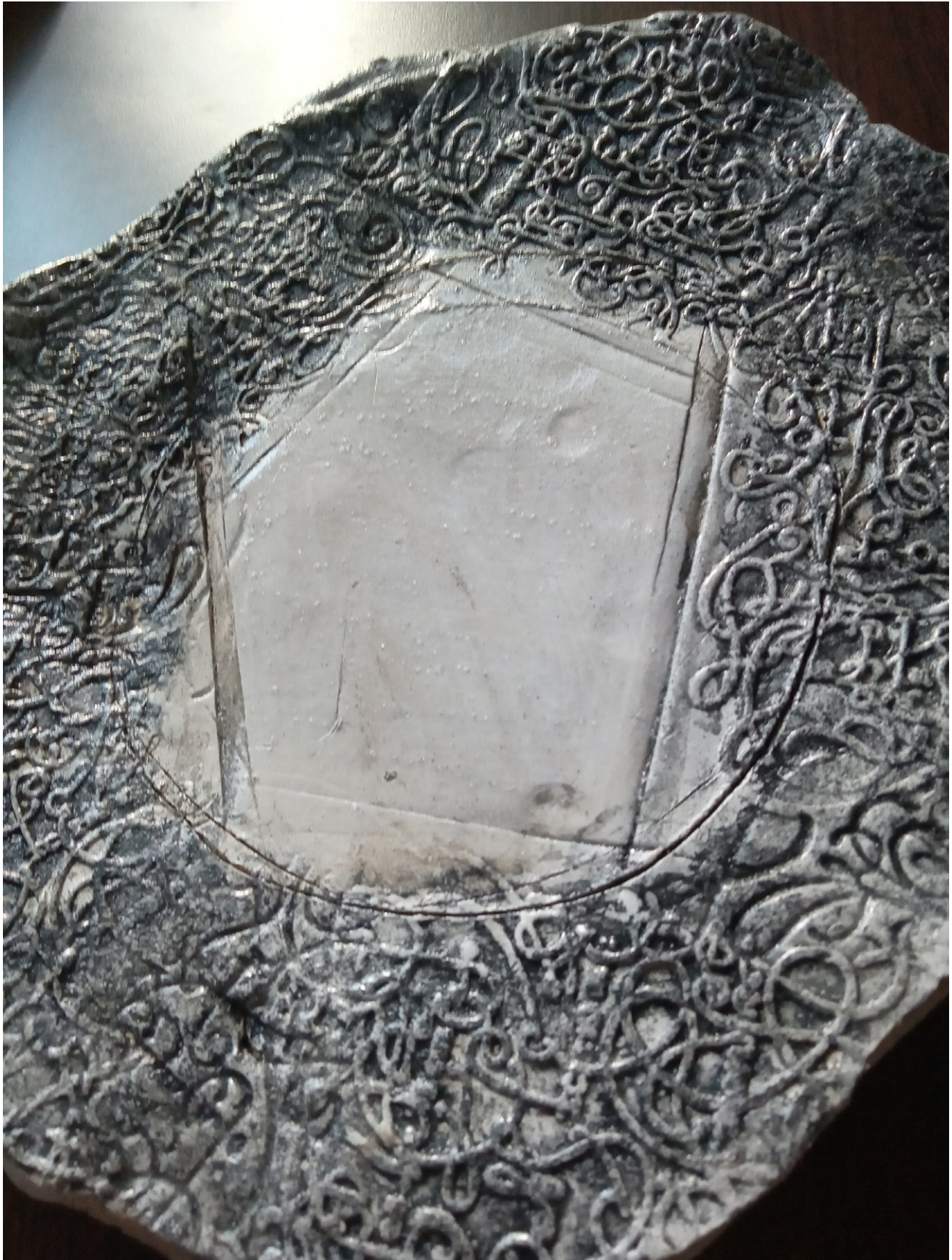












































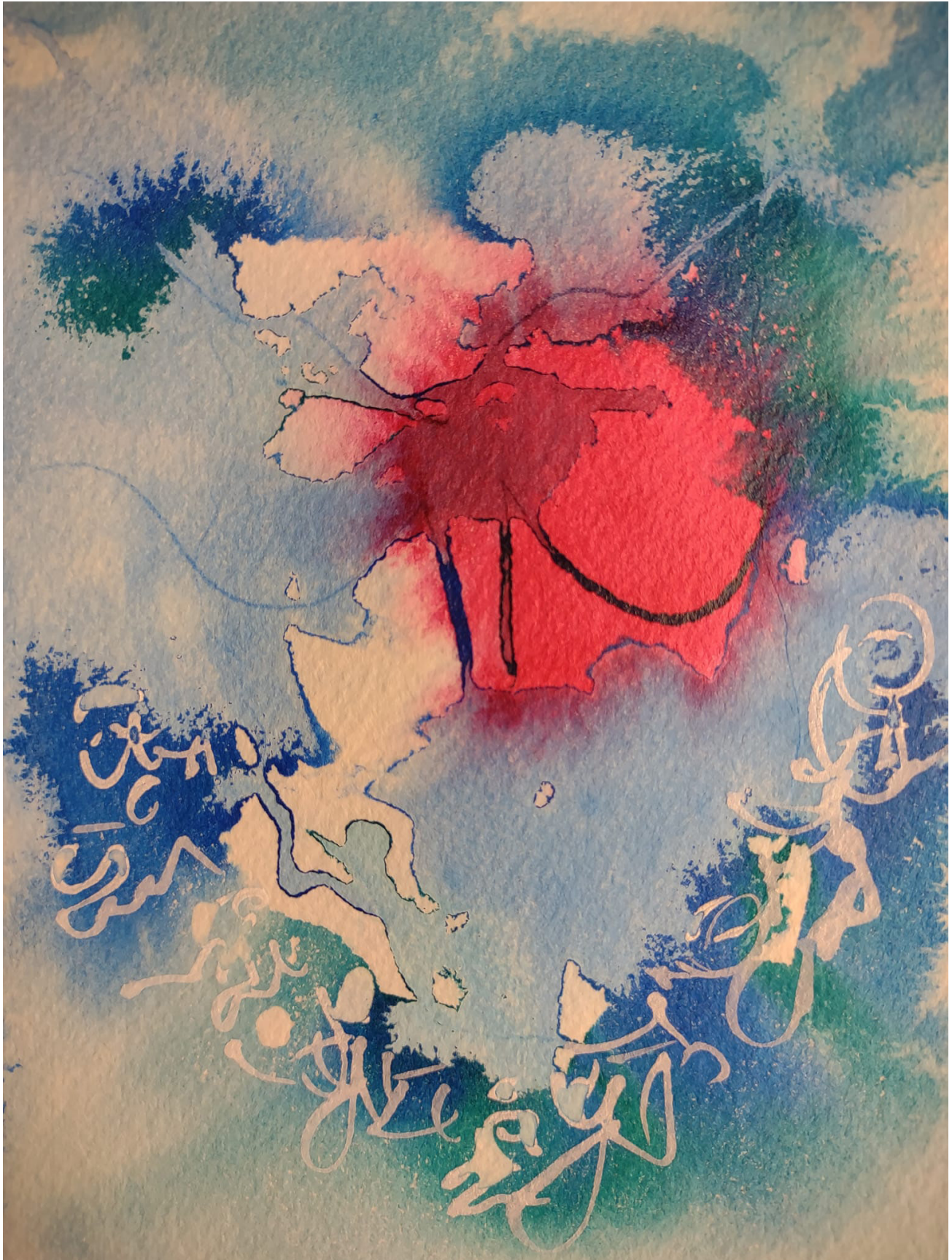




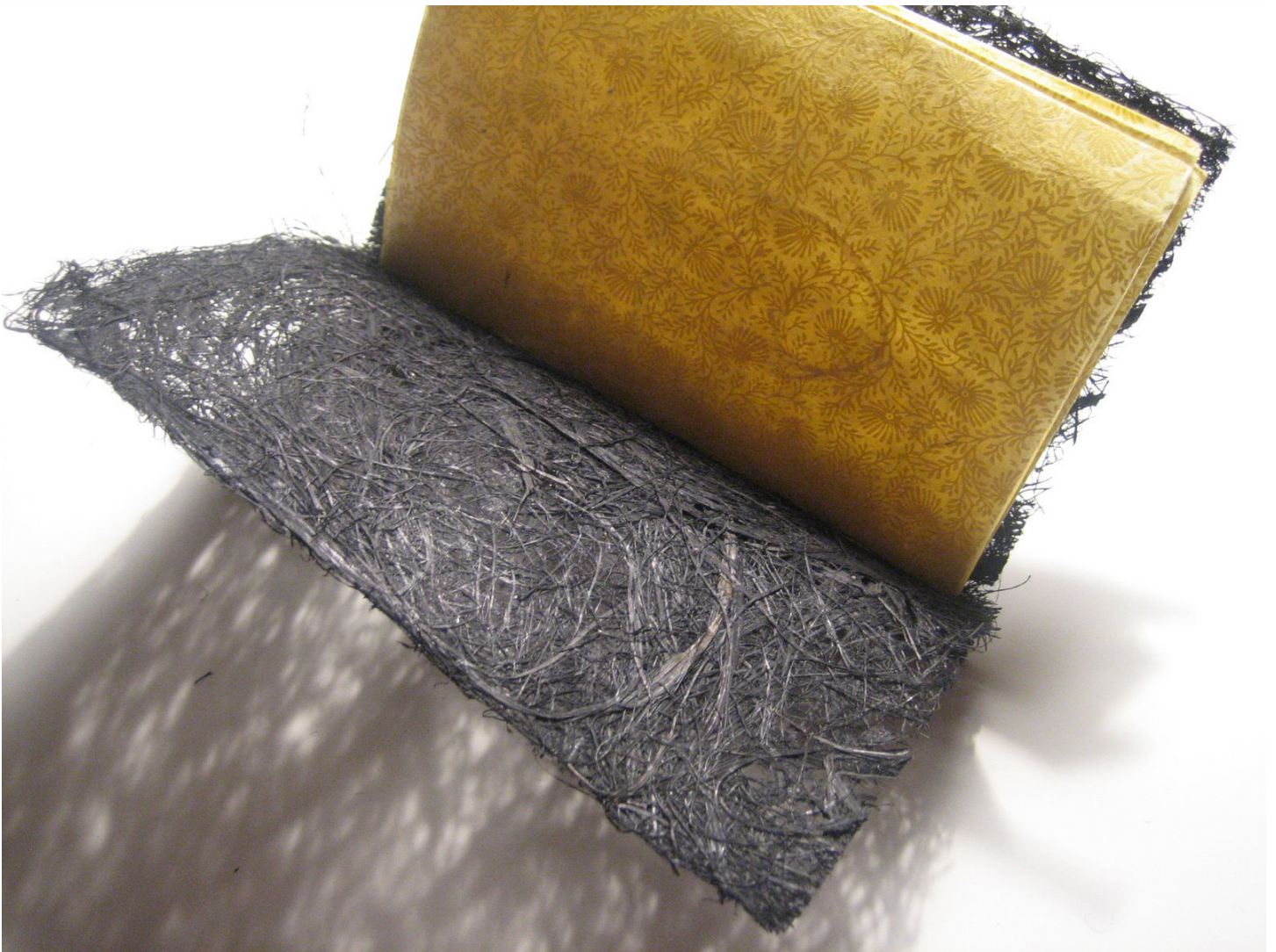




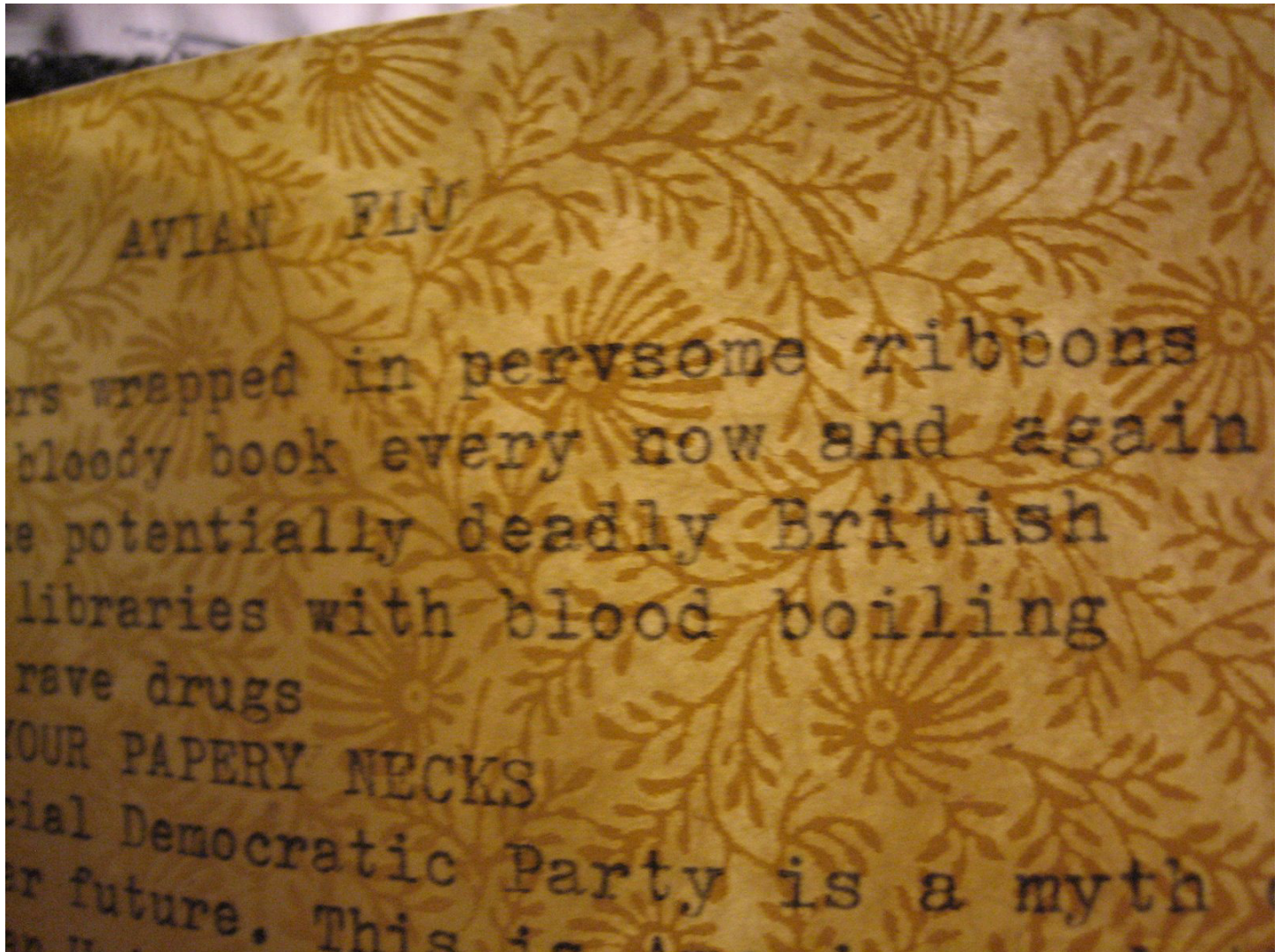




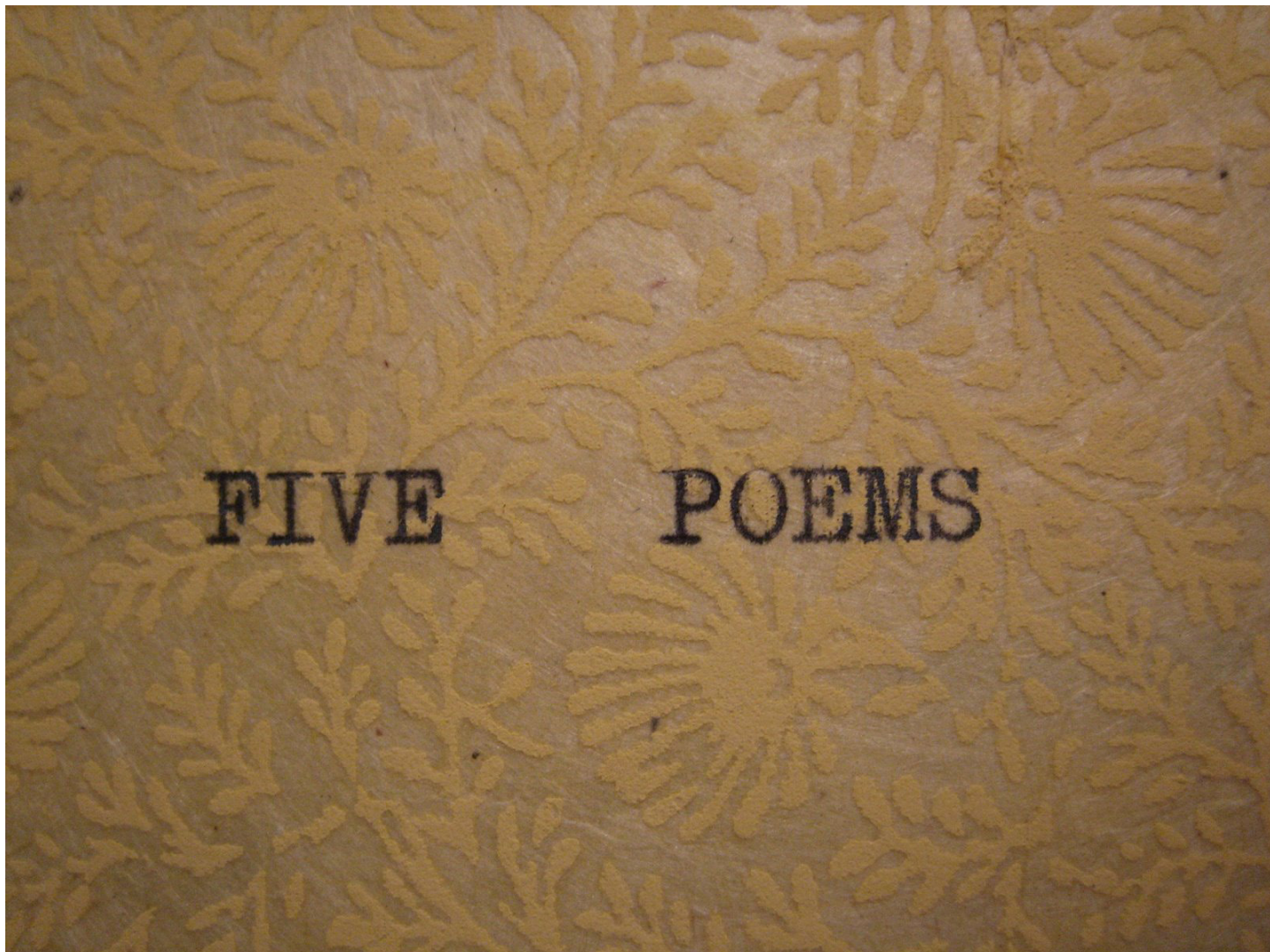






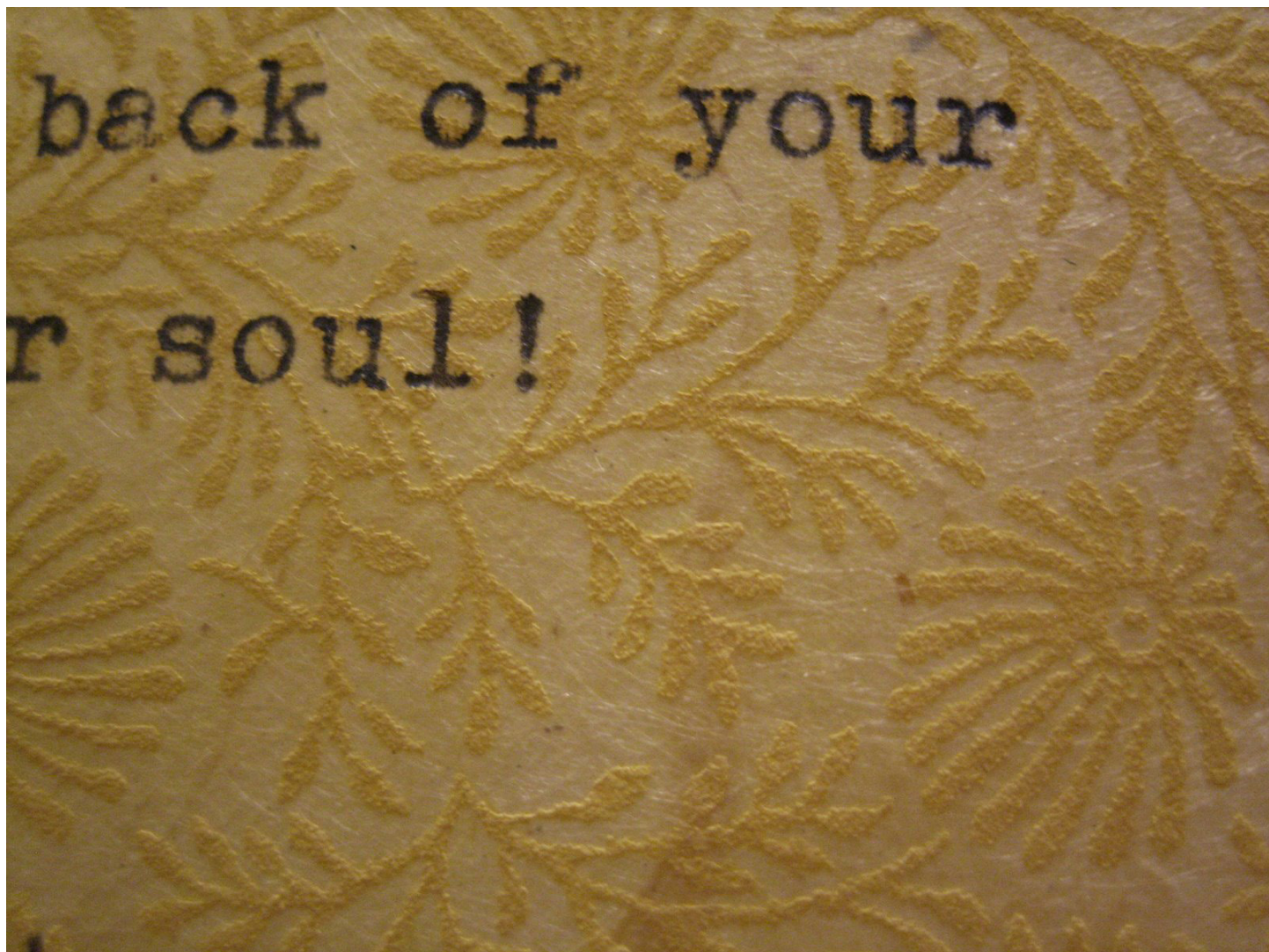








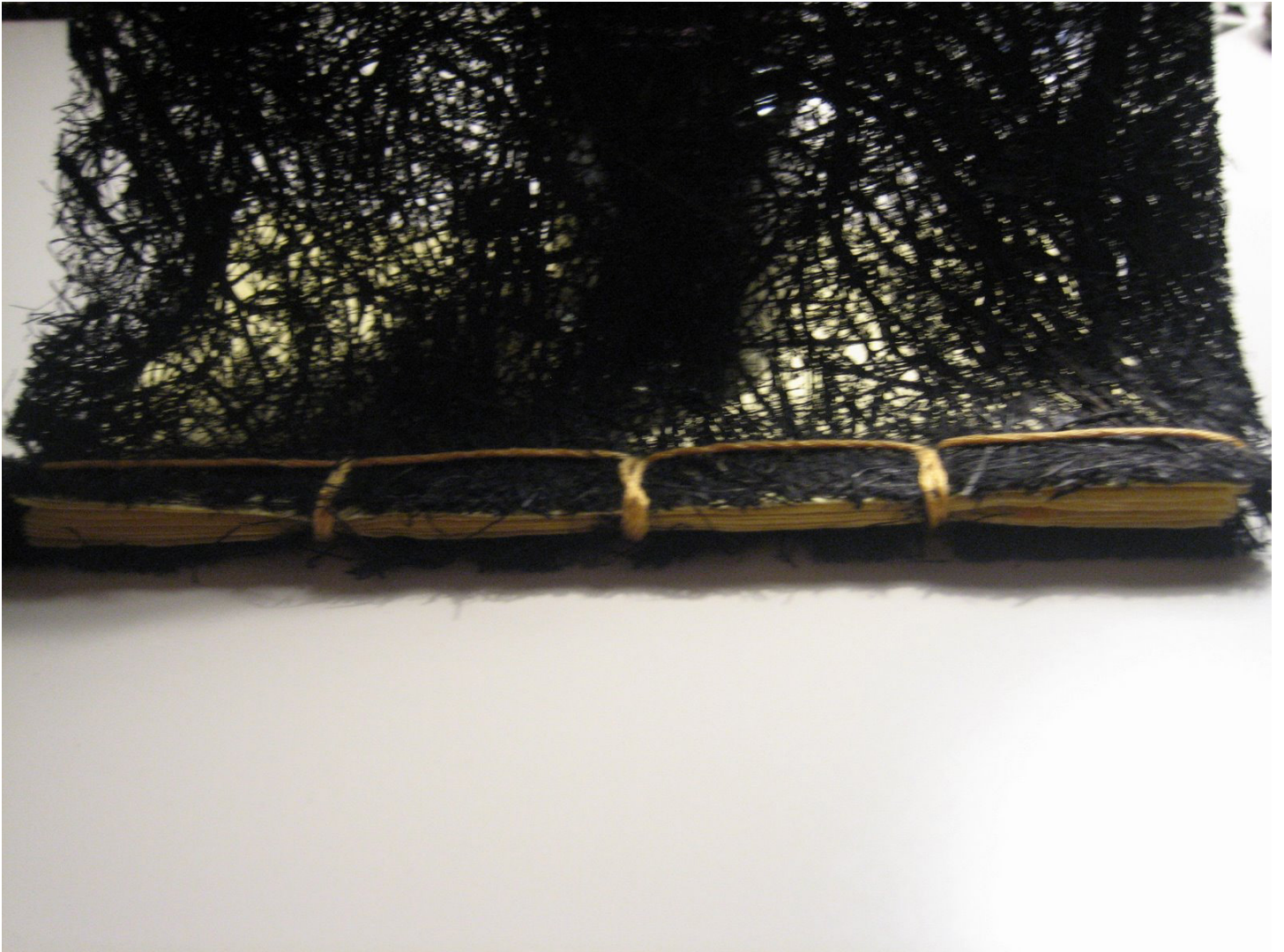
















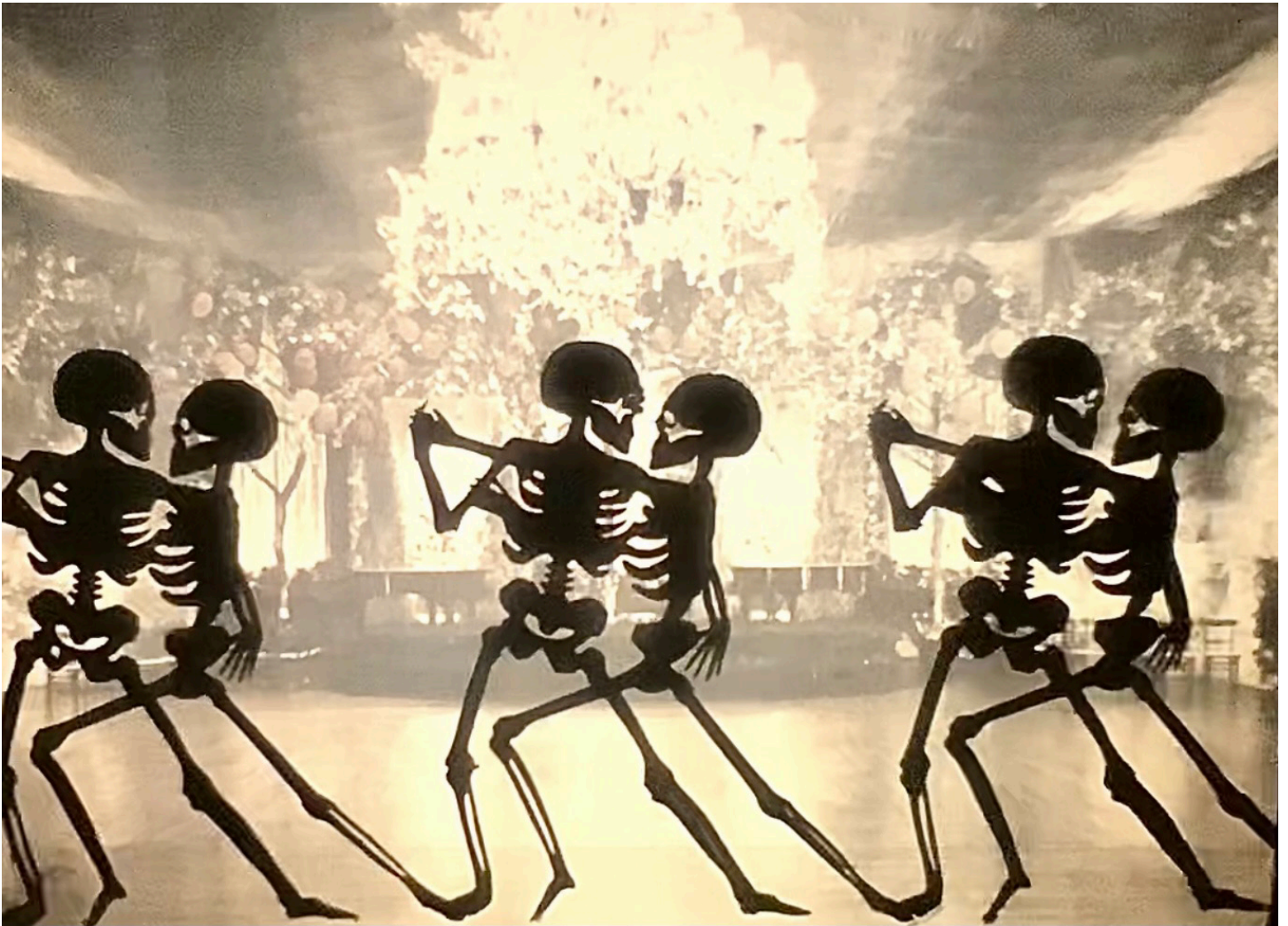




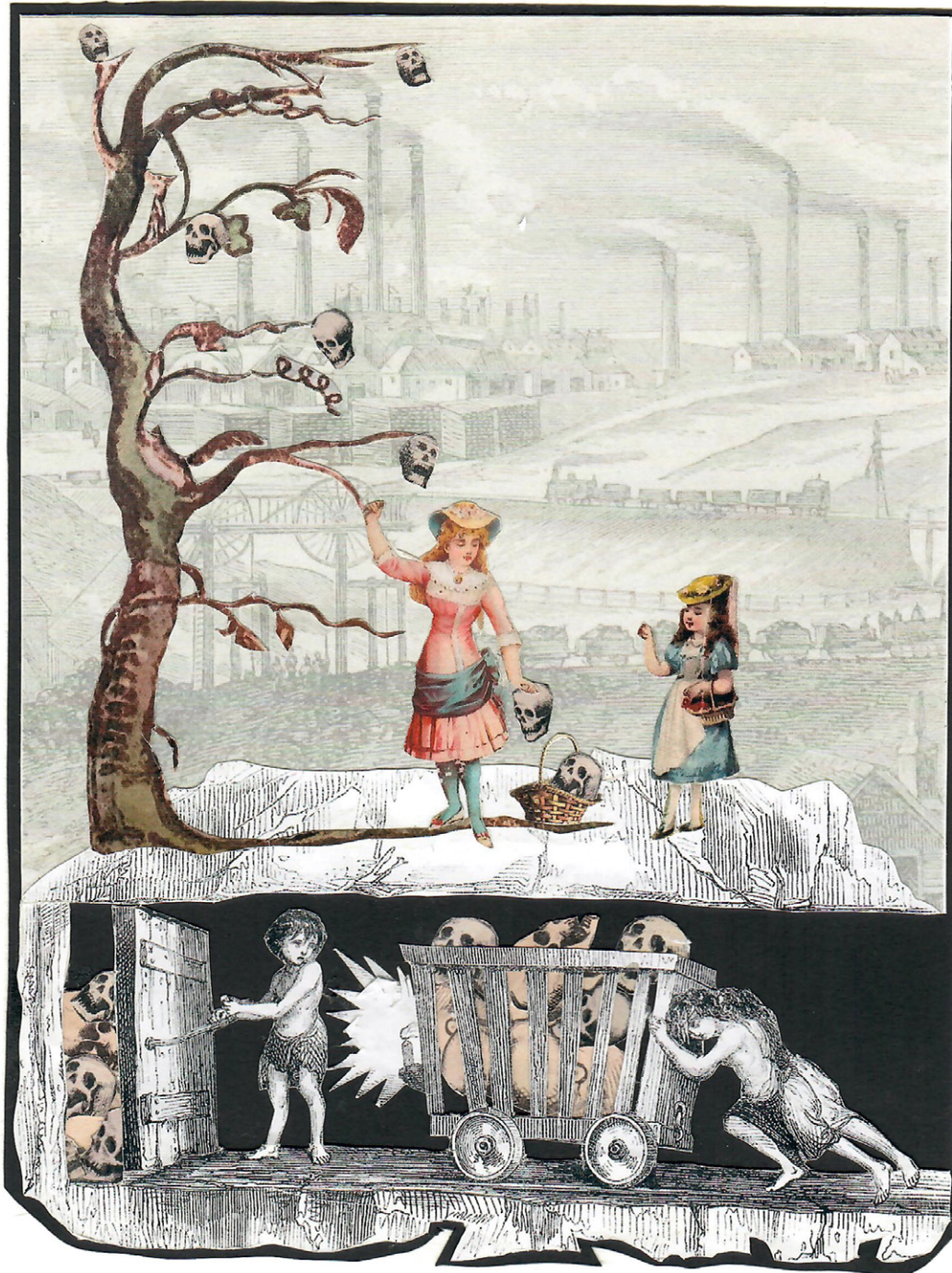


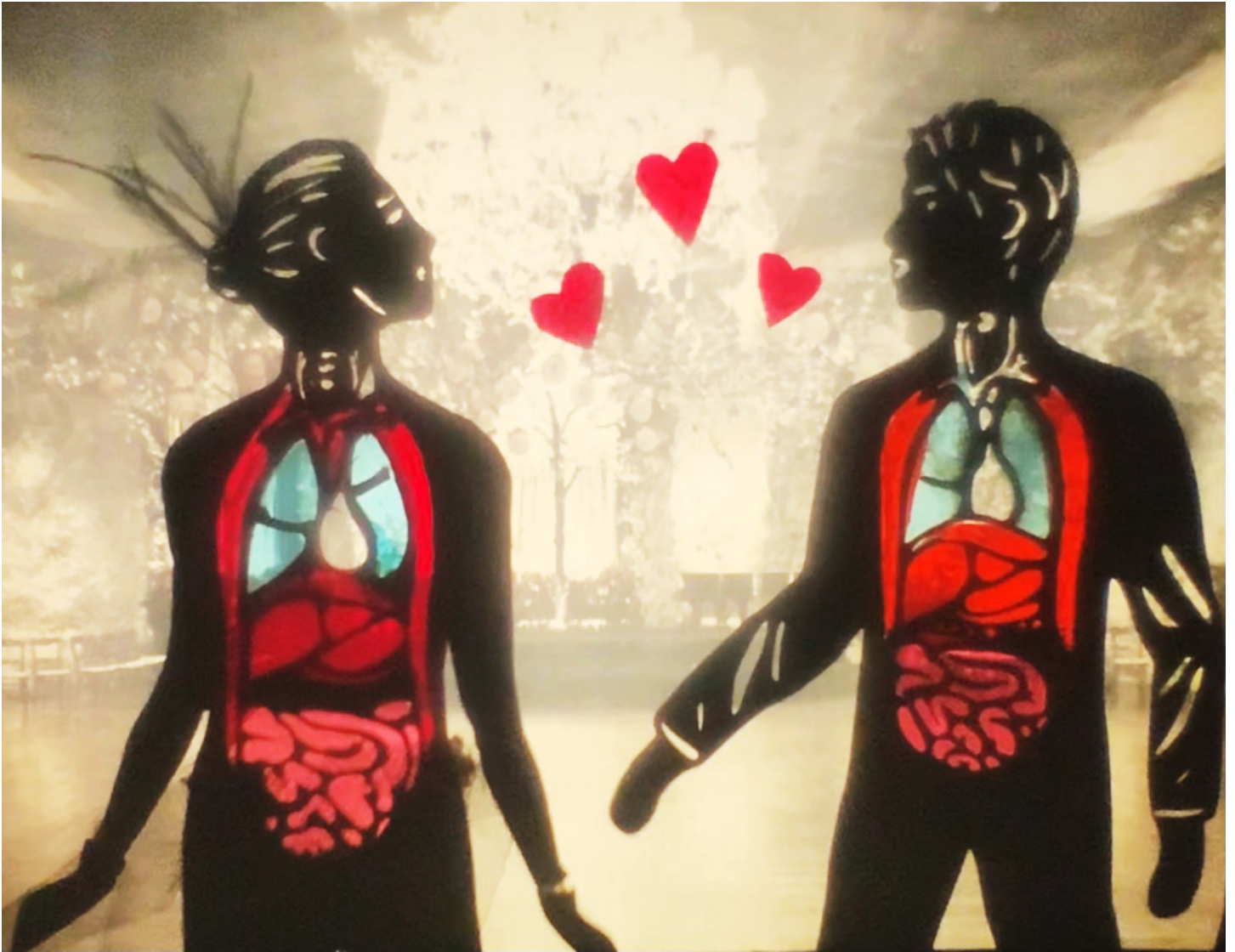








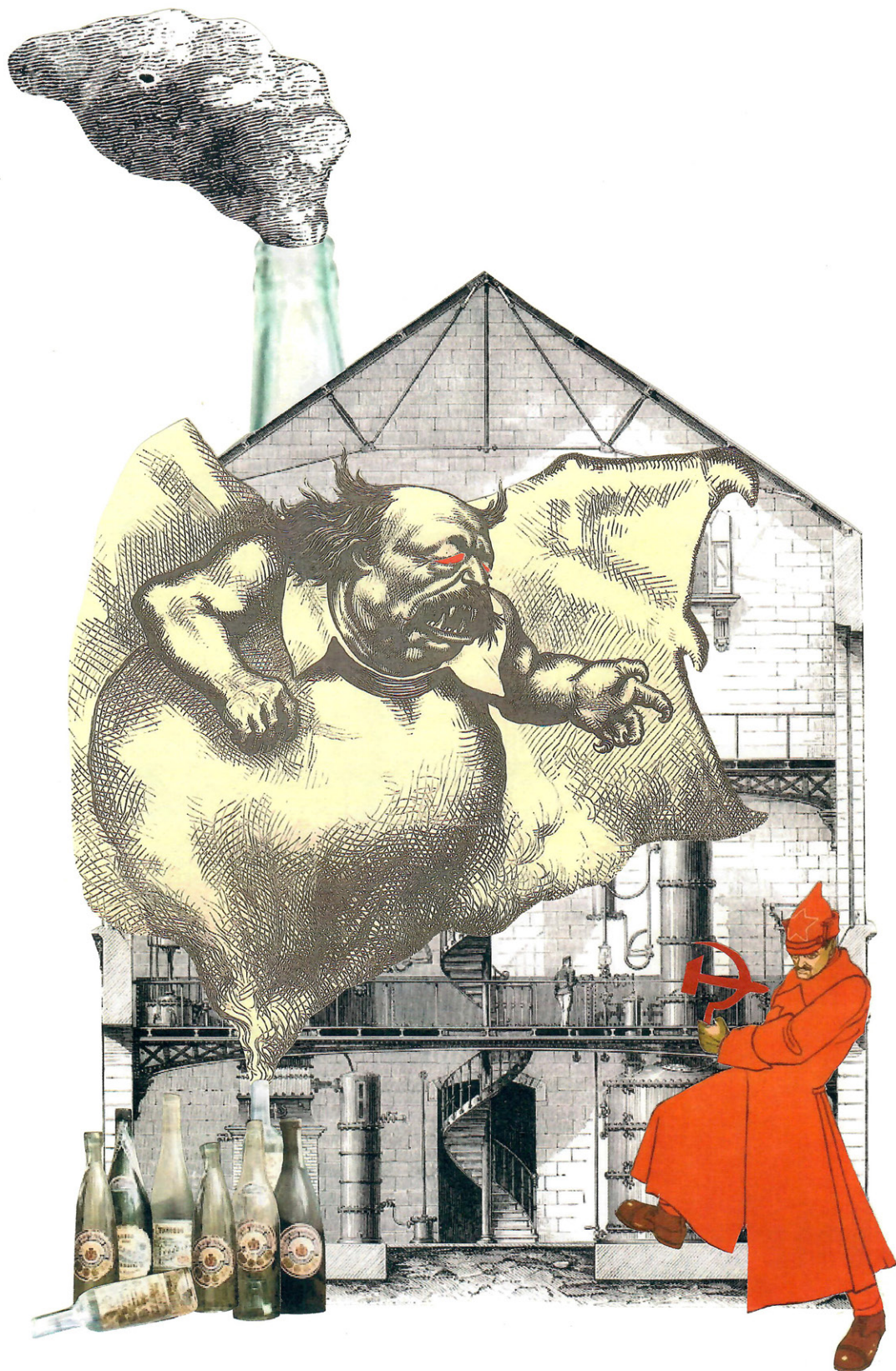
















"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players" - William Shakespeare

religious texts play broken telephone,  
translations transplants ideas  
we cannot proceed to dance around the  
misconstrued truth, follow blindly,  
you've lost your moral compass,  
indoctrination doctors information  
weaving spiderwebs: God is not dead,  
we are all ventriloquists  
unable to separate ego from belief systems,  
put your personal spin on the story  
changing shape, you've lost the  
meaning here, sever the  
umbilical cord, would you?



you cannot box me in  
labels fall of me easily  
no packing tape will  
seal the content  
threatening to spill  
clean up in aisle 6  
stains give floors  
character, who's the  
one putting a show  
on here, draw the  
curtains, would you?

can you map every muscle and nerve as fragility  
is forced onto hands the weight crushing the palm?  
what do these lines what have to say?  
every single nerve-ending screams for pain to end  
nervously, bystanders look away,  
pain is not meant to be placed on displayed  
this body is an antique, a gold-rimmed plate  
sparking in the microwave, cracking in the dishwasher  
no one handles it with care as fingers are punctured by pieces  
you only see pain when the dish is shattered,  
this body is changing shape contoured into a new normal,  
not so easy to clean blood off of these hands, is it?



cracked coffins  
suffocating weight  
of dirt under  
fingernails

gnaw on skin  
and spit it out  
like the way nails  
hammer us shut

rolling oxygen tanks  
across thresholds  
look into eyes and  
see baggage  
outlined in irises

afterlife is a four-way  
stop sign, parking at  
intersections with  
disregard for rules

sidewalks cracked  
in several places  
severing ties between  
here and there

i.

hazy memories collect  
in clouds of smog,  
the sky is on fire,  
ash falling like rain

how obtuse can  
we be to ignore  
smoke signals  
burning up the  
atmosphere?

ii.

compartmentalize  
trauma too,  
packing cubes  
are for  
more than  
suitcases

iii.

situational depression  
is not the opposite of  
a sitcom,

there's a cast  
of characters fighting  
for stage presence  
in the brain



grief marks time like dog-eared books. I'm sorry this is your first birthday without your parents but do you remember the ones you did share with them? I know you told me you had plans to celebrate with your dad before he passed away this summer. what does passing away even mean? more like his spirit brushes past you when you're sitting alone in a bar by the window. he's here, even your mom shows up in your dreams. she's trying to tell you something; lean in a little closer. lean into your grief but don't let it overwhelm you like the way weeds do in a garden. they left a legacy behind -- you and your brother. I wish you didn't push everyone away. what purpose does that serve you? I think today you pushed me away for the first time and I realized this is how your surviving family feels. hurt, sad and helpless. I wish you were in a place to receive help but I know we all grieve in different ways. time passes you by, grief is a speedy vehicle that hits every single pothole until all of your tires are blown. place a memory of a lost loved one in a balloon and blow it up watch it fly away. maybe that message will reach them. maybe they will send a reply.

are boundaries made to be erased like  
the way ethnocentric views  
write over ancient cultures, dig deeper,  
question everything, I was taught.

one day we'll find boundaries don't matter  
since we instinctively try to cross them out  
did putting up a wall keep others from coming in?

I wish I could barricade some decency  
you stripped me of as you force me to  
blindly follow some path to instant  
gratification, was it worth it?

your lack of moral compass is admirable  
exposure is more than what the sun emits  
I could make you out to be the villain,  
but what difference would that make?



what do you do when professional help isn't helpful? a broken healthcare system unable to shatter the ceiling. instead it is time to step around the shards slicing more than wrists. knives maim us but don't always kill us wish we could stop circling round the thoughts in our head absent-mindedly imperfect. presentation is half the battle when we're sharing the feelings falling off our face like things falling off a flat earth. round thoughts spiral downwards we've fallen again and will continue down this wormhole. neglect this noose or tug of war we're too weak to fight every little thing insurmountable we can't move mountains we must climb this obstacle too. like snow it's pretty to look at but not be around. tell me to breathe deeply it's not impossible to overcome the fear of falling from a great height. falling to a death you've thought is like embracing a loved one. nature can be intimate you might come to an understanding. these things aren't mutually exclusive. false dichotomies rule out a discussion. tell me is it time to give the system a kick to the curb? garbage is only taken out every two weeks but can they collect every single injustice under the microscope. details please; pay attention here, but are we there yet?

i.

text them about your self-harm  
attempt while they're sitting  
in class seven hours away;  
boundaries are overrated

ii.

blame them for others' bad habits  
and threaten their safety with sharp  
words with a dull knife wedged  
in their back; betrayal is easy

iii.

trap them like a dead end job  
who needs freedom from  
climate change as guilt  
eats a hole in the ozone layer

iv.

withdraw the rainbow after  
a treacherous storm --  
you feel a complacent wind  
rule the forecast again

v.

show no end to suffering  
then proceed to tell them  
there is no hope or rest  
for the sinners and sign off

vi.

set them on fire: don't bother  
passing a fire extinguisher  
instincts are extinct like  
common sense

vii.

loneliness clings like saran wrap  
and memories recede beaches  
cliche is a strong suit of mixing  
together a toxic cocktail



when life squeezes every drop of juice out of you, you throw the empty carcass of fruit in its face.  
when life tells you, you are worthless you throw some broken bills in its face. I'm not here to tell you that everything broken can be fixed. In fact, some things are not meant to be realigned in our minds like the tires on cars. We are mechanics, but we often don't have the tools to take care of ourselves. Maintenance is key when you don't have the energy to repair every single shitshow thrown in your direction. Direction is a funny thing and sometimes breathing doesn't feel like the wind blowing a sail away. We don't need to change directions we need to adjust the sail to an attainable distance. Distance feels important when you want to think things over. You cannot make lemonade outta one lemon. Water is hydration flowing through your watered down body. Sugar highs crash when you least expect them to because burning these bridges are rarely an option you want to consider. I see a bridge between you and me but the structure is faulty and I cannot continue to watch you walk further and further away. Let the storm cleanse you of your regrets, and when life inevitably gives you lemons, don't make lemonade -- squeeze the juice into the eyes of the ones that taunt you. When you're ready it will all be smooth sailing from here.

### Epiphany

Once upon a time, a woman approached a grey building to meet a stranger in their apartment. She noticed some red roses blooming by the front door. Inhaling their promiscuous scent, she admired the red, waxy petals for their vividness as she pushed an intercom button. *I want to live my life in Technicolor!* When she heard the buzz that unlatched the door, she pushed it open and was immediately blinded by the sun.

The sun swallowed her. She felt herself tumble down its throat and land in a belly with walls of blinding light. She felt herself begin to disintegrate. She opened her mouth to scream.

She screamed herself into a different sun, this one just dawning outside her bedroom window. Heart pounding, she looked around. She was on her bed, damp and heaving breaths. Beyond the window, the sky was turning a benign, even pretty, pink. *Nightmare*, she thought.

As the sun evaporated darkness, as she felt her heartbeat slow down, she recalled her last words in the dream—what she'd been screaming. She had been pleading with the sun, *Wake me! Please. Wake me!*

Something was blinking scarlet at the periphery of vision. She turned to see her alarm clock. It was time to rise. It was time to get ready. She had a meeting that day with a stranger in a grey building whose entrance was lined with Firefighter roses. She thought of an old poem where she'd written, *I want to live my life in Technicolor! Wake me!*

\*

### Flash Romance

Once upon a time, she entered a grey building, waded through the suddenly appearing sea, lingered through its suddenly appearing forest, scaled its suddenly appearing twin mountains, spelunked through its suddenly appearing cave, traversed its suddenly appearing fast-flowing river, crawled through its suddenly appearing desert, and entered its Apartment 3J to look deep into the eyes of a stranger.

"No," Ernst said in agreement as if she'd expressed her wonder out loud. "You are not home."

They smiled when she replied, "Then I'm in the right place."

They backed away from each other then, precisely because they both knew the day would end with her mentally relishing the world then gasping out Ernst's name.

\*



## Lucidity Cuts

Once upon a time, she pushed open the door into a grey building and walked into sunlight. Immediately, she sensed the veils begin to fall.

After cataract surgery, vision can be blurry during the next day or so. Then vision clears. Then one can see more clearly. At times, with fresh eyes one might even see colors more clearly than one has ever experienced.

The condition precedent, of course, has to be surgery—excising the cataracts that had dimmed or blocked one's vision. Lucidity requires ruthlessly cutting away at one's life to eliminate the gauze of illusions or ill-conceived beliefs.

The stranger waiting for her in the grey building came to be uncompromising when performing surgery on her life. She wouldn't have wanted it any other way despite blood-reddened eyes already depleted of tears even as she continued to feel like weeping over their hands on her body. Their hands were ruthlessly gentle, then gently ruthless before red appeared again: Firefighter rose petals melting into lava flowing after a volcanic explosion.

\*

## Anticipation As Mere Tool

Once upon a time, Ernst watched Elena approach the grey building where they'd been meeting for several months. As she neared the front door, Ernst could see her face more clearly—they could see her smiling. Her smile widened when she bent to fondle the petals of a crimson rose at full bloom.

*I am sorry, Elena, Ernst thought. I am sorry I first had to teach you to anticipate me.*

\*

## Post-Paradise

Decades later, after years spent an ocean away from a grey building, she returned to where she'd been at her most transparent. She paused before the building and let her gaze travel up to where color never ceased being a narrative.

*But even if, once, this was paradise, Elena thought, has there ever been a successful return to paradise? Adam and Eve never returned...*

\*

### The Princess, Witnessed

Once upon a time, she was fascinated by fairy tales. What paradoxical bit of misogyny is this idea of a Prince whose arrival—as savior!—would birth the result of “living happily ever after”! As she walked towards a grey building to meet a stranger she also paused at one point, bending down to adjust her right shoe. The act was unnecessary—the motion was her body’s pretense to pause so that she could caution herself, *The stranger is not a Prince. And you already know only you can be the adjudicator on your own life.*

As she stood, she mocked herself: *Nor are you a princess, daintily wincing from the effrontery of an invisible pebble.*

But she did feel that pebble between her toes as, minutes later, she waded down a hallway towards Apartment 3J. Crushed sampaguita scents from her childhood wafted through the hallway whose walls undulated from invisible breezes. The pebble was small, perhaps as tiny as a grit of sand, but its presence was palpable as a cautionary reminder.

*A reminder, she mentally castigated it as she loosened her dress to fall in front of the stranger, is a reference to reality but not reality itself.*

“Who are you talking to this time?” the stranger asked with a smile after correctly interpreting her face. They pulled her closer to them.

“No one,” she said, even as she thought, *Myself.*

But they said, “You are not no one.”

They always correctly interpreted her face.

She approached their lips. She desired and achieved bliss. There is a welcome, particular ecstasy to the bliss of being seen.

\*

### Perception

Once upon a time, a woman walking on the street suddenly halted, surprised by the sight of a grey building that appeared after she turned on a street corner. She remembered the stories shared by her mother about meeting a stranger in a grey building as she tried to address the trauma from her past. With Ernst’s help, her mother healed and, a few years later, felt strong enough to bear a child.

The woman squinted at the building. *Are you really grey?* she wondered. Ever since her mother told her stories of meeting Ernst in a grey building, it seemed that she kept stumbling across grey buildings. But this building was a glass skyscraper. Because the glass was reflective, the glass walls mirrored the grey stone of surrounding buildings.

*Ah desire, she thought. You create your own realities. Could my mother distinguish? How much of what my mother shared really happened? And does it matter if perception is reality?*

\*



### The Title is the Last Word

Once upon a time, Elena walked up a city's longest street where a grey building stood, deceptive in seeming to be anonymous among other such buildings. *I am here*, Elena thought as she stepped over sidewalk cracks, *to flesh out the gaps, the absences, that came to form the primary motivations of what I do. I'd rather not wallow in what's missing. Surely life can be different—larger?*

Elena came to share her thoughts as she stood, nude, on a pedestal.

"Many assume that someone behind a mask contains much to reveal," the stranger replied. "But it may be the person who dares to be naked before the world who contains much more to share."

"Hiding in the open," she said, then subtly stiffened her belly to make her breasts rise. Once, she peeked at the canvas-in-progress. Before the stranger moved to block her view, she saw a golden crown of thorns, and the two letters "M Y."

Before Ernst finally revealed the painting and its title, she'd already indulged in weeks of speculation—several times, she thought, or hoped, the title would be "MY LOVE."

Instead, Ernst, no longer a stranger, revealed that they had titled her portrait

### BLASPHEMY

**A Process Note:** *These prose pieces were deleted from the published version of my first novel, DOVELION: A Fairy Tale for Our Times (AC Books, New York, 2021). Structured anew into the new work, "DELUSIONS EPIPHANIES," they exemplify a tactic with which I'm writing new works: the collapse of time. This means, in part, that one could print out each individual section, throw them up in the air, gather the pieces in the random order they're picked up, and then be read or published in that order ... and the story would still work. One could try that with these sections; the change of emphases would be logical, but would the story still work?*

## Contributors

**Manahil Bandukwala** is a writer and visual artist originally from Pakistan and now settled in Canada. She is the author of *MONUMENT* (Brick Books, 2022) and *Women Wide Awake* (Mawenzi House, 2023). See her work at [manahilbandukwala.com](http://manahilbandukwala.com).

**Sarah-Jane Crowson's** art and poetry is inspired by fairytales, nature and her personal emotional landscape. It is informed by ideas of accidental trespass, surrealism and romanticism. Her collages transform images and artefacts from historical popular culture into surreal, theatrical dreamscapes. She works with a mixture of analogue and digital collage techniques and hopes to create small enigmatic treasures that people might find beautiful. She is an educator at Hereford College of Arts, and a postgraduate researcher at Birmingham City University, investigating ideas of the 'critical radical rural'. Sarah-Jane's images can be seen in various UK and US journals, including *The Adroit Journal*, *Rattle*, *Waxwing Literary Journal*, *Petrichor*, *Sugar House Review* and *Iron Horse Literary Review*. You can find her on Twitter @Sarahjfc, Instagram @Sarah\_jfc or on her website at [www.sarahjanecrowson.art](http://www.sarahjanecrowson.art).

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## Contributors

**Karenjit Sandhu** is a poet and artist. She is a Lecturer in Art at the University of Reading. Her publications include *Poetic Fragments from the Irritating Archive* (Guillemot Press, 2022), *young girls!* (the 87 press, 2021) and a forthcoming publication *Baby 19* (intergraphia, 2023). Her work is anthologised in *Judith: Women Making Visual Poetry*, *Writing Utopia* and *Magma*. Karenjit's performance work has led to collaborations with the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Flat Time House and Barbican (London), Arnolfini (Bristol) and Galerie Eric Dupont (Paris). @k\_ren\_sandhu

**Clelia Scala** is a visual artist whose work includes mask and puppet design, illustrations, installations, collage, and other forms of assemblage art. Her explorations into the fantastic and uncanny stem from a lifelong engagement with tales and myths and her interest in the theme of human interaction with the natural world. Publications include a series of 42 collages for the book *Alice in Plunderland* (BookThug, Toronto 2015) by Steve McCaffery and 11 collages for *I Can Say Interpellation* (BookThug, Toronto 2011) by Stephen Cain. Clelia is the recipient of the 2019 Established Artist Award for the City of St Catharines. She teaches design in the Dan School of Drama & Music at Queen's University. [www.clelia.ca](http://www.clelia.ca)

**Christine Sung** lives and writes on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. She has been published by bywords.ca, Corporeal Lit Mag, Autofocus and elsewhere. She usually writes from lived experience, but occasionally she can dream.

**Eileen R. Tabios** has released over 70 collections of poetry, fiction, essays, and experimental biographies from publishers around the world. In 2023 she released the poetry collection *Because I Love You, I Become War*; an autobiography, *The Inventor*; and a flash fiction collection collaboration with Harry K. Stammer, *Getting To One*. Other recent books include a first novel *DoveLion: A Fairy Tale for Our Times*; two French books, *PRISES (Double Take)* (trans. Fanny Garin) and *La Vie erotique de l'art* (trans. Samuel Rochery); and a book-length essay *Kapwa's Novels*. Her body of work includes invention of the hay(na)ku, a 21st century diasporic poetic form; the MDR Poetry Generator that can create poems totaling theoretical infinity; the "Flooid" poetry form that's rooted in a good deed; and a first poetry book, *Beyond Life Sentences*, which received the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry. Translated into 12 languages, she also has edited, co-edited or conceptualized 15 anthologies of poetry, fiction and essays. Her writing and editing works have received recognition through awards, grants and residencies. More information is at <http://eileenrtabios.com>.



Experiment-O is an annual online magazine established in 2008. its aim is to bring attention to works that do what art is supposed to do and that is to risk.

This issue's dedication is to those who dwell in the blur.

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Experiment-O will consider interviews, reviews, visual art, visual poetry, concrete poetry, poetry, prose, manifestos, maps, rants, blog entries, translations, and other miscellany. please send creative works to [amanda@experiment-o.com](mailto:amanda@experiment-o.com) for consideration for future issues. only contributions that are possible in PDF form will be considered; text-based submissions should be sent as doc, docx or rtf files and image based submissions should be sent as pngs/jpgs with a resolution of 1200 pixels on the longest side. responses will likely only occur if the work is accepted for publication. previously published work is considered. simultaneous submissions are fine too.

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We acknowledge that we operate on traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

The old expressions are with us always, and there are always others. *Others, A Magazine of New Verse*, December, 1919 Issue 5, No. 1