

STAR STUFF

JESSICA FRANKEN

You can turn to soil, to fire. Curl around a ginkgo seed; trade your ribs for roots. You can craft your own coffin from pines in your yard. You can fill your veins with vinegar, betel sap, or wax. Stretch out your limbs in a mushroom-spore suit. Plant your body to stop the bulldozers. You can drape a flower garland on your woven-willow basket. You can show off your pith to a medical student, or transplant your heart to another warm chest.

You can be a crystal Buddha in the columbarium. You can buzz between the sousaphonist's lips. Place your lungs in clay pots. Compress to a gem. You can sleep standing up in a hollow tree trunk. Feed your skin to the vultures and bones to the crows.

You can sink into the peat bog. You can steer down the river on candlelit boats. Hop on the pinion wind. Cavort around the moon, barnacle onto a reef, or dangle from a cliff.

You can demand hell money. Snag a last smoke. You can haunt your red-clad children, or manifest on film. You can start collecting rocks. You can play a game on future archaeologists. You can enter the water supply.

Divide yourself for relics. Freeze your noggin for the future. Lie down with your head due west, and point your feet to Gabriel's horn. You can cast your face in plaster. You can see a yellow dog.

You can bathe in lotus leaves. Paint your friends in ochre. You can add a dash of metta to the batter of the world. You can build a mound, an effigy, a cenotaph. Bestow your last breath to the mouth of your lover. You can dance your wine-soaked skeleton into your niece's arms.

Inhume, immure, entomb, promess. Resomate, excarnate. The dead outnumber the living fourteen to one.

HAIBUN TRIPTYCH

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SIoux COUNTY INSECTARIUM

There is no reason for a road to curve here. A tractor-bound soul can motor down the shoulder in a loose-eyed reverie. Folks here won't admit to daydreaming, of course, but when talk is so sparse, surely fancies must grow. How could they not, amid the inviting pillows of hay bales, bound and round and nested in the fields with divine—or farmerly—logic.

A town this small means you're always mere steps away from its outskirts. That's where the best specimens are, hardy and seasoned like the soil. My father, before he was anyone's father, cups a clacking grasshopper in his hands. Its tobacco stains his skin as he drops it in a jar. The moths, he gathers from the porch light; the spiders, from the armpit of the well's hand-pump. To find beetles, he follows their names: cucumber, asparagus, grape, and potato. He nestles them on the spreading board, pin through the belly, one wing pointing pastward, one ahead.

lighted sheet, clothesline—
we stayed up with him to see
six-legged shadows

SHARKS' TEETH

A tenuous strip of sand in its brief uncovered time; its future will be like its past: underwater. Water experiences time as a circle: condense, precipitate, evaporate, transpire. The waves are on a loop. The tides wake daily to stretch their limbs up the shore and sigh them back down. Even sand—which holds the memory of boulders fledging from

their mountain homes at the river's beckon—need not be an ending,
and could someday re-become rock.

My father walks with a heron's patience on a beach darkened by fossils. Sometimes he stoops and with the beak of his fingers plucks a black triangle. Once every minute, all of the blood in his body cycles through his heart. He likes the liminal band—not quite beach, not quite sea; neither solid nor liquid. This interstitial sand is a plasma that both resists and surrenders to his sun-browned feet. He fills the pockets of his swim trunks with sharks' teeth, ten million years old. The sediment is a truth between his toes, but looking back he sees no footprints.

slipped from time's creases
a spectral Megalodon
stormclouding the sun

CANTICLE OF THE SUN

Seen in periphery, the bird could have been a fallen leaf, but for the August of it all. Clarion sun, full-access prairie sun, needling bare arms at noon. A child with markers has inked the sky-blue sky and the grass-green grass. The square plots and labels mark this as a research garden, but there's a softness, too, as stems relax across the twine to lean comfortably on their neighbors.

It is important to make good memories today. My father, in his winter coat, inches his laced bones around a patch of coneflowers. I, catch-ready, take eyes from him only to scan for a tongue-petaled plant to speak for me. Even in this flat place there is no wind. Sunbake scents our silence with marigold and chive. I demand only miracles.

in the pain-curved nest
of my startled father's hand
a young bluebird lands