STREET CAKE

experimental writing magazine

issue 101

@mike callaghan

contents
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COVER: mike callaghan – no fear

amber angel – i am, of course, performative (because that is society)

abraham aondoana – terms & conditions for existing in the 21st century

seth crook – explorer

dario roberto dioli – answers

clive donovan – bonsai

david earl williams – if dogs

ann marie hendry – listen

sarah james/leavesley – redacted

j.i. kleinberg – without a poem

mark w kumming – morte

kb nelson – dust to dust

dr. tara zafft – holding morning

i am, of course, performative (because that is society)

I am, of course, performative
But how can I
not
be?
When the world is spinning left and

right
When nothing remains
label-free.

What are we doing with our lives
When everything is happening on camera
In the dizzying here and now
On display?
Life is a crazy
caffeine-fuelled
performance-driven play.

Why don't we decorate?
Decorate our lashed-out identities
Tie a big over our personas
pink bow
Romanticize our complexities?

Let's flip our minds inside-out
Empty them of all that unconsidered authenticity
Thoughtless, unsystematic,
benefit-less felicity,
And eliminate individual thought:

The freedom from dominant influence
hovering obsessively above us, over us
With monetary symbols etched into their eyeballs
brought
by Capitalism
Censorship
Uniform

Let's read books to be smart.
Let's write books
To share

To self-express
To educate -
No.
“Art
is art!”
Let’s read them because *This Romance book is trending right now!*
Let’s read books because that’s what
the internet
wants, because they’re
selling and selling
And money and sales are more important than intellect.

Ladies, let’s be pretty.
Plastic, filters, all the arts
Only for the male gaze, of course.
Or the camera
fake mannerism
For the streaming
algorithm.

Let’s perform for the boys,
The girls
The people behind the screen –
Let them hear our carefully-crafted songs
but not our
screams.

What else *do* you expect from kids?
For, after all
We are only kids
Yet already compared
Presented
Displayed
As show
Achievements
Success
Rather than human beings.

And, of course, we’ve got
AI-generated art
War
Doom-prompting
The male loneliness epidemic

Surface-level conversations through it all

Surface level.
Yes, let's talk about surface level.
This whole poem is surface-level
Shallow
Pseudo-intellectualism
Show-off.
Flinging newly coined terms at your faces
giving way for them
on the stage
To
sing

for themselves.

But how can I know
Who I really am
When "am" is a collection
of trendy labels
of instagram aesthetics
of algorithm and feed perfection?

And why even bother know it all
When I am only
so small?
Why not compress my everything
Into a static *image*
A single fixed thing
Barely individually,
Smile into the camera
And fade into it once and for
eternity,
unchangeable, but hey,
She is SOMEONE, at least,
so keep up the

play.

1. **Terms & Conditions for Existing in the 21st Century**

By continuing to breathe,
you agree to the following:

Your data may be harvested
  by clouds that never rain.

Your childhood
  will reemerge in the form of a focused advertisement.

The river near your house
  has been renamed
  Sponsored Content.

You consent to:

 sensing the aroma of your grandmother kitchen
 hollering over three wars to breakfast
 confusion of noise with intimacy.

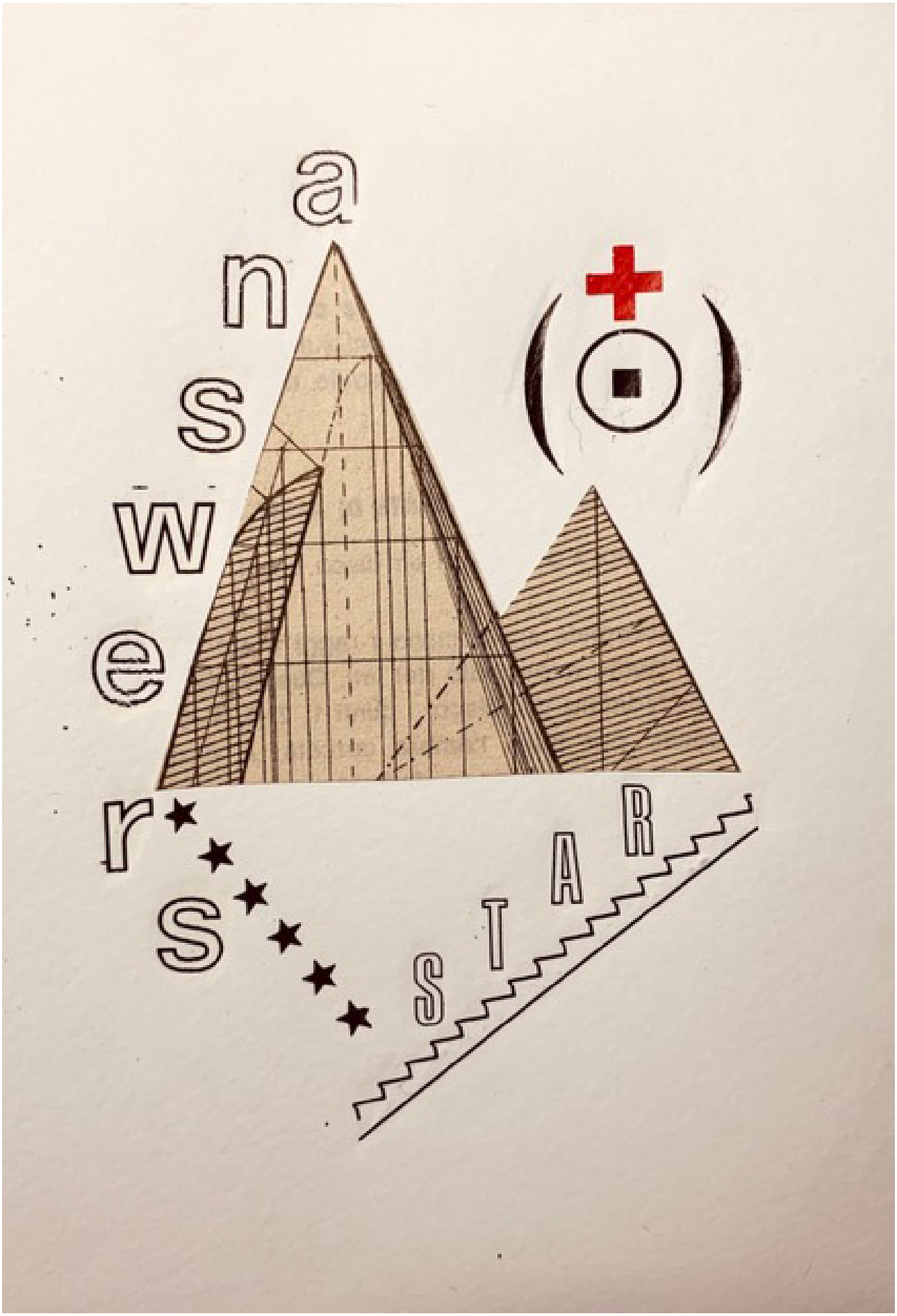
Failure to comply
may result in silence.

We reserve the right
to update the sky
without notice.

By clicking ACCEPT,
you admit that the moon
has always been watching
and that history
uses cookies.

Explorer

$I_s$land


a
n
s
w
e
r
STAR

BONSAI

She trusted me
with her [curiously wrought] bonsai trees
when she left for a long journey

When she returned
she was ferocious
because they had blossomed

and
straightened
themselves

IF DOGS

If dogs could spell backwards—
would they then think themselves GODs?

Listen

So I said to my therapist, Nobody listens, nobody *listens* to me, you know? And she said, You feel like nobody listens to you? And I said I *know* they don't, they never do, they just nod and agree but really they're thinking about something else, about what to have for dinner or whether they should, I don't know, stick with Prime or if Netflix is worth getting as well, and they just don't fucking *listen*.

What would you say to them if they *were* listening? she asked – and I could tell right away that she understood just what I needed.

So I told her all about my friend – my *ex*-friend – about how we were really close and told each other *everything*, but then she got married and had kids and it was like she had *zero* interest in what was going on in my life now. What kind of friend ignores you when you call them, even if you call them ten times a day? I ask you.

I tried to talk to some of my other friends about it, but they weren't paying attention, I could tell. And that hurts, you know, it really *hurts* when you try to share your deepest, darkest secrets but nobody listens. And so I started posting online about how I felt, and for a while my socials were actually pretty busy, but then my posts started to get kind of drowned out by other people going on and on about how they got ignored or cut out of people's lives too, and I was like, *Hello, who invited you to the conversation*? But not many people were responding to my posts any more, so in the end I just blocked all of my so-called followers and started hanging out at the gym instead.

Then things started to get better because I met this guy there, a really nice guy actually, really kind, really considerate, a really good listener. We'd have these long, long chats, and I'd stroke his earlobe and he'd gaze at me while I poured my heart out. But after a few months I realised something was off. His attention would wander. I'd bring up something I'd mentioned before and it was obvious he hadn't been listening the first time round. And then I caught this other woman talking to him. We had this massive argument about it, and I let him know *exactly* what I thought about selfish, self-centred people like him.

After that I didn't see him again. Which was really bad timing, actually, because like a month later, my Mum and Dad emigrated to Australia. I can't tell you how hard that was for me. I'd been an only child, and we didn't have any other relatives that we kept in touch with, so I *literally* had no-one to talk to. All I've got left of them is this old caravan. We used to come here on holiday when I was little. Those holidays got pretty tedious without any other kids around to talk to, just Mum and Dad staring out the window at the rain pattering down on the brown, sludgy river, and occasionally playing silent games of travel Scrabble. Since then, the caravan's only really been used when Dad went fishing, which explains the stink. Sorry about that. At least it's miles from anywhere – the smell won't bother anyone else.

So anyway, I told my therapist all about that, and about how difficult it was being on my own again. And then I started on about this preserving course I did at the college. I didn't mean to get into that, I didn't think she'd be interested really, but she was just so *good* at listening, you know? So I told her all about how hard it was to manage shopping and cooking for one, and how my food kept going bad, and it was such a waste to watch fresh fruit rotting and vegetables going mouldy just cause I didn't have anyone to share it with. I watched a few YouTube videos on home preserving, and then I signed up for the evening class. I thought it would be a good way to meet new people, but the other students were hard to get along with. I already knew some stuff because of YouTube, and I think they were a bit jealous that I knew more than they did cause they just wouldn't *listen* when I tried to explain things. One of them actually told me to *shut up*, can you believe that? Right in the middle of a class. So in the end I just stopped going.

I told my therapist all about this and she nodded in that compassionate way of hers, with her head cocked to one side like a cute little puppy-dog. She did that a lot, and I thought it was kind of sweet. She listened so blimmin *hard*, it was like it wasn't just her job. It was more than that. She really seemed to get me, you know?

It meant so much to me, her patience and understanding, so I told her – straight out – that she was the best listener I'd ever met. I said I'd love to curl up next to her, my chin on her shoulder, and whisper my troubles direct into her ear. My breath would slither down her ear canal, thrum against her eardrum, and squirm deep inside her brain. And then she'd truly understand. She'd know *exactly* what it was like to be me.

But do you know what she did? She gave me the number of another therapist, one she said was 'more qualified' to deal with 'my issues'. She said something about transference, but that was nonsense. Nobody ever *listened* before, not the way she did.

I tried, I really did, but I have to tell you, I did not take to this other therapist. I knew he was thinking about his next client twenty minutes before the end of our session. He hardly even looked at me, just gazed somewhere over my shoulder, and when he spoke it was always a second too late, like his mind was elsewhere. How is that supposed to help me, I ask you?

So I phoned up my original therapist, but her phone must have been on the blink because it kept going straight to voicemail. In the end there was nothing for it but to visit her in person. I hung around in the dank and murk outside, waiting until her last client of the day finally left. And then I let myself in. She doesn't lock up until she goes to bed.

She seemed surprised to see me – she stood up so fast she almost knocked her chair over – but I explained very firmly that I just needed to borrow her ears for a while, and eventually she agreed to listen.

We nestled ourselves down in the big comfy chairs in her office, and I explained how the other therapist just wasn't right for me. Sometimes I get a bit muddled, and it doesn't come out right, but it's testament to how good a listener she is that she seemed to totally understand. Well, at first, anyway. I might have got a bit excited and not explained things properly because, to tell you the truth, when I brought up the subject, she didn't seem all that keen to let me *have* her ear.

I explained that I'd been thinking a lot about her advice, and I realise I can't *always* be the centre of attention. I didn't want to monopolise her time – an exceptional listener like her must have lots of other people who need her just as much as I do - but she really was the best qualified person to listen to what I've got to say. So this would actually be the most convenient solution for both of us.

Things got a bit out of hand, then. She didn't want to part with that ear at all! She really doesn't believe in her powers of listening, you know? But I'd brought a paring knife with me, freshly honed, and it was quick and clean, almost as easy as carving a Sunday roast. I used to love a roast, but it's one of those things that's just too much effort to cook for one person, you know?

I didn't feel like going home, so I wrapped the ear in a hankie and I brought it here to Mum and Dad's old caravan instead. I boiled up a vinegar solution on that little gas hob over there, then poured it into an old jam jar. That delicate little ear looked a bit lonely in its jar of pinkish brine but, you know what, it worked perfectly! I told it things I probably wouldn't have dared to if it'd had eyes and a nose and a mouth attached.

But I must have got the acidity wrong or something, because before long this white fuzzy mould sprouted all over the ear. And after a while it just collapsed into a brown sludge in the bottom of the jar. I really wish I'd finished that preserving course.

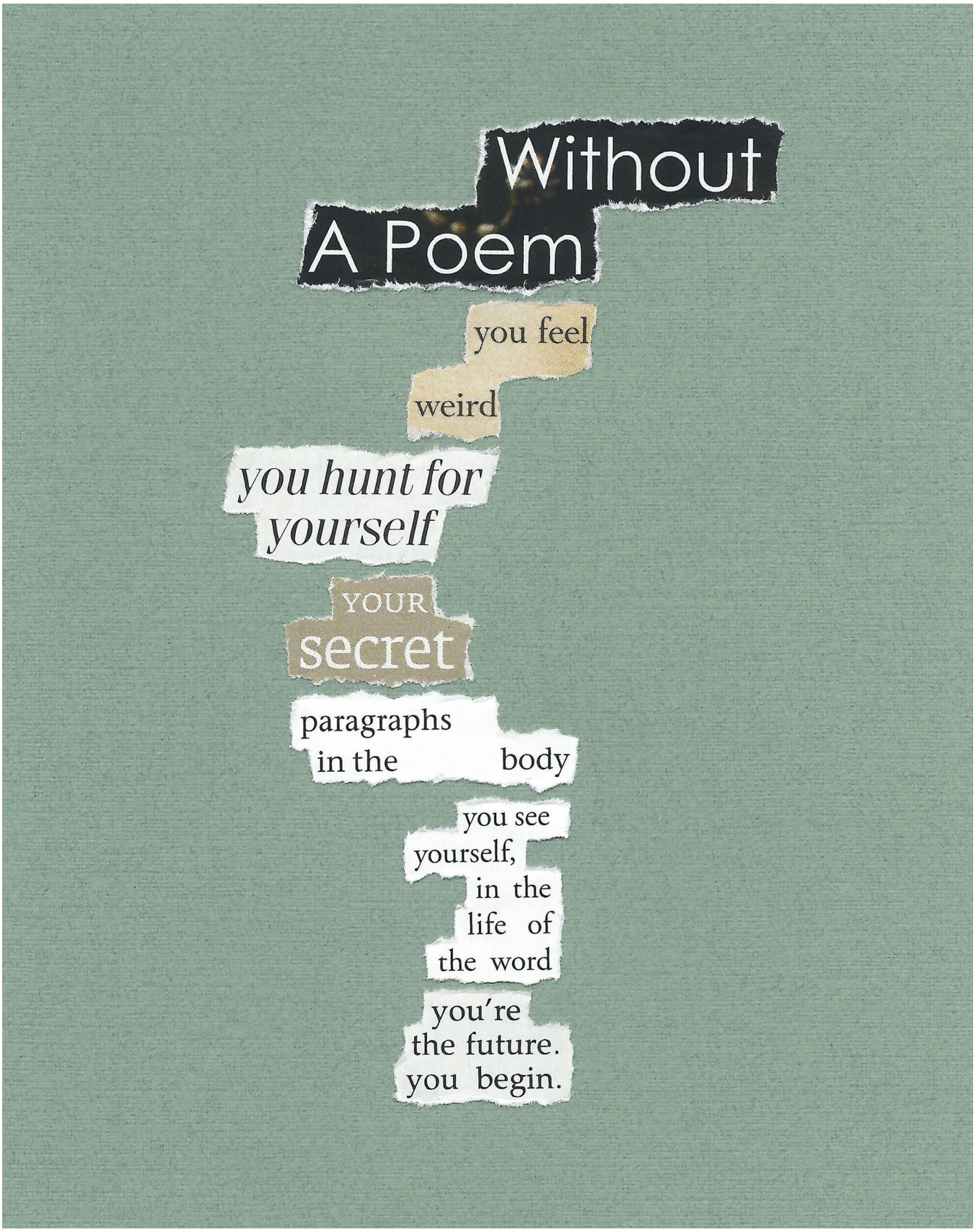
So until you came along it's just been me in the caravan, on my own, talking to myself. It's actually starting to feel like that's not healthy.

Hey, thanks for listening. You're really good at it, you know?

REDACTED

~~***taste:***~~
~~*(noun) /teɪst/*~~
~~*something's flavour;*~~
~~*one of five human senses*~~
~~*a person or animal's capacity*~~
~~*for recognising different flavours;*~~
~~*a small amount of food or short sample*~~
~~*of something; the fact/state of liking or enjoying*~~
~~*something; a person's approval of or liking for certain*~~
~~*things; their ability to judge and recognise what is good or*~~
~~*suitable, especially in art, style, beauty and behaviour; an often*~~
~~*very misunderstood part of everyday societal and cultural practices*~~

Back in REDACTED, inhabitants of Earth version REDACTED lost their sense of taste. What happened, how and why is undocumented despite REDACTED. Information is scant and REDACTED. Likewise, how some parallel worlds, such as REDACTED, avoided this catastrophe / fate / punishment / REDACTED but still managed to destroy themselves. This REDACTED has been collaged together from fragments, REDACTED, anecdotes and a few remaining previously classified files. As REDACTED, the exact dates and origin of these pieces is REDACTED and they should be treated with REDACTED. Our investigators have REDACTED the kind of craziness that might result from REDACTED and widespread loss of taste. But the human mind is too REDACTED to simulate this fully. It's beyond our current REDACTED.


Without
A Poem
you feel
weird
you hunt for
yourself
YOUR
secret
paragraphs
in the body
you see
yourself,
in the
life of
the word
you're
the future.
you begin.

Morte

It's little things adding up:
bottles I don't recall opening,
where I laid my glasses,
people dying —
ones not anonymous like from the news or obits —
but those with whom I've sipped coffee,
listened to complaints about ex's,
hiked the moors of solitude.
At this age, I shouldn't be surprised by each one's
demise, but I am stricken with grief
its fathomless depths.
How it ambushes and lingers.
How I can't prepare.
But I don't really fear that part for me —
It'll be a light switched off,
a room gone dark.
I'm certain I'll know nothing of it just after.
What scares me more is living till then.

Dust to Dust

Erasure poem created from the final page of The Dispossessed by Ursula K. LeGuin

kind of ride she might have got from the Sorruba coast; a dirigible, he hoped, if she had brought the girls along. Train riding was hard,with children. He still recalled the discomforts of the trip from Chakar to Abbenay, in '68, when Sadik had been trainsick for three mortal days.

The door of **the garden** room opened, increasing the dim illumination. The commander of the *Davenant* looked in and **spoke his name;** he **a**nswered; the **command**er came in, with Ketho.

"We have the entry **pattern** for our landing craft from your ground control**,**" the commander said. He was a short, **iron-**colored Terran, **cool and** businesslike. "If you're **ready** to go, we'll start launch procedure**.**"

"Yes."

The commander nodded and left. Ketho came forward to **stand** beside Shevek at the port.

"You're sure you want to walk through this wall with me, Ketho? You know, for me, it's **easy**. Whatever happens**,** I am coming home. But you are leaving home. 'True journey is **return…** '"

"I hope to **return**," Ketho said in his quiet voice. "In time."

"When are we **to** enter **the** landing craft?"

"In about twenty minutes."

"I'm ready. I have nothing to pack." Shevek laughed, a laugh of clear, unmixed happiness. The other man looked at him **grave**ly, as if he was not sure what happiness was, and yet recognized or perhaps remembered it from afar**.** He stood beside Shevek as if there was something he wanted to ask him. But he did not ask it. "It will be early morning at Anarres Port," he said at last, and took his leave, to get his things and meet Shevek at the launch port.

Alone, Shevek turned back to the observation port, and saw the **blind**ing curve of sunrise over the Temae**,** just coming into sight.

"I will **lie down** to sleep on Anarres tonight," he thought. "I will **lie down** beside Takver. I **wish** I'd brought the picture, the baby sheep, to give Pilun."

But he had **not** brought **a**ny**thing.** His **hands** were **empty, as** they had **always** been**.**

Holding Morning

The coffee smells particularly
sharp this dark morning, the
glass jar filled with freshly
ground house blend from
that place in the *shuk.* The
one where every time I go
I tell myself I must learn
how to say *house blend* and
every week I forget and smile
with that apologetic smile that
says, *sorry I still haven't*
mastered your language. And
every week the owner who
usually wears tattered t-shirts
with the names of heavy metal
bands, chats to me about
the rock band he had decades
before and I ask if he still
plays and he always looks up
to the ceiling. And sighs and says,
no. And sometimes one of his kids
calls and sometimes the line
stretches out the door so we

never talk long, but I'm

always grateful. For the chats, they

remind me…I fill the kettle full and

boil the water. I need the coffee

extra hot today. And strong.

After a night of texts from

an ocean away. Sick loved

ones and a reminder of

the ocean in between. And

a sadness I can't talk myself

out of. But I can drink strong

house blend and remember

a chat at the *shuk* and hope

this can carry me into my day.