

2024 MAYDAY POETRY PRIZE

our  
sodden  
bond

k e l l y   g r a y

our sodden bond

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## On Rising

To say friendship is not romantic is an act  
of buoyancy. Eventually, all things sink.

Or rise, if you are holy inclined.

Platonic misses the point of intimacy precisely,  
as if to say sex is the only cumulation of shared breath

when we know—

one can still hold another's breath	{mine}
in a mouth	{yours}

while sleeping	{on a vessel made for floating}.
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# Swimmer

You told me a man slipped next to  
child you  
while the waters of the hot springs  
bubbled and silked warm bodies,  
all the grown-ups undressed  
and celebratory. You also said  
there was a pond  
where a girl had a tail that would peak  
out of the blue, left to grow,  
the hippies believing in the beauty of the natural let her be  
her own way.

Things grew beneath waters unchecked and you became a good swimmer. Hung algae on your body at the river. Took the shape of a sea monster. This was your sex appeal, that you could come up from the depths in the form of men who took from you, starved, a current pulling others under.

# Mytho

I.

You clipped flowers in my hair  
and painted my eyes. Had me crawl  
across floors while you practiced  
the art of edifying  
other.

Flanked by mirrors  
you scalped words like arch  
and contour through our skin,  
cut small holes and made us multi-mouthed.

II.

Before, you let him spit in yours,  
thus, I became a spitter.

III.

The only day it snowed that year  
we opened

all the windows and shared cigarettes,  
feet touching.

In the evening, we found  
the bay meaty with dead jellyfish,  
the lapping of waters the only movement.  
You undressed and said put them on my body,  
which I did. You were translucent,

colors of pink  
and blue caught  
in the photos  
which you hung on your wall

as if you had arrived to this world  
in jellyfish.

The snow peaks  
behind you, born  
alone,  
creatured.

## In the Distance, a Herd of Elk

You hauled a basket on your arm  
as though you could be relied upon  
to carry everything we needed:

curry, cactus candy, cigarettes,  
tin mugs. We fished for tiger sharks  
& you, black lunged, unprompted,  
dove into the bay

as if the cold waters could give  
us back our mothers.

## Galley

When I woke up in the middle of the night you didn't hold me. Instead, you told me what I said in my sleep in the space between. You showed me how my arms thrashed in the dark. After the re-enactment, you went outside to water succulents while smoking and watch raccoons eat cat food. Were you still listening. Did you hear the water. Did you feel my drowning move your bed.

At daybreak you crawled beside me. You said, swig the syrup. Lullaby pill, the cherry drill. By day, you fed everyone fish, nuts, cheese. At night, oxycontin. That young man you used to babysit would come around tall and you kept feeding him until everyone was so confused they invited you to his intervention. Where did he sleep with you. Your bed as a boat through the night. The passage. The parting. You can't be the boat and the sea at the same time.

## For Loving You

It started because I knew all the Patsy Cline  
songs by heart and you had a closet  
full of dolls dressed in gingham.  
You compressed their bodies  
into small houses against tin ovens,  
collected plastic toy okra  
while longing for the manufacturing  
of creasy greens  
small enough to fit between your thumb  
and forefinger, nails painted Tennessee rouge.  
You perfected a drawl and named a part of your body  
Loretta, placed two dolls into the precarious position  
of scissoring while genital-less on the pocket-sized  
brocade silver couch,  
the little man doll having hung his cowboy hat  
in the hallway,  
imitation straw between his lips, boots left on.

You asked me to make a swimming pool.  
I gathered supplies, metallic spray paint and a pane of glass,  
fingered lounge chairs and lost a few tiny pineapples.  
When I bought the model airplane and hung it in the sky,  
you darkened. Two days later I came back  
and the doll that looked like me  
was in the bottom of the pool, glitter  
in the water foam, seashells sprayed gold around her body  
like an underwater tomb. Doll eyes looking up at the airplane,  
  
the rocking, rocking airplane.

**at every turn there is a deer.** this is a form of love. from the barn. two by the trailer in the shade. young things. pretty and fly-eyed at the same time. at dawn in the bramble. once, we found one so still we cut it open. burned leaves and said thanks. dead doe birthed cold fawn into my hands as you watched. as children, we prayed the deer lord prayer. now we see it as bumper sticker. you taught me how to follow a herd around the hillside. move slow like. learn to twitch my ears. the hearing of musk first, the seeing of musk second. close my velvet lids. dip my face to grass. eat stalks down to dirt. the bitter, the root. you said, let's run across roads. show them your flank, my haunches. watch a car swerve. the child's eyes like owl. nostrils flare. this is a greeting. the miniature hand against glass, a response. us twitching. together in the trees as the machines pass by.

one day, our tongues

will swell our mouths open.

your profile lovely.

my legs like cleavers in the air.

## The Dead Girl's Club

The girls purchased a book "Practicing  
Necromancy with Your Best Friend"  
which instructed to intimately vomit  
into the other's hands. Share a braid,  
share a bed. Hang a list of deaths above a door frame.  
Eulogy and epitaph. Body part and oyster bed.  
The book warned: you will never reanimate  
at the same time. The younger girl read  
that grief is a conduit for a new self.  
A baby was born.  
The older girl read that grief is to pour.  
She opened a diner.  
The baby and the diner were always hungry.  
Being animated was slippery business.  
The book had no bibliography,  
no section on mothers, neither  
the death of nor the birth of.  
The younger girl started to eat the book.  
The older girl became kitchen drenched,  
her hair alive with a black mass of nests,  
paper hives and a sleeping fox  
with a thousand ticks.  
There was not enough blood for all the insects.  
All the mugs in the diner were cracked.  
The baby would not stop crying.  
There was no water for the washing of this poem.

## The Town Writes Elegy

*Or, a rebuttal of the referendum of spectral definitions*

There is controversy over who was the first girl to die. Some say that the younger girl arrived flat voiced, dressed in men's clothing, which is to say, that's how girls got dead in the 80s. Others say the older one died at twenty-five, buried herself in dirt and came back as a mudslide. But that's still a proper dying. It doesn't matter if we came back for the town or the birds or the drinks. It doesn't matter if we left in deer form and came back as a lake where they keep the faces of our mothers, blurred and beneath surface, the two of us languishing in a canoe, dragging our fingers through their undulating hair.

## The Dissolution of Seafaring Creatures

To define friendship, we must look at the ending,  
drudge up the sunken {ship} and count the barnacles.  
Four ankles wrapped in seaweed. Two dresses drenched through.  
One table that floated away, hauled from the ocean's mouth,  
set with arms of octopus,  
cleaved into stillness  
and yet curled,  
inviting you to sit.

Come dressed in white  
to be wetted. Come  
dressed in. {come.}  
Someone said: *this bubble will not escape.*

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## AUTHOR BIO

**KELLY GRAY** (she/her) is the author of *Instructions for the Animal Body* (Moon Tide Press, 2021) and *Tiger Pam, Tiger Paw, Knife, Knife* (Quarter Press, 2022), and *The Mating Calls // of the // Specter* (2023), which was the recipient of the *Tusculum Review* Chapbook Prize. Her writing can be found in *Cream City Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Cherry Tree*, *ANMLY*, *Permafrost*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Northwest Review*, among other places. Gray is the recipient of the Neutrino Prize from *Passages North*, the ArtSurround Cohort Grant, and a participant in the juried *Kenyon Review* Poetry Workshop in 2023. Her second full length poetry collection is forthcoming in 2025.