

# BEST OF THE NET. THE SILVER BRANCH PROJECT. 2023-2024

## A pocketful of air

I've kept a pocketful of air for you;  
a mountain's breath mixed with stream light,  
coral granite and sliced stars.  
This will lift you when you're sunk in sly shadows,  
sliding with sifting voices  
or dancing with devil's hooves.  
I've kept the raindrops that pierced my ears,  
the raven feather dipped in ice,  
and the low slow rise of the moon on snow.  
I'll leave them all here,  
laid out on the ward's long windowsill,  
in case you find your way back.

*Larissa Reid*

## Your Ego as a Therapist

"Tell me about your scars",  
She undresses you —  
backs you into  
a giant wall of water, into  
soft barbs of memories.

Your wounds are self-inflicted,  
you confess. The many times you  
set home on fire & drowned trying  
to escape from yourself. The many  
times you allowed abusive lovers roll  
back into your bed, beat your dreams  
into nightmares. The many times you  
let the war in your head run into the  
marketplace—keen bullets, bold sins.

Your bruises, like ebony, are evergreen.  
Joy is deciduous. Grief is prime timber.  
Teeth fall like leaves at autumn's feet  
—brown smiles strewn over pebbles.  
Knees fall before mahogany altars—  
prey to god's jack plane or sandpaper.

*Jide Badmus*

## Urban Fox

Skinny dog-fox, hungered to his bones,  
scrap-merchant and wheeler-dealer  
of other people's trash; and in this hot reek  
of city, where there's no dark, no silence,  
he's sketched on the dusk, russet traced  
over neon, a drawing so delicately done  
that he's almost not-there, a trick of streetlight  
and rain. His bark is a stalled engine, his scream  
the echo of a passing siren; his eyes gleam  
headlamps of yellow. But when he keens  
for the forest, how it catches in your throat;  
like the memory of a painting, or the wild  
in us, lost somewhere out of the frame.

*Kathy Miles*

## Los Angeles, twice

1.  
A studded black carpet of lights rolled out in a grid  
orange and white prickles,  
squares of dark where trees and parks interrupt,  
a magic eye puzzle of a city that resurrects itself  
into myth at a distance,  
at the top of Vermont, House of Pies,  
behind, the white walls, curves of the observatory,  
a tourist trap, a wonder,  
suspending the night in postcard-pretty glass.
2.  
Down at the intersection of St Andrews and Wilshire,  
a Korean coffee shop is glossy white with plastic chairs,  
just opening. A man sleeps on cardboard in the entrance  
to the rundown Ramada,  
The Wiltern towers green and magnificent on the corner  
cars clustered like hungry bugs pushing into sugar.  
My commute beginning, all red lights and noise and caffeine.  
This picture, a past self.

*Vanessa Napolitano*

## Foxman

Fox-cub, curious amongst roots, sniffs the air,  
pauses, his foreleg poised, a child of caution.

Exile at eight, he sips meltwater from language,  
takes his path towards the wood's dark centre.

A psychedelic prankster, a foxy lady lover,  
he consumes sorrow, plays with powdered joy.

Then, as a soldier, Foxman rides the M4 west,  
tilts at hilltop windmills, with his lance of verse.

He finds trowels, bends his back to labour.  
He digs, builds, creates meaning in his lair.

He loves, has cubs, is often found in pubs,  
first his Father, then his Mother, die.

Pain burns in his joints; makes him want to retch.  
He quits, now sits, writes, though never enough.

Fox-curious still, he leaves his lance on a hill,  
and walks alone to the wood's dark centre

*Miles Hovey*

## Stackpole Frost

In summer, I'd thrown a peach stone  
to the playing fields, screwing up  
my eyes for twists of overnight forests.

After my birthday I'd watch glades crisp,  
morning skins of water stiffening.  
My parents' car passing a whitening

Maidenwells that would turn to prayer,  
for Stackpole Cheriton to be cut off, blizzarded.  
Pipes would freeze – mice would sleep.

I would build snowmen, drink hot chocolate.  
Deep winter turned to drizzle as we passed  
the sign for the village, the first ringing bell.

*George Sandifer-Smith*