

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of deep purple, magenta, and orange. A person's silhouette is visible in the lower half, with their arms raised and hands open, reaching towards the text. The title is written in a large, white, hand-drawn font across the upper half of the image.

HOW TO DRAW A GOD

poems and art by

Oona Miller

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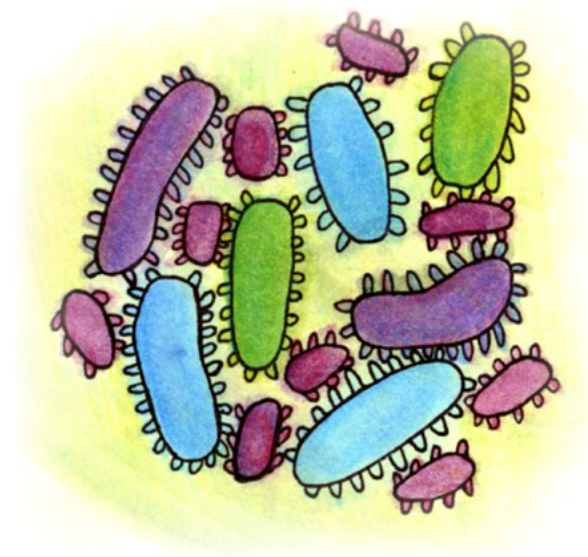


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Preface



I thank you for bending your path towards this
deck of poems—

they are a stack of cards shuffled regardless of
time and sorted by sentiment.

Some were born from my split skull, fully formed
and clad in battle armor.

Some were scratched out in notebooks at eight in
the morning as I swished coffee around my mouth
and contemplated my impending English major
and my yellowing teeth.

Some were written in the quiet moments
when no one was paying attention
to the gut flora blooming in my stomach
and turning the coastline of my ocean
as green as lovers.

(I will not give you the polished fruit of my
thoughts.

I will give you the pits and seeds and cores and
skins.

Plant and fertilize what you wish.)

Please allow yourself to be pulled by the tips of
your smudged graphite fingers
through the pulp of these pages,
up and down the rows of tiny symbols.

I apologize, though, if we get lost along the way.
Sapiens only invented writing five-thousand
years ago—

I'm pretty new at this.

Part One

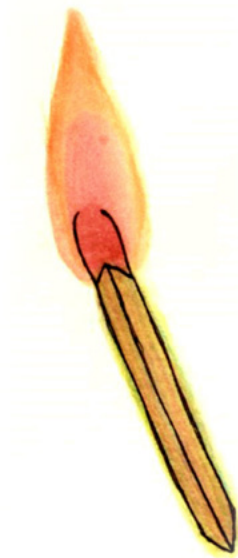
**The Sun, Your
Smile, and Other
Radiant Things**

Match

We're the perfect match
Let's start a forest fire

Let's go ahead and glow too bright
We'll melt without a doubt
Scorched skin is just as warm
Who cares if we burn out?

We could be a blazing sun
A star of eternal fame
We might just burn forever
But maybe you're just a flame



In My Studies

I examine her face while she goes over books
 And all things considered it must be her looks
 That get me to waste my life on this girl's face
 And catalog features while she's off in space
 In those English class novels that just weigh us down
 And make me look brainy when really I'll drown
 I can't take my eyes off her to get my tests aced
 But my studies have found that it's not such a waste
 To focus on people instead of on school
 'Cause it's so much better than following rules
 From counselors, teachers, all they have to say
 Is that it's my fault when it's her mouth to blame
 For distracting me often so I fall behind
 To get myself focused I'd have to go blind
 'Cause if I can stare she will pull me away
 Without knowing she's been on my mind the whole day
 But I can't tell my tutor I've been stealing looks
 So I examine her face while she goes over books

Strawberries

a tribute to *Peaches* by Sandra Cisneros

Strawberries, strawberries, in a bin
 As sweet as berries can be
 They love each other so very much
 Just like you and me

Strawberries, strawberries, on a vine
 As red as my love is true
 Aren't they oh-so-cute together?
 Just like me and you

I'm Having a Good Day (Calc Sounds Like Hell, Though)

You wear your lips so red
Curls spiral down your back
Your eyes shoot hot as lead
And glitter just as black
You sure belong in space
You might as well be there
You've got that pale moon face
And then I'd get to stare

I'd see you every night
Not just in Snapchat clips
I'd see you shining bright
Not have to take long trips
To meet you eye to eye
Why must it be this way?
Why do we even try
When we're so far away?

Along Came May

The Mayjune heat is here
It makes me want to write
But I've been going blind
Your smile's much too bright

The sunbreeze in my face
makes everything seem new
Did you see the plants today?
The flowers tilt towards you

The path into my school
is paved with lilac clouds
You'd love them if you came down here
But I know you don't like crowds

I love summer and you love me
But seeing you's a task
Just keep me warm from where you are
That's really all I ask

America's Finest

He wore secondhand school uniforms
and draped towels across the fronts of his friends'
cars to work under the hoods
so he didn't get his trousers dirty

The muscles in his legs burned hot
in the Virginian autumn sun
when he biked to the academy

He was a fine-tuned machine
programmed for perfection
but not raised for it
He worked to crank the pistons inside him
but exhaustion doesn't make good gasoline

His hair was the color of the earth
outside his parent's trailer
She asked him, "What happened to your face?"
His eyes were as blue as his mood
and darkened further by insomnia
and a fist
He said, "Do you think it makes me look tougher?"

He was sure that love was a privilege to be earned
like scholarship money and success
He wasn't sure that magic existed
but he desperately needed it to

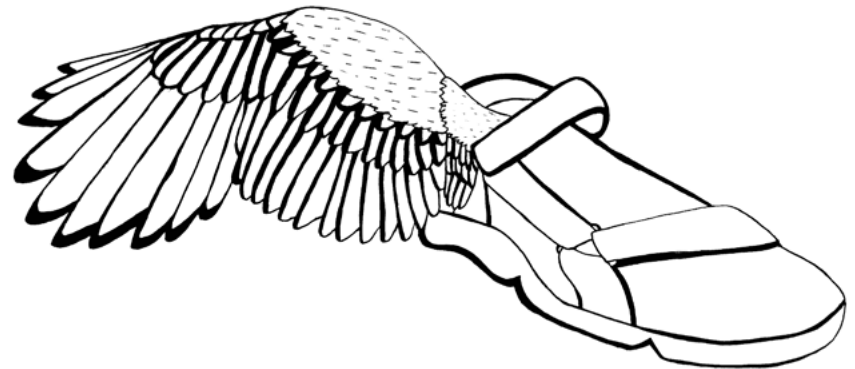
He was the kind of creature one would find
while digging under rocks in the summer
something small and quiet and determined
something lonesome and complex
something bred in the dirt to die in the dirt
and nothing more

Medusa and Arachne

Medusa, you are the clay beneath your nails
 You sculpt until your hands are dry and caked
 Arachne, you are the thread at your fingertips
 And you sew until your joints ache and your
 needles are dull
 Medusa, you are more than the hissing in your
 head and the stone in your stare
 Turn up the kiln inside your chest
 Close your eyes, cross your fingers, and hope for a
 good sculpture
 Arachne, open your eight arms to judgement again
 You were thrown aside like scraps but cut and
 stitched back together
 Don't be afraid to be prideful, don't tear yourself
 apart at the seams
 Weave a bit of yourself into every one of your works
 The gods are only jealous of your skill
 Athena has nothing on the two of you
 Seek each other out and curse her together
 She has turned you into terrible, unthinkable things
 But you have turned crag and cord into
 masterpieces

Up & Away

I want to say goodbye
 For this life feels like a pen
 You should know that if I could fly
 You'd never see me again



Dear August

Dear August,
I want to go with you this time.
Let me fade away until my gold shine
is brown and fragile.
Let me fall and fray like autumn leaves.
Don't make me live through the cold
of these next months.
I want to run from this place
like the sun flees the sky in December.

The calendar means nothing to me without you.
Please take me with you when you go.

Part Two

**Philosophies from
Arbutus Lake**

My Teeth

I didn't grind my teeth last night.
Do you think it's because they knew
it is our birthday today?

Within a year I will no longer be
a teenager.
Within a year—
my dentist tells me
—my wisdom teeth will have
clawed their way up through my gums
and wreaked havoc on the work
done by my middle school braces.

I don't blame them.
I hated middle school, too.

Family Dinner

Last night, my father sat at the end of the bar with us and sipped his own cold, hoppy anger from a twelve-ounce glass. The glass jokingly claimed it was a mere eight ounces. My brother pointed this out. I wondered aloud if that is dangerous to people who don't know better what twelve ounces of anger looks like.

We were restless as we were being seated. As we waited for our food, my mother and I dripped thick, oily, yellow-green happiness onto small dishes and soaked it up with bread. I opened too many packets of soft, salted worry but felt it was a waste if I didn't use it. My mother said I shouldn't use both the happiness and the worry in one bite—it was too much.

My brother didn't eat any happiness with his bread, but he dipped his finger in the puddle on my plate and tried to wipe it on my jacket. I didn't want it to stain—I hit his hand away. We swiped my sweating glass right off the side of the table. Ice cubes scattered across the floor and my father erupted. I told him that it was okay because I had only been drinking my own emotional labor and that it wouldn't stain or make the carpet sticky. Still, I think my family blamed me for spilling it.

Two waitresses brought our food and scooped up my ice cubes at the same time. I thanked both the women about three times each before they left. At the table, my family was close to silent. I wish I could write that I picked up my father's mood from my plate and sunk my teeth in it, not afraid of the tiny bones hiding inside. In truth, I picked at it slowly, noticing its dryness above all else. It came off the bones in chunks but bits of cartilage hid in the joints, making it a chore to stomach. My mother and I piled the inedible pieces on a plate together. My brother dipped a bit of indifference into my gravy when he thought I wasn't looking. I demanded he trade me some for my mashed compliance. We argued for a bit on the value of each of these foods, made from the same root but served differently to different people.

In the end, we decided not to have dessert at the restaurant. I packed up what was left on my plate into a white styrofoam box to take home. Everyone else had finished their dinners—I was the only one with leftovers. They made fun of me for eating slow. They made fun of my small appetite. They would fight over the food for breakfast the next day.

Succulent Secrets

My house plants know something I don't
About the wind and the sun and the spring.
They sit close together and whisper
but refuse to tell me a thing.

Surely they know where they came from
and surely they know where they'll go.
Even though I care for them deeply
they've no secrets for humans to know.

The room grows dark all around us
as I compose this poem.
I wonder what they're thinking
and if they're missing home.

I ask the aloe for advice
to tell me how to be.
But she just points her spines;
it seems her wisdom's not for me.

The one in the blue clay pot
feels most likely to speak.
But when I gently prod for aid,
she barely makes a squeak.

The shyest girl and smallest by far
I don't expect to tell me much.
And like I thought, she lets nothing slip
when her leaves I stretch to touch.

Maybe they know not how to say
it's written in their roots.
Maybe I need chlorophyll
to communicate with these mutes.

They keep their succulent secrets
amongst the leaved and green,
and while I sleep I'll hope to catch
a glimpse into their genes.

The Mirror

When I saw my mother on the pier
looking at the mirror beneath her
I ran up the hill to get my good camera.

The fish mingle with the sky in the glass.
She stares up at me.
The gray clouds rub their heads against the sunset.
Maybe one day I will reach for them, too.
Like the pine trees on the far edge of the reflection.
She breathes out and waves knead at the shore.

The boat coming towards us ripples the glass.
The man from the cabin next door asks if we
want a ride.

We circle the mirror.
I wonder if the clouds will fade before the sun sets.
I wonder if the fish will fall asleep tonight.
I wonder if the waves will ever stop pawing at
the wet shore.
I wonder if the pier will collapse
and if this boat will sink
with me and my parents and the man from the
cabin next door and my good camera
still in it.

The Storytelling Species

Everything we do is for this—telling stories.
No other species can do it.
Cats, yet vicious, cannot lie to each other.
Dogs, yet angry, cannot share their troubles.
Fish, yet trapped, cannot voice their complaints.
All the beasts in all the world
(horses, whales, lions, rats)
cannot be as imperfect as us:
Homo narrans—if my Latin is correct.

I had another dream about you last night

i had another dream about you last night
but thats not something people say in casual
conversation

(and thats all we have)
even though the dream was just us texting

screens dont usually work for me in dreams
(what was different this time?)

in the dream i guzzled the lie of me and you
it fed me bright orange candies until sunrise
and until i thought of you again that morning
moments after waking
i believed it to be true
it was not a fact at the front of my mind
like how i knew i had to get up and get dressed
and eat breakfast

it was a truth as subtle as the sun
an underlying cause for everything bright
in the world

a truth beneath my skin, your skin
like music and the moon
a truth that was true until i remembered it was not

before i remembered those dream texts
i had been leeching off the happiness of the false
knowledge of me and you
without realizing it

now i sip bitterly from the lie instead of gulping
wishing for orange candies and to forget it was
only a dream
then i might have the courage in the waking world
to text you

Not Untitled, Just Unnamed

I have come to the conclusion that dogs don't have names. It's sad but I think it's true. Because what is a name but a word that represents a thing that is important to us? And dogs don't have words. They have growls and barks that convey emotions and sentimentalities ranging from, "You are my best friend in the whole world," to, "Get the fuck away from me right now or I'll bite you." Humans, I suppose, do the same thing, just with more sounds. We can't be as simple as dogs. We must be complicated.

So that is why we name our babies, our cities, our cars, our laptops, and our dogs. And how rude we are for it—to "give" these simple creatures our complicated human names when they cannot understand the weight of such an act: the naming. Because no mother hound has ever given birth to a litter of pups and named one Spots and one Molly and one Maggie and one Butter and one Sweetie. She goes by smells. She doesn't need words by which to remember her babies.

While we sit here and mourn her lack of language, she must pity us humans. She must think we don't

know our family well enough. I almost pity us too—for this loss of [substitute smell and emotion for redacted English word that never was]. But then I remember how my brother and I curl up in my parents' bed sometimes, smelling my mother's pillows where her shampooed head comes to rest at night. Or when I walk down the upstairs hallway when my brother's bedroom door is open and smell something that is inextricably him. Or when my dad comes home after biking from work and he turns on the living room fan because the sweat is soaking through his shirt and the smell takes me to a blues concert when I was two years old and still bald and sitting on my father's shoulders grabbing big handfuls of his hair in my tiny baby fists.

These feelings are not named mom or dad or brother. They do not have names the way we know names to exist, sound, or look. They have a special place in our brains and hearts that can never be overwritten. And just like that, I understand dogs and their happiness a little better.

Man is God's Best Friend

Draw a god.

What makes it a god?

Is it His white hair and beard?

His loving, wrathful eyes?

Is it His capitalized male pronoun?

(He, hymn, His.)

No.

Draw a god.

Is it her black eyes? Her white curls?

Her naked, featureless body?

Her unhuman horns, or her six-fingered hands?

Her heavenly perch upon a golden cloud?

(She, hear, hers.)

No.

Draw a god.

It is because you have rendered it as such.

It is not because it is a creator,

it is because it was created.

It is because it would not exist without you.

[The gods did not create us.]

[[They know no better than we do what did.]]

[[[We created them.]]]

We do not believe in gods because they exist.

They exist because we believe in them.

Draw a god.

Does that not make us gods?



**Things I'll probably have
eventually with luck if
I set my mind to it but I
want right now regardless**

(A To-Do List)

~~A couch for my friends to sit on~~
One large bookcase
A dresser that fits all my T-shirts
My novel to be finished
A lock on my bedroom door
My baby succulents to grow
To make a movie
A horse
A smaller horse
For my father to find peace
For my mother to see me
For my brother to be okay
Hair that looks like Ilana's from Broad City
Fun earrings
To be known for my fun earrings
Sleep
To play more video games
A new computer to run the games on
Another kiss from her
A new car with an AUX cord and AC
To make art
To make very good art

Part Three

Cognitive Revolution

A Cocktail Party Under Orange String Lights

I had a dream
last night
about a woman
who was both me and my
wife—and my ex-lover.

And still in the middle
of English class I can
feel my grief and love and
fear for the woman's children
who were growing inside her
and me
and at the same time
were being born into that
dreamscape of a world.

Time existed on three axes
for three triplets.

I was crawling on my belly through the dirt
in the cold night
towards the glowing orange tree
under which she gave birth—
the woman—my love—
my former love—
me—

I fought for her and the children—
our children—
even as time was running out
and starting again
and running out
and I woke up.

WE ARE JUST MEAT!

WE ARE JUST MEAT!

BRAINS ARE SPECIAL PIECES OF MEAT THAT
CAN THINK!

FINGERS ARE MEAT THAT CAN HOLD
THINGS!

LUNGS ARE MEAT THAT EXPAND WITH AIR!

SKIN IS MEAT THAT HOLDS ALL OF OUR
OTHER MEAT!

NERVES ARE MEAT THAT CAN FEEL PAIN
AND PLEASURE!

MUSCLES ARE MEAT THAT MOVES BY ITSELF!

VOICES COME FROM VIBRATING MEAT!

HEARING COMES FROM A DIFFERENT KIND
OF VIBRATING MEAT!

EYES ARE BALLS OF MEAT THAT PERCEIVE
LIGHT!

WOMBS ARE MEAT THAT GROW MORE
MEAT INSIDE THEM THAT WILL SOON BECOME
SENTIENT MEAT!

CARS ON HIGHWAYS ARE MEAT TRANSPORT

SYSTEMS!

THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN BY
THINKING MEAT!

THE PYRAMIDS WERE BUILT BY
MOVING MEAT!

MEAT INVENTED THE INTERNET SO
IT COULD SHARE INFORMATION WITH
OTHER MEAT!

MEAT KEEPS OTHER SENTIENT MEAT
IN HOUSES AS PETS!

MEAT DOMESTICATED OTHER
SENTIENT MEAT IN FARMS TO EAT IT!

MEAT GOES TO SCHOOL TO BECOME
SMARTER MEAT!

MEAT PICKS UP TRASH ON THE
SIDEWALK BECAUSE IT WANTS TO BE
BETTER MEAT!

MEAT MEETS A MEAT MATE AND
FALLS IN LOVE!

MEAT PAINTS AND DANCES AND
TELLS STORIES BECAUSE IT NEEDS TO
EXPRESS ITS MEATY EMOTIONS!

WHEN MEAT REALLY THINKS
ABOUT IT, IT IS JUST REALLY
COMPLICATED MEAT!

The Angel Who Pitched Humans to God

Have you ever wanted an animal that could do more than just survive?

Have you ever needed an animal to realize you're there?

An animal that could make up its own mind about you?

An animal that had five fingers on each hand?

To make things for you?

To build for you?

An animal that could harvest and breed its own food?

That could live without relying on what already exists in nature?

That could conquer nature itself?

That could master fire and tool-making and killing?

Whose lives could span a century?

Whose lives could mean so much, or nothing at all?

Scarecrows

Three scarecrows stuffed with shame stand in a corn field

and try to light themselves on fire.

The people say they're lazy.

The scarecrows disagree.

The people say, Move.

The scarecrows say, We can't.

We are like the stinking worms after a flood, sprawled out on your sidewalks,

writhing with longing.

We would like to go back to the earth,

but the curb is miles away,

and you are stepping on us.

The people say, What are we supposed to do?

Pick you up and fling you back onto the grass?

You floundering worm, you?

The scarecrows say, If not, we will continue to toss and turn

on the pavement.

The people say, We are at an impasse.

Favorite Things

Dim lights and pink wines,
ocean waves and city skylines,
pressed flowers and good times,
and blue fingers from cheap rings.

Marquee boards and crystal-clear skies,
flower crowns and blue hair dye,
sugar skulls and not telling lies,
and heavy golden wings.

Open windows with nice views,
new music and sentimental value,
neon signs and speaking the truth.
These are a few of my favorite things
(that have nothing to do with you).

Homesick Keratin

My hair grows faster in Madison.
It's always curlier, too.
It knows where it wants to be.
It wants to be ruffled by
the wind that glides over the lakes.

My nails grow stronger in Madison.
When I return to Iowa I have to cut them
because they begin to break.
My hangnails are worse here, too.
I have to be sure to carry clippers.

My feathers grow brighter in Madison.
They're vibrant because they know they're home.
They know the feeling of the air
when we fly to all our favorite places.
They aren't afraid to take up more space.

My horns grow better in Madison.
When they're shoved into crowded friends' cars,
when we knock our heads together
cruising down West Broadway,
that's when I grow best.

The Myth of You and Me

We lie at the feet of a statue of a goddess and stare up
at Victory high above our heads.

We reach for her
even though she stands out of our grasp.

I want you to know that I think you're holy.

I want you to know
that I know
that you know
that we can't just keep breaking
our problems into stanzas.

We lie at the feet of a statue of a goddess and cut our
jealousy into tiny pieces and feed them to each other
like peeled grapes.

I want you to know that my pillows are
a big fan of your hair.

I want you to know that you're my Achilles heel
and wrist
and knuckles.

We could be great together.
The right side of your brain
and the left side of my chest?
We'd conquer.
But, then again...

Maybe we should cut our losses.
Shred them, in fact.

Are we going to keep raising our voices for each other?
Or are we going to let ourselves speak?

You say you need me.

Like a moth needs a good electric shock.

So I cross my heart—

—with cold hands.

I promise
I'll leave you sleek, sun-kissed skin.
I'll leave you warm and forgetful.

How about you take that sharp gaze of yours
and cut away the bruises on my skin?

Carve away the bad and rotten,
leave the soft, the untouched, the delicate,
leave the unmarred and pure.

File away the lines on my thighs,
sand them until they're smooth.

Silver lining, that's my name.

You're my permission to be okay.

We may be lying right now—

—but I'm hungry for your truth.

It seems the myth of me—

—is in love with the myth of you.

Anthropologically Speaking

The fact that we as a society do not need to /
constantly hunt and gather or farm / is a sign of an
advanced civilization. / The less farmers we have— /
the more craftspeople and artists and / storytellers—
/ the more philosophers and poets— / the more it
means that we are truly thriving.

So why can't the complex ecosystem / of
my brain and bones and blood / be a complex
sociotechnological system / of aqueducts and
pyramids and / storytellers / and be an advanced
civilization, too?

Why must every cell be devoted to / food or water
or money? / I'll go to college to pursue a higher /
education and write poetry in / technology studies
class and / complicate my advanced civilization. /
Thank you very much / for the tuition money, though.

Predictions from the Dawn of History

In twelve thousand years my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter will not think of me.

She will sit at her writing machine as I sit now and think, but she will not look back. In twelve thousand years life will move so quickly that she will barely have time to think of me. She will work for a living, as we do now. It will be easier for her, though. All the knowledge of all the humans on the planet will have doubled ten times by her century. Although she will not know as much as I do about the plants and their uses, the movements of the animals, and how to chip away at the rocks to make perfect bi-facial, double-fluted projectile points, she will not need to. Her brain may be smaller than mine, but that is okay. Her people will no longer have to stalk animals across the savanna for days on end, nor scramble through forests to find nuts and fruit. Her people will have herds and crops to live off of, and she will not even have to meet the livestock or touch the still-growing stalks of wheat before she eats them. There will be farmers, of course, but there will be many more potters and poets and actors and

athletes and scientists and engineers and people who are all of those things at once. My granddaughter will live and study in tall buildings made of glass. She will tend to her potted plants and written words and make art with her hands in her people's vast intersubjective language— because she can— because when she and her people no longer need anything, they will begin to want. She will take classes on me and my people, study us as if we are different. As if she doesn't have the same instructions for life inside her. As if she does not walk the same earth I walk now. I am twenty-five and pregnant. If I am right to believe that my child is female, then an egg forming inside her right now will someday become her own child. That will be my granddaughter. My granddaughter lives inside me at this very moment, a small piece of her, of what she will become. Inside her will soon form another granddaughter, and in her, another. All the instructions for all of the great-granddaughters that will ever come from my family are cradled inside my body at this very moment. And it will not take very many granddaughters until she is born— the one who will not think of me. She will work for a living. She will study. She will not break her back over farm work, but instead hunch over machines. She will click away at her tiny written symbols and crank out pages of them for her teachers. Some days she will walk like a ghost from glass building to glass building. But she will have chosen it. And she will not wonder if her body is rotting. She will not walk outside and smell the breeze and wonder— if she were to throw her computer away, would she be happier? She will not trudge across the pockets of grass surrounding her tall buildings and ask herself— if she were to kneel in the dirt and bury her five-fingered hands into the mud from which we emerged so many granddaughters ago, would she be

happier? She will not think about how far her people have come in only twelve thousand years. She will not go on long walks out of her town and long for the days I live now — the ones of hunting and gathering — the ones in which we are all marathon runners — in which mothers carry children on their backs until they can keep up with the adults by themselves. In twelve thousand years my great-granddaughter will not think of me. She will sit at her writing machine as I sit now and think, but she will not look back.

Or maybe she will.

Acknowledgments

I thank you for bending your path towards this
deck of poems—

they are a stack of cards shuffled regardless of
time and sorted by sentiment.

And thank you to my friends for their radiant smiles
and our countless nights of cognitive revolutions.

Every day we leave the pits and seeds of our
thoughts wherever we go
and still we trail each other.

Thank you, also, to AM, his writing class, and his
fiction club,

for which I gladly crank out pages of tiny inter-
subjective symbols.

The pulp of these pages are packed with your
guidance.

Many of these poems would not have been written
without you

and your daily writing prompts.

*All the beasts in all the world
(horses, whales, lions, rats)
cannot be as imperfect as us:
Homo narrans –
if my Latin is correct.*

Follow award-winning author Oona Miller as she guides you through her shuffled deck of poetry, *How to Draw a God*. Listen closely to the earthworms, stomach bacteria, angels, and wisdom teeth striving to make their voices heard.

Maybe these twenty-nine poems can teach you a thing or two about the mental health of scarecrows, the suspiciously talented meat, and what it truly means to be a part of the storytelling species.