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The Mockingbird

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The Mockingbird

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of East Tennessee State University

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Department of Literature and Language



2024

Volume 51 edited by Emily Wilson and Jake Lawson

In Memoriam

The 51st edition of *The Mockingbird* is dedicated to Dr. Bert C. Bach. Former Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Bert C. Bach's legacy spans many generations. A true Renaissance man, Dr. Bach provided unparalleled support for the Arts at ETSU. He made immeasurable contributions to the Department of Literature and Language, including founding the Bert C. Bach Written Word Initiative. He also ensured that *The Mockingbird* had a future when most literary magazines were moving online and falling out of print.

Because of Dr. Bach, we have had the opportunity to learn from dozens of world-renowned authors, including former United States Poet Laureates.

The Bert C. Bach Written Word Initiative annually continues to sponsor events such as The Spring Literary Festival, the Fall Writing Residency, the Black American Writers series, and the 3 Emerging Writers series.

May we remember Dr. Bach as we turn through these pages.

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The Mockingbird

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Editors' Note

Emily Wilson & Jake Lawson

In 2023, *The Mockingbird* underwent many changes – as did its "nest" of Burleson Hall. The magazine's masthead expanded to include two executive editors and a team of genre editors. By assembling a larger team, we considered each genre with a new and concentrated focus; with this new ensemble, we are thrilled to present all the outstanding work in this issue. ETSU's thriving literary and art community continually expands, and being among such talented artists is truly inspiring.

While the welcome changes brought a new fluidity and ease to our work, it was no easy task to say goodbye to Burleson. In the final days of the Fall 2023 semester, we watched with full hearts as dozens of Burleson's denizens covered the walls in verse, doodles, song lyrics, and gentle odes to the halls that housed so much of the creativity we aim to illuminate through our publication. Though Burleson will no longer house the classrooms where we nurtured our love for literature, we sincerely thank our professors for their dedication in guiding us as students and art enthusiasts.

This edition aims to bring marginalized voices to the center by elevating and championing ETSU's diverse and richly woven tapestry of creatives. After witnessing adverse legislation and social climate excluding so many, we sought to invite and welcome the voices of those who may have felt disregarded or stifled. To protect the privacy and safety of anyone who wished to publish with us, we offered to publish work anonymously for the first time. We hope that in our efforts to provide an inclusive, welcoming space, we were able to shine a light on the work of those who may not have felt safe or celebrated otherwise. Editing the 51st issue of *The Mockingbird* has been an honor for many reasons. We have many people to thank for this edition's success.

Many thanks to our editors. Our team included Holly Todaro for poetry, Lauren Lefler for fiction, TaKya Hughes for nonfiction, and Juliet Chukwuma for drama. We would also like to give special thanks to our student readers: Iris Caldwell, Briana Presley, Erika Perez Cortazar, Emma Sheedlo, Hayden Cogdell, Claire Webb, Alexis Lamb, Adeline Rosebush, and Meghan Cordoza.

We want to thank Dr. Jesse Graves and Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes for all their help and encouragement. We thank Taylor Campbell for bringing the needed expertise to make this edition sing. We also thank our contest judges for making the most difficult decisions. Our judges included Julia Watts for fiction, Melissa Range for poetry, Darius Stewart for nonfiction, and Heather Hoover for drama. Thanks to Dr. Felipe Fiuza and Dr. David Korfhagen for translating and reviewing our winning poems.

A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself is an act of gratitude, but we would nonetheless like to offer special thanks to Dr. Joe Bidwell, Dean of College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Daniel Westover, Chair of the Department of Literature & Language for their continued support and commitment to this project.

Emily Wilson would like to thank her family for their persistent support and belief in her, and especially her mother for listening to every neurotic, caffeine-fueled soliloquy delivered over the course of this magazine's production.

Jake Lawson would like to thank his wife, Sommer Hayden, for her unwavering support and patience.

Thanks to everyone who gave their love and support—your dedication to our mission brought this issue to life.

dream journal

AQ Hanna

some nights i wake up
with a poem swelling
in my throat. do you
remember the feeling
of cicada song, could you
fall asleep to cacophony
like this when it never goes
silent? i tell myself that
tomorrow, always tomorrow,
i'll arrive at the page. i will
stick the landing and knot
these sentences with sunlight.

diario de sueños

AQ Hanna

Translated by Dr. Felipe Fiuza

a veces me despierto por la noche
con un poema hinchándose
la garganta. ¿te acuerdas
de lo que sentía al oír la canción
de la cigarra? ¿te dormías con
esa cacofonía que nunca se
calla? trato de convencerme
de que mañana, siempre mañana,
me acercaré a la página. clavaré el aterrizaje y anudaré
estos versos con la luz del día.

in the car, alone

AQ Hanna

at night and memory starts to play its tricks, shivering
through the windshield. under the cold red of a stop
light, swathes of people pass like birthdays—so many
people who have laughed and made excuses and carried
news, good and bad, on the way to their friend's living
rooms. you take your eyes off the road and insert yourself
in the script. alone in the car, want makes an animal
out of you, makes you wish for things like friendship
bracelets and a full belly, a full heart. lorde comes on the
radio
and the daydream flinches—you're 19 and a house fire.
january already and you can't wait for this year
to be over. you're starving, i know. i know you
think your mistakes are handwritten when every night
ends in a bedroom of your faults. all the years you spent
watching parties through your window, the dirty places
you crawled into for love as if it could ease the anger.
a long poem going nowhere. lies followed all the way down.
meanwhile, the world goes on. morning throws light
light across your room, shoo's last night away like a mother
teaches you your first word. there is an other side to this
and on some june-glad morning, you will take life
by the hands, ask it how much joy it has to give
and it will say *more, more, more.*

June

AQ Hanna

I can feel it coming
back, a flock of blue

birds larger than hope. Look:
the mouth of summer opens

like a peach pit, no peeling necessary.
I'll enter it alone. I'll dance anyways.

I was always here, mistakes and all, saying yes
to heaven. To being. Because it's June and it's in

my blood. The honeybees have committed
to their purpose. Mangos have returned

in grocery carts, so ripe I can almost taste
the sun. Basil in the garden, mosquito

bite on my heart. I swear it's twice the size
now, making me think I could honestly love

the world. Dear belly of honeysuckle and heat,
dear giddy roly-poly in the dirt. I know what to do

with wonder now.

July

AQ Hanna

Sitting on a log in the lawless dark, I tell you the truth. How'd we end up here anyway? Time is a rumor that ends with *but you didn't hear it from me*. Three feet away, our friends talk nonsense. Fireflies blink like cursors in the trees and the glow is in our mouths. I'm listening to you, which is to say I'm memorizing the way your figure displaces light. Limping through the woods, whittled hand on your shoulder, I tell you to salt the earth behind us. Don't let them get us until they get us. But the deadlines—the mosquito bite scars and other things my body remembers. Someone from a cold climate could believe in this. Come morning, you can act like everyone else; you can lie. Say oakwood. Heatstroke. Say I was good in that forest and all my words were worth it. Look at my hands. Look at them in a light only tomorrow brings. It's summer—reach out and mean it. Now hold it down in the shadows. Let midnight be where we are enough to stay.

Young Love

Cade Campbell

Young love flies on a midsummer's night,
Pivoting like a silent helicopter over a battlefield.
Ripping those who love away and coddling what remains.
It flies until it reaches an organism, incomprehensibly
larger than itself and alights.
A mere featherweight on the fingertip, unnoticeable to
modern womankind.
And much less her masculine counterpart.
Young love sits on the arm or leg,
Six more elegant legs anchored to the pink flesh,
Tender tarsi caressing each follicle,
And it drains the lifeblood from the core of many bodies.
But only seldom is it noticed.
When caught, it is vanquished, leaving but a smear upon
the skin.
Yet when it finishes its brief errand and departs,
A searing pinprick born, abandoned.
And one must wonder, what this bite may have become?
Or who left it.
Nevertheless, well-fed mosquitoes fly away,
And the lifeblood drained is spawned into a so-called
family.
Young love is forgotten in dew-covered spiderwebs and
deliquescing wings on pond water,
A carcass of exoskeleton and membranous wings,
But it always resumes.
The night sky is never without young lovers.

Amor Juvenil

Cade Campbell

Translated by Dr. Felipe Fiuza

El amor juvenil vuela durante una noche de verano,
Adelantándose como un helicóptero sobre un campo de
batalla,
Arrancando a los enamorados y acariciando a lo que se
queda.
Vuela hasta encontrar un organismo, incomprensiblemente
mayor que sí mismo y se baja.
Una pluma en la puntita del dedo, ignorada por las mujeres
modernas.
Y mucho menos su homólogo masculino.
El amor juvenil se sienta en el brazo o en la pierna,
Seis piernas elegantes más hincadas en la piel rosada,
Tarsos tiernos acariciando a cada folículo,
Y saca el alma del tuétano de muchos cuerpos.
Pero casi nunca se nota.
Cuando se atrapa, se derrota, dejando no más una mancha
en la piel.
Sin embargo, cuando abandona sus vuelos errantes y se va,
Deja una quemadura, una señal, abandonada.
Y uno debe preguntarse ¿qué podría haber sido esta
mordida?
O quién la dejó.
No obstante, mosquitos bien nutridos se van,
Y la sangre que se ha quitado se desarrolla en lo que se
llama familia.
El amor juvenil se olvida en telarañas cubiertas de rocío y
sus alas se deshacen en un estanque,
Un cadáver de exoesqueleto y alas membranosas,
Pero siempre vuelve.
El cielo nocturno no existe sin amores juveniles.

Anesthetic Love Song

Hannah Smith

PRE-OP / THE DOCTOR SAYS, “RATE YOUR PAIN ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN,” and in the hoarse cry of mis-strung violin, I tell him, “Seven.” *Just because it’s lucky; not because it hurts.* On the crest of every hour, a fresh set of rubber gloves will pry informatic victims from the carnage of a medicalized battleground – *What’s your full name? When were you born? Can you tell me, in your own words, why you’re here today?* – but they never return to change the dressing. Never to drain the new blood; never to cleanse the old wound. In place of comfort care, the clock strikes noon and a nurse rushes forth, begging to take over – she swears she can manage, but every hemoglobin tear shed by a body cloaked in gaping eyes for apertures becomes long forgotten – as she sweeps my hair from my face and begins to hum a lullaby, coaxing liquid anesthetics through the tireless labyrinth of nerves and veins that root within the erythemic flora of my skin.

A moment of silence, cherished until it is ragged. (*Haven’t you heard this before? “To be loved is to be changed.”*) She instructs me to close my eyes and count backwards from ten in my head. Sedation’s beak picks at the shell of a body left hollowed and bloodless; still, all I can offer is this: I have spent two decades biding time on the rounded edge of a potter’s knife, manipulating and configuring myself into a woman without cracks, who emerges from the pyre with a soldier’s fortitude and learns to bury her soft parts beneath Trojan Horse bones. But even then – created in my own image, with my mother’s thick skin and my father’s steady surgeon hands – it has not been long enough. *I am still no match for a bleeding heart. No competitor for the ruptured valves and ailing vessels that I concealed, carried within the depths of my coat pockets like weapons from the*

time that I had enough strength in my fingers to be able to pull a trigger. There are not words for this poem, there is not a melody for this swan song – just silent, naked longing, and the tired pulsation of a singular force, a perfect mirror of Earth’s genesis. Adam takes from the rib. *No words, no poem.* Eve is left to bleed out in the garden; unraveling in solitary, her innards preserved to fertilize the next harvest’s soil. *No melody, no swan song.* In time, restoration begins. It’s all clay and water from here. The doctor prepares to operate, extremities crossed – *just because it’s lucky; not because it hurts.* He will cut me open with the unapologetic tenderness of someone who is not afraid of the things they can hold. *No words, no poem, no melody, no swan song.* The sky turns black as a pupil. My body slips into unconsciousness like it is breathing a sigh of relief. I have forgotten what it is I am supposed to be doing.

SURGERY / Someone once told me that – amongst the ceaseless stream of experiences that man is to amass between conception and damnation – we will never find ourselves as defenseless as we are on an operating table. Naturally, – and bound to the childlike quest for unrelenting explanation – I’d tested both science and theory, “*Never?*” Alas, it was confirmed: *Never. Never. That was all there was to it.* But, what of art? What of poetry, and theatrics, and frantic, rhythmic hymnsong? *Had they never been sixteen?* All girl and no god. Tempting fate atop a concave foundation, watching summer’s final sun be digested by a blood red sky and crucifixion emerge beneath the shadow of a blue bruise. Stalled in transience by the fascination of reincarnation as a consequence for carrying the weight of something that she shouldn’t yet be strong enough to keep hold of.

I was sixteen once. I still can’t find the words to describe it.

To stand in the peach-pit center of a bedroom that reeks of lingering prepubescence, to learn what it feels like when a woman comes undone at her childhood seams and primary colors turn threadbare. The literature proves that each season should pass but fails to hypothesize that the next one will leave me with grasping hands and a wordless tongue. *I come home for Thanksgiving, and it kills me. I come home for Christmas Eve and follow my mother through the grocery store with every ounce of my loneliness tied like a balloon around my wrist.* The literature proves that each season

should pass but fails to hypothesize that the next one will take me with it. Here are the results of tracheotomizing the poet: *what good is it to breathe, if I cannot speak?* Here I am regardless, in fragmentation and in blood. What I'm trying to say is I love you. You find me, a helpless avian. For the first time, I do not have to neglect my injuries; I do not have to let them swell to the point of infection just to meet you there. What I'm trying to say is I love you. I'm drowning in a saline sea, where intravenous lines act as life preservers, and even in all the re-dos, I reach for you before the Ace Bandage shore. What I'm trying to say is I love you. I am finding a cure for this disease. I am emitting lexicon emesis on an empty stomach. *Just because it's lucky; not because it hurts.*

What I'm trying to say is I love you.

When consciousness breaks, you're sitting by my bedside, more than just an outline. You're holding my hands, and for the first time, I don't have to remember what to do with the weight of them empty. You don't know it yet, but I'll preserve this moment in every pressed petal, every contorted reflection in a smiley-faced mylar balloon, every spoonful of ice chips fallen victim to the merciless warmth of your palm. I will practice life-sustaining measures; I will take the dove down from our doorway. I will walk out of this hospital and become something beyond a body in a basement.

What I'm trying to say is I love you. When consciousness breaks, you're sitting by my bedside, more than just an outline. For the first time, you press your fingers to the cut to try and quell the bleeding, and I pretend that doesn't hurt worse than any wound I've carried.

What I'm trying to say is I love you.

I think that you know.

POST-OP / When consciousness breaks, I wake – alone, in a stark-white room where everything is made of sharp corners. The doctor says, “Rate your pain on a scale of one to ten,” and in the hoarse cry of mis-strung violin, I tell him, “Seven.”

Not because it's lucky; just because it hurts.

Canción de Amor Anestesiada

Hannah Smith

Translated by Dr. Felipe Fiuza

PRE-OPERATORIO/ EL DOCTOR DICE “EVALÚE SU DOLOR EN UNA ESCALA DE UNO A DIEZ,” y con voz ronca y llorosa de violín mal encordado le digo “siete.”
No más por la suerte del número, no porque me duela. A la campanada de cada hora, un nuevo par de guantes de goma les arrancará a víctimas informadas de la masacre en este campo de batalla medicalizado – *¿Cuál es su nombre completo? ¿Cuándo nació? ¿Me puede contar con sus propias palabras por qué está aquí hoy?* – pero nunca vuelven para cambiar los vendajes. Nunca para drenar la nueva sangre, jamás para limpiar la vieja herida. En vez de cuidado paliativo, la campanada del reloj marca las doce y aparece una enfermera, implorando para que le dejen reemplazarles – jura que será capaz de manejarlo, pero cada lágrima de hemoglobina compartida por un cuerpo ocultado en agujeros de ojos borrosos de ojeras se olvida por completo – mientras ella me quita el pelo de la frente y empieza a murmurar una canción de cuna y, a la vez, mete anestésicos líquidos por el laberinto incansable de nervios y venas que se enraízan adentro de la flora epistémica de mi piel. Un momento de silencio, que se celebra hasta que se rompe. (*¿Ya has escuchado eso alguna vez? “Ser amado es ser cambiado.”*) Me dice que cierre los ojos y que cuente de diez a cero en la mente. El pico de la anestesia pica los restos de un cuerpo vacío y sin sangre; todavía, lo que te puedo contar es esto:
He pasado dos décadas matando el tiempo manejando al cuchillo de un alfarero, moldándome y manipulándome en una mujer sin agujeros, que se levanta de las cenizas con una resistencia de soldado y que aprende a enterrar sus sentimientos bajo huesos de caballo de Troya. Pero aun

entonces – creada según mi propia imagen, con la piel dura de mi madre y las manos seguras de mi padre cirujano – no me alcanzó el tiempo. *Todavía no soy suficientemente fuerte para enfrentarme a un corazón partido. No hay competencia para las válvulas rotas y las venas enfermas que oculté, cargadas adentro del fondo de mis bolsos como si fueran armas del tiempo en que tenía fuerza suficiente en los dedos para apretarle al gatillo.* No hay palabras para este poema, no hay una melodía para esta canción desesperada – solamente silencio, anhelo desnudo, y el latido débil de una fuerza singular, un espejo perfecto del génesis de la Tierra. Adam le saca de la costilla. *Sin palabras, sin poema.* Eva se queda abandonada, desangrándose en el jardín, desenredándose sola, sus tripas preservadas para fertilizar al suelo de la próxima cosecha. *Sin melodía, sin despedida.* Con el tiempo, empieza la restauración. Todo es agua y barro desde aquí. El doctor se prepara para operar, las extremidades se cruzan – *no más por la suerte, no porque me duela.* Me abrirá con la ternura imparcial de alguien que no tiene miedo de las cosas que puede agarrar. *Sin palabras, sin poema, sin melodía, sin despedida.* El cielo se vuelve negro como una pupila. Mi cuerpo se vuelve inconsciente como si respirara un suspiro de alivio. Se me ha olvidado lo que debía de estar haciendo.

CIRUGÍA / Alguien me dijo una vez que – entre esas experiencias incesables con las que un hombre se enfrenta desde su concepción hasta su damnación – nunca nos encontraremos tan indefensos como cuando estamos en una mesa de operaciones. Naturalmente, – y motivado por la búsqueda juvenil de explicaciones implacables – había probado tanto de la ciencia cómo de la teoría, “¿nunca?” Lamentablemente, se confirmó: nunca. *Nunca. Y eso era todo lo que había que decir.* Pero, ¿y el arte? ¿Y la poesía, el teatro, la música sacra, frenética y rítmica? *¿Nunca tuvieron dieciséis años?* Toda niña y sin dios. Tentando a la suerte arriba de una fundación cóncava, mirando al último puesto de sol del verano ser digerido por un rojo cielo mientras la crucifixión emerge desde las sombras de un machucado azul. Parada momentáneamente por la fascinación de la reencarnación como consecuencia de cargar el peso de algo que no debería poder agarrar. *Tuve dieciséis años una vez. Todavía no encuentro las palabras para describirlo.*

Estar de pie en el medio de un dormitorio que apesta a preadolescencia y aprender cómo se siente cuando una mujer se deshace de los nudos de su niñez mientras sus colores primarios se vuelven débiles. La literatura comprueba que cada estación tiene que pasar, pero se excusa de hipotetizar que la siguiente me dejará con ganas de agarrar algo y con una lengua sin palabras. *Vuelvo a casa por el día de acción de gracias y eso me mata. Vuelvo a casa por las vísperas de navidad y sigo a mi madre por el supermercado llevando a cada gota de mi soledad prendida como un globo alrededor de la muñeca.* La literatura comprueba que cada estación tiene que pasar, pero se excusa de hipotetizar que la siguiente me llevará consigo. Aquí están los resultados de traqueotomizar al poeta: *¿para qué sirve respirar, si no puedo hablar?* Aquí estoy, sin embargo, en fragmentos y en sangre. Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo. Me encuentras, un pájaro indefenso. Por la primera vez, no tengo que ignorar mis heridas; no tengo que dejar que se hinchen hasta que se infeccionen no más para encontrarte allí. Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo. Me estoy ahogando en un mar salado, donde líneas intravenosas actúan como si fueran salvavidas, y aun después de rehacerlo varias veces, te busco frente a la ribera de Ace Bandage. Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo. Estoy encontrando una cura para esta enfermedad. Y estoy vomitando léxico mientras tengo el estómago vacío. *No más por la suerte; no porque me duele.*

Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo.

Cuando me vuelve la conciencia, estás sentado al pie de mi cama, eres más que un boceto. Me tienes colgadas las manos y, por la primera vez, no tengo que preocuparme sobre qué hacer con el peso de tenerlas vacías. No lo sabes todavía, pero recordaré a este momento en cada pétalo prensado, en cada reflexión retorcida en un globo mylar sonriente, en cada cucharada de chips de hielo derrotados por el calor despiadado de tus palmas. Tomaré medidas para mantener la vida; sacaré la paloma desde la entrada de nuestra puerta. Saldré de este hospital y seré algo más que un cuerpo en el sótano. Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo. Cuando me vuelve la conciencia, estás sentado al pie de mi cama, eres más que un boceto. Por la primera vez me aprietas la herida con los dedos para tratar de calmar el sangrado y yo trato de fingir que no me duele más que cualquier herida que ya haya tenido.

Lo que estoy tratando de decirte es que te amo.
Creo que lo sabes.

POSOPERATORIO / Cuando me vuelve la consciencia, me despierto – sola, en una habitación blanca reluciente donde todo está hecho de rincones cortantes. El doctor dice “evalúe a su dolor en una escala de uno a diez” y con voz ronca y llorosa de violín mal encordado le digo “siete.” *No por la suerte; solo porque me duele.*

i'm sorry to all you bath lovers

Claire Webb

i don't like baths,
that night in the
steam fogging up
your bare legs
hair floating like
intertwined limbs.
suspended, weightless,
cocoon, fingers brushing against skin underwater submerged, i could hear the dull thud
of your arm shielding me from the cold, porcelain enameled steel that makes up our world.

but I remember
hotel room:
the mirror,
cradling me,
ink between our
i sink below the water
contained in a warm

Moonwalker

Claire Webb

I saw the ace of spades the day
before my cat flew away.
I'd been playing euchre
when I pulled the card;
hearts was trump, I was losing.

The next morning,
my cat jumped off the table and
drifted right down like a leaf.
Didn't think much of it, til I saw him
walk past me while I ate lunch.

He was walking three feet off the ground,
like a moonwalker. I took him to the vet
to see what was wrong. I had to
float him to the car, hold him tight
so he wouldn't blow away.

By the time we got there,
he rose like a balloon, sleeping
with his back against the ceiling.
Doctors said they'd never seen
anything like it.

By morning, he was gone.
Someone had opened the door,
let him float right on out. They
watched him rise in the air, til he was
no more than a speck. Then, nothing.

Serenity

Claire Webb

Static, imagine
trying to view life
through channel 5
blurry, out of focus.

Almost there, I think.
Clarity, just out of reach,
arms outstretched for
something I don't understand,
feeling as if it's been
wrenched from me,
though I don't know
what I've lost.

Time perhaps,
or an experience, longing
to go back and change
the unchangeable,
things I never had a say in.
Yet, here I am, affected
by the waves of a past
that is not my own.

My therapist has been
teaching me to inhale
through the stomach;
use my diaphragm;
exhale; think of the things
I cannot change, to carry?
Shoulder? Manage- accept.
Begin again.

Weightless, imagine
cloud and sky blanketing
the earth and the waves,
oh, how the waves breathe.

I Wasn't There the Night He Died

Claire Webb

I'd chosen to go to my play rehearsal,
because I knew how hard it would be
to watch his eyes slowly close
each blink longer than the last
until his eyes wouldn't open
to blink again.

I knew that I'd cry because everyone else
in my family cried because we were losing
the most precious part of us,
more than a companion,
a friend, a loved one.

I knew how cold and sterile that room would be,
the last room he'd be alive in.
I knew that he needed me.
I should've been there, but I couldn't,
couldn't be there for him or for me.

I knew that he loved me,
but he'd be different after.
His fur wouldn't be so glossy;
his velvet ears wouldn't perk up
the way they did when someone came home
and I knew that that was the last time I'd get see him,
but I didn't go and I'm so sorry.

What I didn't know was how guilty I'd feel
even years later wondering if he wondered
where the fourth member of his family was
in those last moments,
before he closed
his eyes.

Constellations

Elizabeth Carpenter

We are Constellations, you and I.
Constellations oh brother of mine.
In our minds, we would fly,
And without me, you passed with wings divine.

Without you there, I was pushed under.
Once, we were two lines free but adjacent,
But with you has gone my thunder.
Now a wild thing forced complacent.

In the end, I did it for you.
I could see you in the mirror,
I could see you as I rebelled true.
My features for a single moment ran clear.

I waited for you brother.
I waited just on the fringe.
Then you were here, mourning another.
You cry for the moon and I feel a twinge.

We are constellations, you and I.
Constellations oh brother of mine.

On This Farm

Elizabeth Carpenter

On this farm everything is fine.
The moon is grinning from the sky.
Now it's time to dine.

My flashlight emits a gentle shine,
The horses knicker their greeting.
On this farm everything is fine.

Their oats and supplements I combine.
I pour into their food pans.
Now it's time to dine.

Shouting into the night, the sheep come running in a line.
The lamb has wandered away again.
On this farm everything is fine

I walk towards the lambs whine.
My light dies, but I see its small body. Gently I call.
“Now it's time to dine.”

A shiver runs up my spine.
It never was a lamb or even an animal.
On this farm everything is fine,
Now it's time to dine.

In Their Narrative

Elizabeth Carpenter

Their tongues are needle-like barbs in her breast.
It is fine, for she is not demanding.
Who cares if her shoulder is their armrest?
Who cares if she is no longer standing?

Their blunt words are waves, sweeping her away.
Her fate? The broken shell that no one wants
Who cares when you are not fit for display?
Who cares when you do not fit certain fonts?

Broken and bleeding, nothing more to give.
She doesn't care for their rhyme or meter.

She's the hue of lime green,
The darker-haired lion.
Listen to her, see her, and don't turn your back.

In their narrative, she is the bitch.

MORNING GLORIES

Rachel Kincaid

My sickly porch is overrun
by flowers and ivy that wrap
around a porch chair. Here, I
watch my hummingbirds
getting drunk. My morning
glories distill for them.
Quenched vines long for
a drink like Southern Sunday.

I pluck a savory-smelling
honeysuckle to taste
sweet nectar and I am gone.
With each drop that flows
from my watering can,
my body shrinks,
like Alice drinking the potion
The water left in my pail
is a pool.

I dive into the land
of Arthur and the Minimoyes
and emerge a yellow
hummingbird, already wasted
on sweet spirits of my flora.

I hover before intoxicants
of many colors, deciding
to have another. A blue
brother approaches me,
“whoever finishes first
gets to pick their spot
in the nest tonight,”

he says, challenging me
to a drinking contest.

I win.

I fall over, drunk,
into the flower, beak first.
I think I'll sleep here.

Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks"

Ben Bilderback

It's quiet downtown.
No buses running
nor dogs barking
at the strays-
silent in their dens.
It's that time of night
when even the street lights
sleep sound in their corners.

These hours, I find
I'm always at the same place:
Phillies.

A bygone mirage I've
made a little part of my soul;
where the coffee is narrowly
lukewarm and there's just
enough effort in the food.

That...that is enough.

Tonight, there's a man
with his woman, both
dressed awfully nice.
I don't see that every day.
Not at Phillies.
But for her...

it's quaint.
That's the satisfaction.
He doesn't mind either.
Phillies is cheap.

It's enough.
That's all there is to it.

They'll sit and chat,
maybe for an hour.
So the time passes by,
flaking like dying skin
from my hand.

They chat with the owner.
They chat with themselves.
They win.
I leave.
And the street wakes, restless.

Diary of a Trans Girl

L.C. Francis

tuck in your shirt,
and lower your voice.
boys like trucks,
and girls like boys.
cut your hair, and tie your tie,
 boys get dirty!
 I Live A Lie

Thank You

L.R. Tipton

If I'd have known that was the last time I'd ever see your face,
I would have stared a little longer.
I'd have held you closer in my embrace,
You who my love did conquer.
You loved me for a time before we went our separate ways,
All alone you left me there crying on the train.
If I'd known what I do now, I might not have gone away,
But in the end it saved us both from a world of pain.
From across the world, I met you, the person that I love,
I thought we'd last forever, like the mated doves.
Although I'll never see you again, across the deep blue sea,
You taught me what love is, my dear, and then you set me free.

I Miss You

L. R. Tipton

Clean sheets and an empty head,
I miss you with me in bed.
I miss your caress, and your soft blond hair--
All the little ways you show that you care.
Lazy days' coffee, and thinking ahead,
And all the things we should have said.
It wasn't too bad, that short life we led--
You said you loved me, lips softly kissing my head.

Fluoxetine (20mg)

Abigail Wolfenbarger

No one would let me die
but I was already dead
a presence they felt but
unseen and unheard
stuck between heaven and hell
until you pierced the darkness
as frigid fingers I know well—
no, not the same as these
shielding me from the pit
water washes over me

they didn't want to grieve
a ghost
they never missed
invisibly ignored
living and breathing
but not the same
death creeping—
ever so slowly
into my thoughts
then evaporates.

Framed

Raven Rhue

Staring up at an unlit ceiling
Held by heavy blankets
I whisper to no-one:
“I am lonely,
I wish to be seen.”

Body framed by edges of the bed
I am an unobserved portrait.
I consider escaping the frame that surrounds me
Stepping out the door to be seen.

But the darkness wraps me so warmly
And as I consider, I remember:
Eyes on my body,
Words in my ears,
Like needles etching tallies into my spine
Each a reminder of the false image they see.

This unseen portrait begs for an audience
But when the light hits the canvas
All the colors are washed away,
Forever lost in obscurity.

So in this frame I stay.
The gentle purr of distant thunder sweeps over my body
Comforting me into complacency.
This frame becomes my tomb.

Above me is written
The epitaph of my soul
For all to read.
“I am scared to be seen,
I am lonely.”

Bath

Raven Rhue

Alone I am held
In an ocean's embrace

The water is the best kind of friend
Supporting me in peaceful silence,
No words with which to judge.

Its body makes small splashes
At the edges of my world.
Its cold fingers run gently through my hair,
And it whispers to me
"You are safe."

In this everlasting, soulless hug
I reach up my hands
And peel back light like a curtain.
In the darkness I am free
To crack open the geode of my soul
And whisper to myself
"I am beautiful."

The Need for Brevity

Raven Rhue

Our eyes meet,
One beat, two-
I look away.

A thought comes to me,
I open my mouth to give it sound,
But on its way
From depth of mind
To tip of tongue
It loses its shape.

Our eyes meet.

If I had an eternity
To make you understand
I would give to you
All that I am,

But words--
Blessed bridge,
Damned prison--
Make a poor vessel
And so
I look away.

But you need a token,
A stamp to mark
Our talk complete.
So, with wry smile
And empty joke
I give to you
A shred of me.

Our eyes meet,
One beat, two
Three...

I walk away,
Still burdened by the weight
Of the invisible me.

in november i burn monsters

Emma Sheedlo

Red still glints against your teeth--
viscera strung like fairy lights
between your canines--
from all the places you've torn into me,
the fruit of my pulse painting your lips
in too-perfect crimson lines, twisted in a smile
as if you're merely going out on the town.

*(As if you've won,
even though the tinderbox
is in my hand.)*

The kerosene hangs heavier this year,
the cold, mottled plastic
digging into my frostbitten fingers
as I stand over you,
choked breaths punched from my withering lungs
as I fumble with the cap,
careful not to stain my hands.

*(I do, anyway,
a thin sheen of oil clinging to
my trembling fingers.)*

"This never works," you hiss,
once-warm voice rough, cold with exertion,
with the weight of the blood we've shed,
"Every year, you do this--
spill a gallon of your own blood
to draw a drop of mine,
only to drop the fuel when it counts."

*("Aren't you tired?"
you don't ask,
as if you ever would.)*

This time, I don't answer--
I'm tired of answering,
tired of this late-autumnal war
where you take what's left to be taken,
tired of letting you talk down the fire,
when you've sold me five years' worth of matches
and the flame's long overdue.

*(And so I pour out the kerosene
and toss aside the can
so that I can light the match.)*

In November, I burn monsters--
tear down memories with my teeth,
a Little Red biting back
against the She-Wolf who tore me open,
ready to burn all traces of the woods that house her,
yet always flinching back in the seconds
before the kill is in my hands.

*(But maybe this year it'll stick,
and next November there'll be ashes
in the places you once prowled.)*

Roadside Cycles

Emma Sheedlo

Death begins with the jaw—

with gentle fingers swiping against soft lips,
prying, nails notched into the gaps between teeth,
plucking canines from their place and smoothing molars down,
sanding the sharpness from the tongue
until it's lost its edge—
until you've gone docile, placid. Obedient.

They'll strip the first and last line of defense from you
before you ever know you need it,
take from you, tame you,
comb back those instincts until they fall asleep,
blissfully dormant, drifting away,
unable to call you back from the roar of the road.

Death continues with the hands—

with a trusted palm against yours,
warm fingers tracing fate and life lines
with all the reverence a worshiper pays their god,
lost in veneration even as they carve your claws away,
trim away your talons with the promise
that you'll never need to use them.

They'll leave your fingers barren,
broken, bloodied, nailbeds made a wasteland,
small valleys leveled from keratin and flesh,
let your palms scrape against concrete
until you can no longer feel the pain,
until the earth and gravel start to meld together.

Death ends with the eyes—

with a body that fails you when it counts,
once-kind hands brushing over tired eyelids,
offering no grace, no salvation,
happy to take your claws, your teeth, anything
and leave you there to watch
as the asphalt lights up gold.

They'll leave you there, then,
with no way to pick yourself up,
no will to drag yourself to your split-skin feet,
and when you've nothing left to fight with
and nowhere left to run,
those headlights almost look like home.

There's no grace in rubber-ripped entrails,
no glory in a body abandoned,
no beauty in blood-blotched bones
left nameless by the roadside,
but the cycle's hard to learn from
and it never seems to end.

But one day you'll walk anew
by the ghost of old tires,
past the place your heart split
against the concrete of the road,
and you'll remake your claws, remake your teeth,
and never die that way again.

an open letter to my black pumps (and the girl who wore them)

Emma Sheedlo

In high school, you were my first friend—
unearthed somewhere in the gilded halls
of a discount shoe store,
too-big around the ankles and tight around the toes,
glossy and glamorous and perfectly imperfect
for a girl who wanted, just for once, to feel something other
than small.

We met when I was fourteen—
five foot one and clumsy,
with the awkward gait of a deer,
a mouth full of rubber-wrapped braces,
not a clue in the world about how to wear makeup
beyond what my aunt taught me three years back.
You were there for me when I stumbled
(because of you, sometimes)
through speeches, through hallways,
through blisters blossoming on my otherwise bare feet,
through the bliss of bone-deep aches until
I finally cast you off.
(I wish, now, that fourteen-year-old girl
had known to savor those blisters—
known to drown in the ache,
to dance in those heels when she had the chance.)
Our friendship only flowered further— fifteen,
five foot one and slightly less clumsy,
braces long-gone and gait refined,
more like a movie star (extra)
and less like a deer traipsing along
with a bullet in her leg.
I only felt stronger with you—

in colored suits and practiced speeches,
only tripping every now and then
and able to catch myself more often than not,
used to blisters, used to the sting,
learning to love it like a victory.
(I miss when pain could feel like glory,
when the fire in my limbs felt contained,
when it felt beautiful— when I felt beautiful,
when this body was yet to betray me.)
You stayed with me through sixteen, seventeen—
five foot nothing (the doctors measured wrong),
and graceful as I could be,
wearing you like an extension of myself,
no longer a roadkill puppet
dragged along by tangled strings.
I still remember running with you—
across college campuses, parking lots,
alight with energy, the flood of joy
surging through my veins
like waters flow through riverbeds,
legs burning, bruised, and brilliant— blissful.
(My lungs burned, each breath smoke
against my tongue, languid and lovely
as the rush slowly ebbed away—
I don't remember when the flame turned cruel.)
I'm twenty-two, now—
five foot nothing and graceless,
limbs stiff as a wandering corpse
and fire ever-burning,
with you buried somewhere deep
in the piles of clothes beneath my bed.
You served me well, then,
before motion became a mountain
I was unequipped to climb,
before wakefulness became a war
I was never going to win,
before this body decided to cave in.
(I'll spend the rest of my life missing you.
I wish I'd savored the bruises when I could.)

Caustic

Hayden Cogdell

Drag needle-like fingers across my cheek
I want to feel them pierce my skin
Suture a smile on my face
And dry my tears with alcohol wipes
To sterilize the impurities festering beneath the lids...
Lids to jars of depressants weighing on me
Pressing down my speech, depressed to screams

Say aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh

Screaming 'til I'm barely breathing
And the drum beat of the white coats
Chromatic thoughts into four notes
Compress my chest with the tempo
Of Bee Gee's famed disco

"Ah Ah Ah Ah Stayin' Alive"

But I'm addicted to the blow
Of polyrhythmic, hypodermic jazz
A symphonic cacophony of clanging metals and ethereal
Counting back from one-hundred

But that medicine gave me a sweet tooth
I can't sleep with that sweet leaf flooding the air
Noxious vapors pass through my lungs
I feel my hands relaxing, steadfast for the first time since I
found you
Though this sweet air is killing me
I pray that I may finally sleep

Chlorine

Hayden Cogdell

I. Crimson Firth

Night air weighed on us,
Like breathing in oil.
Cloaked in vantablack, we climbed out the trenches at the
sound of silence.

Our footsteps echoing in the sloshing mud-
Sprinting through the darkness
Argent glitter ensnaring soldiers- incessant slitting of skin
down to bone.

Bound like fingers in woven bamboo-
Laying lacerated in sadistic bloodletting rituals.
They screamed through the blood-soaked mire for us in
the distance.

The echoing bellows at the barrier of blood
Herald the lighting of lamps ahead.
Fear engulfed me at that sight, my fingers molded into the
Three-O-Three.

Standing with thousands behind me dying in hell,
Manic gnashing of teeth at the thought of what is and was-
Standing lifeless with the bodies bundled up in bladed
bassinets

And the faintest whiff of bleach...

II. *Eau de Nil*

There was no point in moving.
We were destined to die the moment we sprung from the trenches-
And inconsequential race to the womb of death.

I heaved like a mortar was lodged in my guts.
I trembled with a Browning in my chest.
I stared into the nothingness with teargassed eyes.

Sputtering coughs sounded off like firing squads.
Panicked yells in realization of the bitter, burning perfume.
Falling amongst the rats, churning liquified lung tissue in the
earthen sludge.

Undercurrents of the looming green river-
A slurry of carnage seeping across screaming soldiers, silencing
their sorrows.
None escaped the sacrificial drowning.

Hell washed over them in the palette of brimstone.
The charge, the race, the plunge into the crimson firth-
Now laying dead in the mire

Beneath the chemically corrupted River Acheron.

From the Tunnel, I Heard Death Hum

Hayden Cogdell

In the towering tablet of stone bounding across the interstate, I could have sworn I saw writing carved by the constructive gods like hieroglyphs telling the story of the birth of death. In the tunnel that followed I heard the faint screams of his crowning.

Hillsides sheered and slaughtered in your name and woods carved and divided by one hundred-mile graveyards. Oh, roads cutting through the overgrowth and digging through the mountains, like a wishing well for machinery, where children hold their breath for good luck as their parents toss their two-ton tokens through the gaping mouth- dear roads, you cursed this land.

Your ancestry was paved with malice. As boats sailed from the mother country to penetrate foreign soil, from within birthed the demons that raped the land of its purity. On the shores they docked on, no natural beauty could be seen for the monstrous visages frothing from the sediment in the thousands bearing the red cross of senseless slaughter turned the shores to viscera.

From the minds of the penetrators spawned your mother: cavernous maws spread out across the landscape, the clanging of swinging axes into stone and sputtering coughs echo from within. Your father, born of her pillaged pits, trailed his way from Charm City to the Buckeye with slaves bound by blood and chains tied to the tracks conception.

And from their ferric bond, tied with bloodshed and spiked with vehement violence, you, dear road- harbinger of death- were delivered unto the earth.

How many insects have gone extinct on a windshield, swept up by the wipers and buried in the pores of concrete?

How many carcasses lay decomposing and disconnected from the soil that could compost their bones and bring new beginnings to the world you blighted?

How many picket crosses are made out of wood you demanded dismantled and how many tears lay absorbed under the asphalt?

Slaughter is the footpath of man no matter the terrain;
God forbid the day cars fly and our roads can blot out the sun.

The Rite of Rot

Hayden Cogdell

Spoon-feed the masses with mashups of catastrophes
Gut-load the populace, engorge them with hypocrisies
Inject them with micro-doses of logical fallacies
Espresso shots of packed down, acid-based anxieties
Myopic miasma of a mal-informed society
Floating past reality and sinking into malady

They look at us like addicts
If they can get you drunk on algorithms
Get you high on echoes
There'll be no other cure

Misinformation molded into modernity
Sermons preached in buzzwords
Gospels read in newsletters

Mass media engagement, married to a screen
Influencer vacations, a world unseen
Nudes leaked on twitter, she's only fifteen
Yet another suicide, a cog in the machine

Forget about that
The mirror has come to steal your eyes
Now it's swiped your life away
The death of a child washed down the River Lethe

That winding river of ancient oblivion
Dug up from hell, now bounding through the earth
A secret current flowing through our reflections
Treated like a sewage dump

Collectively swimming up shit creek
Pushing each other to the bottom
Don't forget to breathe
Inhale the cesspool that we created
Into your lungs

And forget that you're drowning

honeysuckle leaves caught between your teeth

Percy Smalygo

I am haunting myself, the ghost of a person I never became;
I did not give myself time to be sad and now it is all that I am.
Shoulder-deep in the earth, we are desperately clawing our way
to an early grave—
I want to run away from you and from this place but
somewhere in the back of my throat I know
this hurt will feel the same everywhere as it does here, miles
outside the lights of the city.

“We are going to die one day,” you told me just shy of midnight,
sitting in the back of a pickup truck
and lazing in the stillness of somewhere that was not our home.
Maybe our roots were always too shallow to grow in this half-
dead town.

You write place-name songs about cities you’ve never even seen
and talk of running away, of outrunning the things that bite at
your heels;
“for once” you say, “I could burn the smallness of my youth”
but the kestrels are all dying with bullets in their throats,
and you have never been one to offer up that sort of forgiveness
without cause.

And the coyotes in the west pasture will eat you alive before the
sunrise
though you argue there are better days ahead, we cannot see
them through the fog
and truth is sharper than the double-edged sword that lives
between my shoulder blades;
this town is going to kill the both of us before we see another
spring.

Yet the wolves still come running each time you call
fleeing from between the pines like this endless chase will save
 them
midwinter desperate and long past starving, in a fight for their lives.
“They look like us,” you say, yarrow and blood staining your palms
as I pretend not to hear you, burying my secrets in the cardinal red
 earth.

american reckoning

Percy Smalygo

I do not know what bravery means
after you look me in the eyes and call me a coward
when I was only just trying to survive
all of the worst days that meant nothing to you.

And if I am a myriad of regret you are just the same,
just a sixteen-year-old, still as bitter as that day in winter
to the east, walking through the woods and saying to no one,
“have you forgotten the cruelty of being fifteen?”

And I run and I keep running
because I am terrified of what happens when I stop
chasing something I cannot find
and fleeing something I will never escape.

And I do not know what the end of the world looks like
but sometimes it is like this:
deer on the side of the highway, ribs showing through their fur,
screaming until you lose your voice and your ears are ringing
and the birds go quiet and the kingfishers drown in the lake
again.

perseus

Percy Smalygo

Half of a name fit for a hero.
Is that not what I am?
Is destroying history and learning to live again,
forgetting who you thought I was,
rebuilding in a city full of cardboard houses
not good enough?

I already know it isn't.
Not for you, anyway.
Still, peregrine sorrow swells and settles
in my chest.
Not regret, not guilt,
but the same nameless bite
that sent me east. Running
from the flycatchers and the switchgrass.

Gone are the halcyon days
of burning sunsets on the back porch,
seething in the town of three stoplights
and carrying a name that was never mine.
(I still carry half of that regret, you know.)

There is not a place for me at the end of the world,
so I will make one here in the valley
900 miles down I-40
with twice as much bitterness and bravery
as my father,
that mistletoe man I will never become.

you're doin fine

Percy Smalygo

my roots were raised in the red dirt,
where pumpjacks line roads that lead to nowhere
and all the boomtowns have turned to ghost towns.
we, too, the survivors of that oil-slick greed,
turned into a half-forgotten place,
sanctuary for the cowboys and the cowards
who were too proud to move further south

you learn Appalachia the hard way,
or so I was told.
say it, then say it again
this time with blood on your teeth;
survival is not soft here,
stranger. outsider.
don't you know that this shattercane holler is a far cry
from those twisted-up tongues out west?

yet nobody here knows of those old cicada summers,
when the land between the persimmon trees
and the cow pasture was my kingdom,
or of the lake on the edge of town,
unclear with too many snakes to swim in;
every drop of water made not by a god
but by a man who wanted to feel freshwater on his skin.

this place is not a home
without the 918, blood on my hands,
without back-porch thunderstorms,
the pecan store on main street,
or the fields of hickory in the town of my rivals.

that place carved me out just like the hollow of a lake,
ribs splitting and cracking to make space
for the home I never wanted to call my own.
i learned Appalachia the hard way
and I learned that your history bites back,
fights against aphasia and against the glare
of the cardinals watching from the roadside.
there is no courage in forgetting where you came from
and why you left it all behind you, burning up on the horizon.

char:ladu

Eleanor Flory

The trees are on fire.

I look out the window and watch as the edges begin to catch. Red, orange, gold. Still green for the most part. For a moment I pause, disregarding the laundry in favor of daydreaming. It will be cold soon. The thought makes the hairs rise on the back of my neck, and I have to make a conscious effort to return to the task at hand.

Boxers, overalls, sports bras. A white button up shirt, in need of ironing. A lacy lingerie top. My fingers are stiff with routine and bored with the fabric's familiarity.

I finish anyway.

Two neat stacks folded to set on the bed. A queen size, the comforter embroidered with lilies. Fresh sheets as neat as a psych ward.

Rising, I make my way to the kitchen. There are dishes to be done. I glance out the front window.

The trees are on fire.

In the distance, the mountains are quilted. If I squint I can pick out the colors of asters and goldenrod and sap. Soon it will be time for the harvest.

I breathe deeply. Shake my head.

There are dishes to be done. I go to the kitchen and get to work.

Two sets of tableware. They are old and tarnished. I should polish them soon, but we have no vinegar left to polish with. Maybe another day.

Two porcelain plates, painted with hyacinths. I wash them carefully. I need to put them away, until next year.

The thought makes my fingers itch.

I hear the sound of a car and wonder what time it is. The clock says it is half past noon. I squeeze the dishrag until my fist is dripping with suds. When I breathe in through my nose, the air smells like Mrs. Meyer's Lemon Verbena. I let the sink run until the foam disappears.

Everything still smells like lemon.

I glance out the window and stop.

His car is in the lot. He is home early. I wonder if he knows that the library was closed today.

I see his back, not quite broad enough to hide the fingers clutching at his neck.

I don't think he knows that the library was closed today.

I run outside. It's cold out, the air is starting to bite. I think he says something, but I can't hear him.

I smile.

I forget the feel of fraying lace, of itching fingers, of tarnished silverware and porcelain hyacinths drowning in lemon.

I remember what it is to run like this.

I remember the smell of pine sap sluicing down the evergreens, its taste at the back of my throat.

I remember how the loaminess feels under my feet, the choir of cicadas,

the color of metamorphosis,
burning through the hickories.

The trees are on fire.

Flowers

Liam McCroskey-Shope

*I want my flowers while I can smell them
Won't do me no good atop a tombstone
I won't know that you placed them
There in teary eyed reverence*

*Your loving and longing transmissions
Can't reach me in a casket or urn
You might come visit the place where my corpse is kept
To commemorate our memories and time well spent*

*And bring your kids and grandkids every year
And tell them of the man that once was
But I will be none the wiser
In the ground nothing can move me*

*And the flowers will rot like I do
Forever and always in communion
With the earth you walk upon
Silent and unthinking*

*Flowers will mean nothing
To me in that place
And nothing can reach me
No coordinates could find me*

*No sounds in my ear
No sights in my eye
No fragrance in my nostril
And your good will shall*

*Sit upon my headstone
My heart will know nothing of it.*

The Old, The True

Liam McCroskey-Shope

*If you lived
By the ocean
Right beside the great
Deep Blue*

*Followed your heart
Stayed close to darkness
Would you find your point of view*

*There are sounds
By the ocean
The fizzing crest of a wave
The convulsions of the formless
And no minds with which to stave*

*The hollow sounds
At the edge of the ocean
Will they tell you what you already knew*

*The out of bounds
The wide and the open
The home of the old, the true.*

My Home in Seymour

Liam McCroskey-Shope

*The hills of my home lie like
A lady neath a lush green sheet
Where wind-drifts lift your hair
Kissed and sun bleached
Warmer winds wash over you
Eyes closed, you begin to yield
To the fairest day-dreams that lay beside you
There in those grassy far fields
I was no different
Just one of many
Whose mind as graced by summer's
Sweetest mellow mild rays
Better yet on the cusp of dusk
As the languid world waves away the day
The day ends
Cool night begins
And from all four corners darkness slowly leaks out
One last gust trembles the grass
A silent sermon on the mount
In those far flung fields my fleeting dreams
Slip and slide between the seams
Like the sound of a whip quickly cracked
In the heart of a chasm
Who's depths and parameters
Cannot be fathomed
Nor should you try
Why would the wind worry about you
What could it care about I
Kicked back in meadow meditations
Punctuated sour sting from mosquito's bite
Oh, hot humid southern summer night
Windows weep willow streaks*

*In the lonely interim of Dawn's reach
The sun sets upon me slow as God's speed
My home in Seymour, may I live and breathe.*

Condemned be the Fruit

Alexis Calain

Condemned be the fruit of thy womb,
who must enter a world where all is forgotten.
Where the choice to be or not to be is
not even a question.
Fruit that must possess its beholder and not
unlatch even when one attempts to pluck it.
A fruit that is worshipped above the tree that grew it,
for it is what feeds the commanding again and again.

Condemned be the fruit that wasn't even a choice,
for its growing sprouts were already deemed viable.
Dare to extract the fruit and surely the wrath of
sin will follow.

Condemned be the fruit that must be a part of a land
that takes its power from poisonous crops.
No blessing are you when all that you do is
make me a prop for all to pick off.

Roe to Rights

Alexis Calain

Roe, Roe, Roe your rights
forcibly down the stream.
Mournfully, mournfully, mournfully, mournfully
Freedom: oh, what a dream.

Roe, Roe, Roe your life
nonconsensually down the stream.
Ruefully, ruefully, ruefully, ruefully
Choices: oh, what a dream.

Roe, Roe, Roe your power
oppressively down the stream.
Grievously, grievously, grievously, grievously
Equality: oh, what a dream.

Roe, Roe, Roe no more
time to stop the stream.
Reelect, replace, revive, restore
Liberty: no longer a dream.

God Bless Appalachian Modernization

Alexander Brown

Deep in the hills in Appalachia,
Lays a slumbering giant
Still and sour
Tucked away in a nest of trees
Only seen to all who breathe

Some say it holds riches beyond
Your wildest dreams
Some say it's a cancer
Bursting at the seams
Some say it's the
Beginning of the end
And others say
It's just a beginning

I take it for what it is
A large, rumbling giant
Lying on his majesties dock
Cut in half by a shiny purple river
That barely carries life
And wat come from the river
Is grotesque and deformed
Not once
Have I considered stepping in

Thousands of subjects
Inside its belly
Caring for its every need
It groans and moans
In a way
That satisfies the king

It never sucks in a breath
Only spews out smoke
But it's not angry
Quite the contrary
Its happy to choke

Looking down on its cold hard body
One thought crosses my mind
And it helps me come to the realization
One that I though hard to find
With a sigh and a smile
I spread my arms wide

“God Bless Appalachian Modernization!
- Let's have it all far and wide!”

Kick of Love

Alexander Brown

The longest lines of any poem would not be able to hold her
beauty

The seams of her Visage perfect

No thread out of place,

No imperfect lines for the eye to lay eyes upon,

God took his time

Every stitch serves a purpose

to complete his work of art,

With every gaze my imagination runs wild

She runs with it,

In my mind

How I wish she would crawl from my head

And rest around my arms,

So that his Magnum Opus

Could be more than a Kick of Love.

Hallowed Be Thy Kingdom

Sierra Arguello

there was a time-
in the ages of the past-
where you'll find
the haunting of a life lived before.
coast through waves of memories and moments,
slip through the stone walls;
wrapped in ivy leaves planted long ago.
swim in the current,
that touches like swords and daggers,
watch your blood fuse with the icy blue waves.
walk along the step stones,
counting each one,
turning them over in your pocket,
as so many have before.
see the oak wood signs perched by the path-
letters carved with a sharpened blade-
take your finger and trace the markings,
and then make your own.
you'll find a forest with a canopy ceiling-
overbearing and bewildering trees stand tall-
bushes of junipers and berries scatter around meticulously.
look closely at the muddy floor,
and see the distant prints of those that once walked these
grounds.
if you make it to the end,
you'll find a cliff.
at the very edge,
seconds before you fall,
tombstones lay beside one another,
stuck with the view worth a thousand lives,
yet incapable of living out one.
kneel before them,

read their names,
and if you ask who they are,
i'll tell you.
they're the people i once loved,
and the person i once was.

Unfinished Set

Sierra Arguello

where did our puzzle piece go?
perhaps, it slithered in between the couch cushions,
fell in the vent,
stuck behind another,
grew wings and flew away.
secret tunnels and elevators with no limits,
the cracks on the floor.
dirt and grime and salty tears that grew from your words.
i wish i could crawl through dimensions,
in the past,
take our rusted swords
with the ends covered in scarlet red,
and throw them in the itchy grass.
i showered in guilt,
wore it around my scarred back,
hugged myself in regrets and trauma,
and slept under a blanket of terror.
i thought i found our magnum opus.
it slipped in between my fingers-
i didn't hold on tight enough.
time was a false purpose,
an invisible wall.
you had me by the tips of my hair-
dragging me through days and months-
took me under your wing.
i slipped down a flight of stairs,
bouncing and groaning the whole way down,
and when i reached the bottom-
broken limbs and a soaked, bloody head-
your face was at the top.
keep
going

they screamed.

move

on

yells and vial cries
sprouted in my ears,
yet all i could think of
were the stretch marks on your arms,
and the coiled curls of your hair.
coarse ground seeped under me,
standing on rubbles of fallen kingdoms and monuments.
memories of a lifetime i never got to see.
i waver in the shadows-
creep out into the night-
ghosts are all around me,
everywhere all the time.
and when i settle down,
into a deep slumber,
get comfortable,
and become okay again.

i think of our missing puzzle
and wonder where did it go?

Where Ends Meet

Sierra Arguello

you see sharp edges,
i see glass reflecting rainbows.
it cuts you,
deep,
slicing to the bone,
leaves you with stitches and wounds you can't repair.
to me it feels like ballet pointe shoes,
how they must be broken
until they're finally of use.
you're left shaking in your velvet covers,
chills creeping down the braided parts of your spine,
wrapping around your contorted waist.
i feel as if my bones have finally lit on fire,
a hearth to my freezing mansion.
i twirl around the flames,
spin like ash cascading down to the marble floor.
all that's left for you is bitter memories,
that leave the kind of taste in your mouth
you only get when you put too little sugar in your coffee.
i see the world in the eyes of a child,
but you see it in the eyes of someone who took advantage
of their blindness.
i whisper to you everything i thought i knew,
and you took my words like a cloud to a tree.
a perfect dichotomy.
i showed you the scars on my porcelain skin,
and all you saw was blood and tissue.
i fought my way into your skull,
pounding and drilling my whole way through,
but your head was only filled with air.
i saw the dead flowers on your bedside table;
i saw the half filled glass of water,

and when i asked you why they died,
you told me all you had was a half empty glass.
i strolled through the hallways,
passed by your shut doors,
looked through your closed shutters,
and when i finally did find the exit,
it led me straight back in.

so i reached for the glass-
felt the edges that slit you open-
pressed down as hard as i could,
and when i felt the sting,
the spark,
i wondered

how deep did you have to go for it to hurt you

Why I Don't Let Go

Sierra Arguello

i think i've tried everything.
to keep my mind,
from drifting to you.
as if the cracks inside of me,
will somehow collide together.
as if two souls that once loved,
can simply love again.
it's the promise of infinite
when you're at the doors of the grim reaper,
holding on for a life,
you've already lived.
it's prometheus taking fire from the gods,
for the people,
and being chained to a rock while his liver gets eaten,
for eternity.
and while keeping you washed away,
covered by the blood of my self-deteriorating mind,
helps to forget you.
the thought of losing you
forces me to hold on.

History

Abby Clement

What a sight to see you after all this time, nostalgia flooding through me like a monsoon in the summer. The butterflies flutter around. The anxiety rushes in. My heart beats faster. My head starts spinning. Our gazes catch from across the hall, a flicker of recognition in your eyes. I smile softly, and you smile back. I decide to wave, and you wave back. We linger, not wanting to lose this opportunity. But we both know it's time to turn away, so we do. Just like that, the moment is over. All that is left is a sinking sensation, like an anchor at sea. A pressure in my chest, like missing the last step on a set of stairs. It happens every time you're here, or whenever I sense you near. But no matter what, when I turn to wave, you always turn to wave back. We haven't spoken in years, but could we ever forget? We will always feel the history that runs deep in our souls, the connection that never seems to break. Almost like there's an invisible string that keeps us intertwined, tugging us back whenever we move away from one another. How could we ever forget how close we were, or how far apart we've become.

Home

Abby Clement

home.

is it “the place where one lives permanently” like a dictionary defines it

or is it “relating to the place where one lives” like a different dictionary expounds it?

If these are true, I have multiple homes.

It's my green and purple dorm I share with my roomie, whom I haven't even known for a year.

It's my gold and brown house up in Indy, where my family and childhood reside.

it's my sister's house in Kentucky, with her modern art and slobbery dog.

It's my grandparent's house down in the bayou, pictures of our ancestors plastered to the walls.

“Home is where your heart is”

“Home is where you're happy”

Where is my home?

What is my home?

Who is my home?

Home is with my best friend since I was 7, up in Ohio at another university.

Home is with my 5 year friend group, scattered across the U.S. since life moved us apart.

Home is with my childhood stuffed animal, who's gone on every vacation that I have.

Home is in the music I play, the pages I write in, and the phone I never leave without.

Where is my home?

What is my home?

Who is my home?

Home is with all my books left back in Indiana, the books that taught me all I know.

Home is with my paintings on the walls, the posters tacked to the bedpost.

Home is with my constellation blanket that I can never sleep without.

Home is in the words I say, the actions I do, and the breaths I take.

I feel at home when I'm myself
but not myself as you see it,
myself as when I feel it,
myself as when I dream it.

What is your home?

Where is your home?

Who is your home?

Who Am I?

ACE

Who am I?

I feel like 3 children wearing a trench coat and porcelain
face,
or an imposter wearing my skin as a suit.

Who am I?

My hair's long enough to not raise questions,
but short enough where people still ponder

Who am I?

My family believes I'm one thing,
but my friends always tend ask

Who am I?

I hide my chest some days and flaunt it others,
so the people I meet always wonder

Who am I?

My clothes are both tight and baggy;
my voice can be high or deep.

Who am I?

I feel like neither, but also like both.
Everyday is a roulette wheel on who I'll be.

Who am I?

What am I but a creature on this planet,
just as confused as everyone else,
on what it means to be human
in a world where you have to know...

Who am I?

HATE: HATE

Kelsey Ann Guy

i hate this hate i feel.
i hate the darkness in my soul.
the vengeance i secretly want.
the pain i feel that i want others to know.
i hate the sympathy i crave for.
the validation i long after.
i hate: hate.
i really do just want to move on from you.
i really do just want to accept the disability i've been given.
and truly handle it with grace the way people say i do.
i want to forgive and not to hate.
but as much as i HATE it, i can't do it quite yet.
i still have to get past blaming you for my loss of dignity.
i have to get past the fear of falling.
i have to accept that what we did together was bad
and learn to grow and be better from it.
i have to accept that for now, I am disabled.
And to learn how I can live my life
to the fullest without hiding in fear of this disease.
and learn to hate, then forgive, then grow.

Reality Check

Kelsey Ann Guy

Can I tell you a secret?
Sometimes before I take a step,
I secretly hope for a miracle,
and that I'm strong again.
I take on wishful thinkings and neglect my reality.
I'll tell myself that I'm somehow healed.
That a divine blessing was set upon my bones.
My muscles restored to their former glory.
That I reclaimed my privilege to run,
and to dance,
and to clap,
and to raise my arms above my head,
and take long, beautiful walks in the woods again.
I daydream until delusion.
As I sit at a table, lean against a wall, prepare to lay my hands
on piano keys.
In that moment of stillness, I tell myself a little lie.
I tell myself I'm whole again.
Then I go to stand up, walk, or play,
and feel the empty, roaring, stabbing pain pull me out of my
mind.

I Know My Ending

Kelsey Ann Guy

I was taught that divorce is only for the final straw,
and saw my mother pull the plug.
Could never blame her, I know.
But it still feels wrong.

Taught to save myself above all else,
and that boys would try to go too far.
But I was never really scolded for those late hours
that he and I spent in my car.
Taught to only date a certain type,
Yet unabashed actions always speak louder than words.

But somehow I'm still waiting on permission,
even though I'm far past post-pubescent.
Still waiting on the lover my mother could never find.
Stuck in slow molasses watching my life speed by.
Just waiting to fall in love with a different guy.

Waiting on a cure,
While I cringe at being called an inspiration.
When they would surely take back the compliment
after a little further inspection.
Because I'm cruel and cold inside.
But it's what I truly am.

So I'll keep my intuition,
and the scars in my eyes,
my micro-aggressions,
and backstabbing lies.
And I'll stay sick and frozen.
I'll watch the world go by.
Feel my youth fade and muscles dissipate.

Knowing this was always the end.
And finally become what I truly am.
Cruel and cold and small and weak on the outside too.

Glass Houses

Remy Indigo

I have mourned you over an empty grave.
I wrote your obituary myself,
Thought over the memories a thousand times
Trying to make sense of
What you didn't find perfect.

There is bliss in ignorance.
I regret not kissing you first.
I regret not holding you tighter, longer.
To me, those memories hold a double-shot of dopamine,
But you won't remember, so I won't dwell.

Standing in front of a mic that shrieks when I turn my
back,
I face the music and keep my composure.
Pastors don't cry over the open casket.
I suppose I should sooth the masses first.
Wipe the silent tear, read the script, move on.

Everything in this life dies.
Pure or sinful, too good to be true.
There is no sweet release for those left behind.
I promise I'll pray for your safe departure,
To whatever god will hold you the closest in the afterlife.

Simple gestures become a core memory
To the little kid in the furthest pew.
She's never been to a funeral before.
Never seen her mom so sad,
Never cried tears for someone she didn't know.

But you'll get used to this when you're older.
I want to look you in the eyes and tell you what a fool you were
To believe it could never get so personal,
But you've buried so much heartache over the years
You have a cemetery dedicated to the things that made you happy.

It hits home a little too late.
You grieve when they're still with you,
And you're numb when they're gone.
No flesh left to the decay of your aspirations,
No expectations for the skeleton you'll hide in your closet.

You've been living on the idea
That you could escape by replacement.
Was he meant to fill the gap in your graveyard,
There, etched "in loving memory" on that monument of death?
Leave flowers on the headstone, be respectful, there was never an
opportunity to leave behind a sour taste.

I am angry that you're dead.
It's normal in the 7 stages of grief.
Left a hole in my heart big enough
For both of us to lie in wait of the unknown,
But there is no manufacturer that will make coffins for two.

So I will visit your memories on my own time.
I will cherish the picked-clean bones you left me with.
"Something is better than nothing", people tell me.
You fade away, but the corpse is still pretty,
So I suppose I'll keep waiting, until the next life.

See you on the other side.

I only have one plastic hairtie,
so I have to do this when it snaps

Camille Hagelberg

place a flame to chemical fracture, tapped as tips together
cigarettes. the body/mind of a hair tie in a burning smell.
it nips at my thumb where the knife grazes onions. it
etches into my skin, leaves footprints where ants could
sleep. i admire them when im awake, tired from the depth,
the correction, the glue. the fire as a restoration, the skin
depression as soft beds. he lays his head in the dip of my
neck. he tells me my hair smells like rubber.

I

Camille Hagelberg

babies strum piano strings in mind without keys.
sip black coffee, turn into bed mush.
secret thread of skeleton coats the mollusca.
light warms, gaze makes eyes salt. become
libidinal want, coil in a sheet cocoon. fucked up eternal
child, marionette, cannot move,
sick in a personal puddle of fuck settle into the phantasm.

I remove myself, become a list of actions,
list of orders. the feeling slime and thoughts of a cauliflower
mouth. synapses through the skin of lips down to the stomach
veins, the legs, the toenails. body a brain, embody a brain.
I think with my hands when my head is asleep,
read the texture of trees and the dirt of damp moss.

a ghost isn't a lack of a body, a ghost has to be seen.
antique sunroom stained bright, the light of white semen
scent blossoms, blossoms a body again. rakes
volcanoes from the ground, leaves school to smoke
under the ghost bridge. again, the ghost isn't
material. Though, I sing its praises with a vibrator,
secret skin a ghost again. the ghost thinks with its body
about life, what it needs to be and doesn't have.

a light only in others eyes. that painful current,
its rushing sound. gloss over rock like lips,
gush a warmth of october cold and nights which feel
like halloween. the heavy testosterone smell of mourning,

again the coffee, again the mush, again the mollusca. alive I
tend to the cracks, the white paint leaking from my
mouth, the bugs underneath,
the water relief. it's dark inside the
egg, I make myself a tree again,
in years I become mechanic, technical.
space compress and compress, to think without hands
and packets of sugar, without tits, fat shoulders, and a penis,
without the theory I swallow over my belly.
without the loneliness homework,
without my stupid questions puzzle
a world where we communicate without words.

I love you I love you I love you I love you.

in spite of everything, I love you. without the compromise I
love you, without the commute I love you,
without the mountains I love you,
without the air I love you,
without the coil of our warm bodies I love you,
without the deepness of eyes I love you,
without the loss of childhood I love you, without the same
name I love you, without each losing word I love you.

singing to you and the city drives through with calm
frustration at two in the morning when I am
only half awake. lights dance projected
onto my pale, nothing face, and it's the most
beautiful dance in the whole.

overlapping folds

Camille Hagelberg

there's a drill & a coil
around my old elementary
school, the way is was
as i remember. restoration –
a night shadow on the wall,
those endless dreams of field
& fabric (induced). those who
profit off eternity – as it filters
through us
(object commodity)
(violent sameness)
(a fine mirror line between
order & chaos) /

we breath in chaos as summer calm we touch & touch & hold
& hold (tell us to restrain/tell us we're dramatic) drama &
drama & nothing & drama

(i'm nothing, i'm nothing, i'm drama, i'm nothing) looking

for a safe coil,
for words,
for advice in the wound/
(the wound is there with me, &
i love the wound.)

october euphoria clouds

Camille Hagelberg

eucalyptus a light grey wet
in stretches mountain soft
arms, shoulder blades,
collarbones hidden away
for us. each heron
standing a body. a body
alone & solitude.
no hurts to coil, back
home or somewhere else.
the screaming frogs —
the rain, the autumn,
the sense of being, &
warmth. the sense
of other & touch.
light in the world
silhouette —
a beautiful rat dog.
our bodies swimming
a body a water
a swim a sound
a dim word —
a sound i
say i love you.

I Am

Eleanor Weedman

I am my mother's proud spine
and her feet furrowed into the earth.
I am the deep waters of my father
and the crow that dances across them.
I am of my sisters and our special, secret laughter,
and my Nana's love of English poets, carried long in her heart.

I *am* an English poet, romantic and yearning.
I am the great self, the like of which dominates the soul,
that which pervades the great mountains and valleys of the
Earth,
the rushing rivers and fearsome caverns of the mind.
I am awe-inspiring.

I am a cup of warm tea, bittered by over steeped insecurity.
I am a soul made of words, like a book overwritten.
I am a vinyl skipping and crackling.
I am well-worn, quiet, loved.

I am an apparition, haunting a bustling theater.
I am the actress, dazzling under the lights.
I am Shakespeare performed for the cicadas
in the dusk of the mountains.

I am connected like Eastern Black Trumpets,
heralding the folklore of things long dead.
I am isolated.
A lone violet blooming in the first snow.
I am always returning to shore
like the tiny pink shells from deep water.

I am natural and unnatural. Created and born.

I am eternal. I am momentary.

I am all these things.

I am none of them.

I am a jumbled puzzle of a thousand pieces.

I am sitting on a scuffed kitchen table, right next to the tulips.

I am waiting for winter.

Patently, I am waiting to finally be pieced together.

Radio

Eleanor Weedman

The windows are rolled down,
cool breezes chase us
across deep summer.

We have the radio turned up loud
over the hum of my old engine.
You, in my passenger seat,
forever at my side,
were quiet,
heavy with a splintering heart

A song.

Your heart cracked a little more
because she was in the rearview.
She whispered that this summer, this song,
was the start of your forever.
I had no part in the world she crafted
and my hands were rough as I splinted your
broken parts.

I laughed then,
when you turned down the radio,
because I didn't understand.

But now,
my windows are rolled down.
And as I drift through our city, warmed by
Southern summer, the kind you adore,
a different static plays in my speaker.

The song of our summer,
our forever.

I have to turn the radio down because,
sitting always in my passenger seat,
the ghost of you is singing the words
terribly off-key.

Sunday

Eleanor Weedman

I lay on a gray-checked blanket,
with Spencer and Murakami.
They wait for me to begin our common prayer.

Since John Lennon is always this day's god,
And since he's proclaimed it always for the sacred things that
scuttle
under wine-dark blankets,
Murakami speaks to me of that saint in a plaid skirt, holding
her holy tome.
Spencer prays in silence.

The cupola of our cathedral is heavy with
incense of warm dirt and cut grass,
but I still squint as I turn his pages.
A baptismal font trickles through the stones somewhere
behind.

I'll head home, Sunday shower,
cold water to keep the Passion of Christ bright in my hair,
and nick my ankle with a cheap razor I can't seem to replace.

But for now, I'm in this sanctuary
watching a dark, hallowed cat stalk birds among the weeds.

This cat is a geode.
I wonder if he crystal-glitters inside. If I.
He slinks by, the closest I've been to cracking open the Earth.

Find, dearest love, the meaning in that.

Asphalt

Eleanor Weedman

There are times
when I want to press myself
flat on the asphalt.

Memory sinks
into the skidmarks
and oil stains

It shifts through the concrete and paint
oozing to reach all places, connected.

I want to melt into the asphalt
to feel those long past summer days
where there was gravel stuck to my knees and chalk on my
hands

There was only me, you, and our dog who always
was happiest in summer grass.

Ineffable Love

Elias Murphy

My love is ineffable.
It flows and ebbs like the sea
It is caused by chaos
Leaving Lichtenstein figures on my heart
Made all the more magical by how it was made
Hell may be my destination
But I would suffer it all
For the chance to live one life with you
My love is a mosaic of me and you
Made by a blind man
Who discovered he could see

Ineffable
My love is

And I'm told that what I feel is wrong
But how can someone tell me that
When you make all the cliches true
My love is atypical
And filled with rants of things I do not know
But I love to hear you speak
I take your everything and it becomes my everything too
Meeting you I know
There must be gods because who else could create Someone like
you?
You are jagged edges and cuts along the body
Pain from past and present

Imperfect and flawed
But perfect for me

My love is
Ineffable

But I will spend the rest of my life
Searching for the words
That will tell you how I feel

Michael Knowles

Elias Murphy

Country's Fucked
I wanna drink my life away
But I have a high tolerance
So I guess I'm here to stay
Hell yeah
WE'RE NUMBER
(forty) ONE
But sure
Tell me to be grateful
Ask why I'm not grateful
"There's no reason to be hateful"
I wasn't hateful
Until you said I was a crime
I wasn't hateful
Until you decided I need to be erased
No
Not erased
Eradicated
What does Public life
Mean?

My Mother is a Fish

Madeline Rodenburg

Out of the sea, she rises
Rolling a thousand ripples in the steel
And I look up to her -
to the great swathes of golden hip that paint the sky,
One-piece clinging like eel-skin - black with white dots.

She lifts her arms and rain falls
Crumbling diamonds smoothing me over
Silt crowning her creased brow
And still, her beetle eyes are shiny and new.

But oh, her feet!
Ancient limestone icons bleeding at the edges
Knobby toes like ten shaking fists
Gouging holes in the shore.

This earth, my heart, and her father press
On the small of her back until she lays flat
And the tide slides under her,
Cold as knives.

Rosemary's Baby

Madeline Rodenburg

As a child I twisted
paper clips into mini coat hangers
To scratch at my Barbie's smooth plastic

If I were a Barbie
(Unopened, unjointed)
Then like a child I would cease to bleed

If I were a fish
My size would be your pride
Regardless, you'd never let me keep my bones

If I made a child
(Untouched, unborn)
Then like a mother, I would be the feed

Primal Instincts of Childbirth

Dominique Snedeker

There is a moment, right in the middle of the pain,
when your instincts take over.
While your mind is quitting, your body digs in,
and this feeling of earth expands into your very existence,
of dark, brown earth, crumbling in your fingers,
rich, dark, soil—earth, the womb of grasses and seeds—
and as your body begins to push,
it feels like you are digging down deep,
deep down, into the secret caverns of earth,
that your toes and calves are brown with the
ruddy earth, that your fingers and arms and mouth are
smeared in the dirt,
that the pressure of the earth is weighing down
on you as you dig deeper still to those hidden
treasure troves, deep down into the brown
earth, into that dark, and rich soil—
that you are returning to the roots of your
very own creation, that you are from the dust
springing to life with that very first
Holy breath—
and there it is,
in the wail of your newborn.

Seasonal Delirium

Dominique Snedeker

I am larger than myself—
expanding on the horizon—
looming like winter blizzards
and negative-degree whipping winds—
laughing at misery in my fury and scorn.

But I am also nothing, like your breath
as it disintegrates in the cold, or the voice that is
choked in your throat by the fierce grip of the
cold,
cold,
air.

I am crazy in my delirium, laughing or crying—
a terrible hybrid of chaos and unrestraint—
while my arms wing about me and I am spun
into the winds, twisted into the forces of winter
like I somehow belong to the loneliness,
that the shrieking howl is somehow mine,
and that angry, fierce mocking is somehow
my desire to unleash desolation upon the earth.

At that very point when I feel myself dissolving into
Chaos,
at that exact moment of my fingers and toes
expanding into wisping winds—

I feel a tug,
I feel a tether on my heart yank me back,
pull me back from the brink,
pull me back from the cold—

I look down at your tiny, chubby face
with eyes that have snapped back into focus,
and those fingers attached to my hand suddenly return to flesh
as they stroke your warm, ruby cheek, and I smell that earthy-salty
toddler smell, as your half-baked words solidify in my ears—

In that very exact instant,
my heart thaws, despite the mess and stacks of dishes and
piles and piles of laundry overtaking me like mounds and drifts of
snow. But
I'm magnetically drawn to you and I lean in to your soft and wiggly
facer to whisper,
“What do you want, sweetheart?”
And just like that,
I'm home.

Time Plays Tricks

Dominique Snedeker

I am
now forty?

I am
shocked, as always,
by the way my feet have aged,
toes curled, soles thickened like my legs and belly—
thick enough to spread on toast, and thus
slow,
stuck
in a body that remembers running
as I lay sleeping,
disquietly thrashing about in an attempt
to run backwards, to revert into that girl
sitting there dreaming...

I am
now twelve?

I am
Lazily wiggling my freshly painted toenails
as I lay with my feet up the wall,
looking forward to the freedom of responsibility, and
existential choices of what to wear to school and when to
do
homework, a lithe girl trying to choose the destiny of
success,
and as I lay there dreaming of love and potential,
I am borne into something altogether new,

I am,
now mother?

I am
no longer freedom whisked by opportune chance
and the independence of flying solo high into the wind
wherever work and life take me. Now

I am still—
a moment paused in sepia, in amber.
As time gathers about my soothing body like a magnificent gown,
I am a queen that can solve every one of
life's immediate desires for yipping, tugging, children,
with hands that can mend breaks and tears.
I am still so they may move about to
Shine in their growth, in their morning sunlight, and
still, I remain.

I am
now old?

I am
stiff but lax with time,
my face hanging in crevices,
my hands gnarled and nails grey.
My mind wanders to that time,
when I was young with thickening thighs,
and graying temples and I wonder,
no, wander,
no, wonder,
if that
is me now? Or then? Or is it me at all?

Self Portrait 3

Haleigh Albarak

I am “a pleasure to have in class,”
the last one left on the swings who hogs the slide.
I am an apparition of shame
(look at me, me, me!)
I do not say please or thank you.
I am cheap, a faker, a plagiarist—
hide your paper with both hands and pray
I am not peeking, especially when our eyes meet.

I am nonsense and scribbles,
gibberish and pig Latin
(easeplay on'tday ooklay.)
I am a saggy and frizzy run-on sentence
with the restraint of a growth spurt.

I am the panicky memory of nothingness, forever
stuck wishing I could hitchhike my way back, like a
homesick tourist, to the time before stomachaches
when I did not have seconds
or an extra scoop.

I lie. I say things that I don't mean.
I am swollen cheeks, dry swallows, bad breath,
and discomfort that you can't choke down.
I am hodgepodge, the rule of three.
Jealous and inconsistent.
I am bad and angry. I, I, I.

Are you still looking?

Supermarket Waltz

Haleigh Albarak

I imagine that I'd swerve, and you'd follow me.
Smashed together in a metal clang with sparks and
smoke, locked like antlers; our supermarket waltz.
Ballroom dancing down the aisles, box stepping over
banana peels and sandwiched between the scent of orange rinds
and flour scrubs that douse the walls. I left home in a rush, wet-
haired,
so all I've got on my shopping list is Raymond Carver and
chicken
noodle soup, thumb wars and domesticity. I hope you wrote the
same things.

I'm stamped by fruit stickers that cling to my fingers
like syrupy cellophane, standing by the geodes of
produce where I catch you sneaking a grape before you fill your
buggy
with bread and milk. I watch the babies riding piggyback and
wish
I could carry you through the cleanups on aisle sevens, putting
things
that we won't use in our baskets just so we can have them before
someone else does. Slow dancing shoplifters.

We Call This Girlhood

Haleigh Albarak

Every December, Bri lets me follow her to Key West.
This is where we spend our week, magicking our way through
Winn Dixies, Turtle Outfitters, Baby's Coffee. I pick and choose
my favorite parts while I watch her roam for me, without me.

Our winter summers are where we spend our sweet sixteens,
where we sit,
crisscrossed on our towels, lapping up the key lime popsicles
that spoil
our supper. This is tradition. In our language, we call this
girlhood.
I tell her everything except for the things I don't.

Bri is fun when I am not, loves southernmost tiramisu,
and being right (because she always is).
After Hemingway, always, we separate,
back-to-back in Virginia and Tennessee.

Sometimes, for a second, she almost makes me forget
that I was born big and mean and greedy.
I become addicted to those Florida days
until my supply runs short.

Near Yet Far

Cal Blagg

The days are long and hot,
But I can't help but to feel cold.
I only wish for a chance,
To see your face.
To squeeze your small frame.
To show you how much you mean to me.
But I won't overstep.

I fear what may happen or not.
I feel like a record on repeat, old
But give me your hand for one small dance
I'll show you it's not the case
I don't love you, it's not the same
I want your company, even across the sea
I'll wait to see your face, a never ending cycle

There's a difference between
love and companionship

QPR

Cal Blagg

Half of a name fit for a hero.
Is that not what I am?
is destroying history and learning to live again,
forgetting who you thought I was,
rebuilding in a city full of cardboard houses
not good enough?

I already know it isn't.
Not for you, anyway.
Still, peregrine sorrow swells and settles
in my chest.
Not regret, not guilt,
but the same nameless bite
that sent me east. Running
from the flycatchers and the switchgrass.

Gone are the halcyon days
of burning sunsets on the back porch,
seething in the town of three stoplights
and carrying a name that was never mine.
(I still carry half of that regret, you know.)

There is not a place for me at the end of the world,
so I will make one here in the valley
900 miles down I-40
with twice as much bitterness and bravery
as my father,
that mistletoe man I will never become.

The North Calls

Cal Blagg

I want so desperately
to be who you want me to be.
I want nothing more to be normal
But the north calls me, it's informal

It's a feeling in my chest,
I blocked out, trying my best.
But it stayed, despite it all
I cannot ignore my call.

It pulls and pushed me,
A direction it wants me to be.
I can't help but feel better
With the north calling me by letter.

I will change, before I make the march
To the cold north, where I load up on starch
I hope you see who I really am
Despite your blindness to my plan.

The north calls and I will listen
What would you do in my position?
I hold the locket close to my chest
I will do all I can, my very best.

Sunny Summer Afternoon

Iris Caldwell

I never stopped loving you,
But then, I never fully started.

You were a moment – caught
In time, perfect while it lasted.

It wasn't a sunrise, no dawning morn,
It wasn't a sunset, no final beauty.

It was the glowing comfort of
A sunny summer afternoon.

You were unassuming in your warmth,
Shining easily, reminding me of just how much

Of a calm, beautiful afternoon
Love can be.

I fell for you hard and fast
Getting lost in the peace I found with you.

But I knew, way back in the corner
Of my mind, that it wouldn't last forever.

I knew you wanted more
Wanted it dive into the

Cool waters on a hot day,
Submerging and swimming in the feelings.

But there were clouds
On the horizon, a storm in sight.

With every beer you picked up
The clouds got closer.

I desperately wanted to chase
Them away; wanted my sunshine to last.

But I don't control the weather
Any more than you controlled your drinking.

And so I never let it be a sunrise
Never allowed something new and glorious.

But I couldn't bear a sunset either,
An end filled with memory and darkness.

So I let it be a moment, a sunny afternoon
Like waking from a dream, knowing
That's when I can love you.

Twilight Zone

Iris Caldwell

What a twilight zone the hospital is.

Sucking you in, swirling you about,
Spitting you out with no regard to where you are.

Time moves differently here;
Slow, like a crumbling, decaying building
A place where time stands still, isn't real.

But I look at the clock, hours have passed and
I don't know where the day went, lost in
A place where time doesn't exist, isn't real.

Nothing that happens here is real
But somehow it is inescapable, a truth
That will follow me out of this place.

I don't know if I can take it;
Oh God, please let it be okay.

When Losing a Friend

Iris Caldwell

I read a quote from C.S. Lewis
About how he felt when losing a friend

He spoke of how friends will
Bring out things in you
That only they know,
And others never see.

Of course it made me think of you.
Most everything does these days.
It made me wonder about
The part of me that died too.

Because part of me was only known by you.
Pieces of me only came to be
Due to the presence of your friendship.
How much of me was you?

What did I create in you?
There were pieces of you
That came from me- Me.
Pieces of me died with you.

I've buried you and
I've buried me.
Can I ever be that girl again?
That friend I was with you?
It's not just you I am mourning
It's the pieces of me that only you knew.

The cat and the finch

Oliver Gragg

i did once find a cat
or rather
she found me

she'd start in the grass-filled suburbs
just as the sun would sink low
in the shadow, she'd follow
one which pointed, foreboding and much too free
“what a companion, that fellow...”
together, they'd only get up to what must certainly be
nefarious acts
that is – as far as clowder may be concerned

but between the two
not a word was to be spoken
for their route
just as the sun would sink low
which wound through hill, cantered along calloused
asphalt,
and led beneath lamp standard
never did change

what a shadow,
within which she was free to know of
hasty walkways, cool familiarity of nighthawks, and
abundance that towers above

routinely, her return came
as the dew set from a dark sky
in the vacant lunar luminescence
stretching back to the suburbs
and only then

a glimpse of her companion:
a wonderfully decorated finch

The Necessity of Coincidence

Keeley Michael Cook

After God,
when the bells don't sing
on summer Sundays at noon,
when the hymns have hushed
to the sound of the wind
weaving through this heretical world,
I am left with faith in coincidence.

There I'd find
a twist of fate,
a song,
a chance,
a co-occurrence,
something to make me pause,
which was not often-.

I'd turn breathless,
aghast
perhaps astonished
with disbelief in my ears
at the value of that sound.

Meaningless to some,
it's everything to me.
When the odds become insurmountable,
what's left after God?

Neither fear nor dejection
just the chance of a melody
as coincidence shows its hand
in growing beautiful things.

The Schoolgirl Revelation

Laken Greene

They say
The World is Ending.

but
tie your shoes
pack your lunch
off to school

my mind wonders
in the classroom
science project, soccer match
oh yeah
The World is
Ending.

does anything really matter?

I hope I get to see
another birthday
I want to get married too

but
The World is
Ending.

please let me
experience
adulthood
I'm older now
and
so
close

I'm in love

I want to be
his wife
one day

he tells me
about our future
and
I listen.

but
the schoolgirl
inside me
does not
believe

because
The World is
Ending.

wait,
and you'll see.

Your Alzheimer's

Laken Greene

Your Alzheimer's has made me
forget

what I have to be grateful for

the years You knew my name
recognized my voice
produced the words
I
love
you

my eyes search Your face
for the person I remember
like a child again
pressed up against the window
hoping to see a shooting star,
to make a wish and believe in something

the darkness
of the night sky
consumes me
and
the light in Your eyes
continues to fade

I try to
forget
that I will fade
with it.

Youthful Skin

Laken Greene

Caught
in a web
of spider veins

You are not welcome here
on my youthful skin

twenty-one years young,
still learning to live

I can't bear to look
at my youthful skin

twenty-one years young,
then degrading begins

what happens next?

will my golden heart remain
in my youthful skin

twenty-one years old,
and no life left
to live.

Uriah's Reprisal

Morgan Fellers

I know your secret escapades.
Are you a man after God's own heart— or my wife's?
David, revered as the most faithful of God's servants,
Yet deceit courses through your veins.
I had my suspicions long ago.
You said, "Eat, drink, and be merry!"
The fear permeated your counterfeit smile.
"As you live, and as your soul lives,
I will not do this thing."
Two options remained:
Kill the seemingly righteous king or submit my life to your
 evil intentions.
What is the best revenge?
My death – a crime you will never recover from.
My memory remains heroic,
Yours tainted – a solidified criminal history.
I despise your being,
But I am forever grateful for your lascivious whims.
Should I thank the man who crushed my life to uphold his
 honor?
Of course.
Thank you, David, for sending me to the front lines,
For you have exalted my life and destroyed your own.

Vamplinq

Elliot Lucey

I am made of gnashing teeth
And snarling veins
I am bloodied and raw from war with myself

You feel back layers only to see the scars I have given myself
There are no scraped knees from stumbling
Only razor blades and knuckles kissing skin

These bruises are not from falling willingly
I fell, kicking and screaming
They do not have permission to touch me

I dream in visceral images
Bloodied cuts and stained jeans
Nails torn as I crawl through hell

I did not come out normal
I was not meant to be normal
I will never be what they want me to be

They can put a beast in a suit and tie
But it is still a beast
I will still bite the hand that reaches out

You however, have come to tame me
You offer me raw meat, still pulsing
You stare into sinful eyes that have rendered flesh from
bone

I grasp the meat in serrated teeth
And thank you
For the meal

You offer me your own teeth
Your gums still bleeding
Your mouth fumbles without them

I take them
Making them into a necklace
It is a warning for others

I have claimed my chosen
You, who walks the line between blood and skin
Have given me everything

I am still a beast and you are still human
But you offer me gentle touches and kind eyes
You need not tear yourself apart for me

You refuse to point your finger at someone
Even if their punishment would be deserved
And I curb my appetite
I am still a beast and you are still human
But you kiss me with a mouth filled with sweetness
And I am satisfied

You torture me sweetly
Nails scrape my skin, kissing in their bloody wake
You call me your vampire

I am still a beast and you are still human
And you pet my head afterwards and tell me how good I am
You call me human too

I am a beast in human skin
I have a hunger in my veins that will never go away
And you will always feed me what I need

I am a vampire and you are human
You treat this body with kindness
A honor it has never felt

You press kisses to my temples
praying for a love that never dies

And I whisper praises to your neck
waiting for the day that we turn to dust together

Fragments of Home

Amanda Demirović

Batnoga, Croatia Summer 1994

It is the summer of 1994, and at three years old I am living in what was then known as Yugoslavia with my Mama. The Civil War has been consuming our lives since I was born. My Mama and I were separated from the rest of the family, and we were living in our second refugee camp. Six large, abandoned chicken coups house hundreds of displaced families. Mothers, fathers, and children were forced into living quarters not habitable for farm animals.

I am always hungry. Mama distracts me by singing songs and playing games, but the pain in my stomach does not stop. The intense empty feeling begins in my throat, and it travels down to my belly where it lays and gnaws at my insides. Starvation keeps Mama and me up at night. Sometimes a big truck comes to the camp and gives out bags of food, occasionally we even get soap and chocolate, but it has not come for a while, and all the people are hungry. The mention of food makes their eyes grow wild as they scan their surroundings for any possible form of sustenance.

Mama keeps me close to her as she points out the men in green uniforms holding large guns. I am trained to stay away from them. The men are giants, to me they are monsters stalking our every move. They ensure that we are in a constant state of fear. Mama does not like them, and I decided that I didn't either. The monsters yell if the camp is not tidy, they throw our things everywhere as they scream threats down on us. Mama and I fold the blankets we sleep on when we wake up to keep out of their sight. The camp is crawling with lice, and the lice make the monsters angry, they say it is our fault because we are dirty. The people

grumble about the lack of running water and soap, but no one hears them.

Surrounding the six chicken coups are cornfields. Their lush green leaves hang tenderly from their stalks, and the bright yellow tassels in the center extend into the skies like fireworks. The cornfields are our bathroom. The smell of human excrement is thick as it emerges from the hot ground like a wall of poison. The air around the cornfields is heavy. The strong smell makes the nausea in the pits of our stomachs worse. Mama's eyes stay wide open as we slowly walk into the green abyss. Finally, she finds a spot that no one has used yet. Mama grasps my hands into hers, and I squat down to relieve myself. She's very proud of me since I have learned not to let my clothes touch the ground. After Mama is finished, we carefully begin walking back to our shelter.

The camp is always blaring with noise. Even at night, when the sun rests, the people are restless. Mama says they all want to know when the war will end. They ask one another about their lost family members. In the distance bombs explode and the sound makes its way around the camp like an uninvited flood piercing every corner of our minds. The people cry, their sorrow becomes one, and their prayers melt together, drifting upward to a god who has closed the doors on them.

Children and older people began to die because of the lice infestation. The lice spread sicknesses as they moved through the chicken coups draining the occupants of life. Mama takes me outside all day, the ruthless sun burns our skin and dehydrates us. Mama's wheat-colored hair turns a light yellow in the sun, her usual pale and sunken cheeks are rosy. She inspects my body before we lay down for the night, she shakes out the blankets and tells me we would be safe. In the morning Mama would examine our bodies in the cornfield. We always found new bites, but they didn't kill us.

In the distance, we hear the loud sound of tires rumbling up a gravel road. All the people recognize it. The people's hunger is palpable, their desires apparent. Empty bellies force the people's malnourished and exhausted bodies to stand. The feeding frenzy begins. Moving like zombies, they form a line behind the large white United Nations trucks. There are five of them on this

particular day. The volunteers are pulling bags of food from the trucks and handing them out. Each family is allowed one bag. People begin saying that the food is not enough to sustain their families. The volunteers instruct the emaciated bodies to move along once they have received their rations. Flour, oil, sugar, coffee, and a package of sausages. “Ovo će nas morati potrajati do sljedećeg puta”, Mama says, tucking a loose hair behind her ear. “This will have to last us until next time” is what Mama always says after the trucks leave. No one knows when the next supply day is. The adults, who by now have lost all their independence return to a child-like state. They cry when they are hungry and look to the gravel road to bring back their saviors.

Tonight, Mama sets our single pan on a fire we are sharing with our neighbors. A large moon hangs over our heads. I make the moon disappear with a single finger over it, the way Mama showed me. The smell of sausage and bread dances around hungry heads. Our eyes are wide, our stomachs empty. I watch Mama, but instead of cooking the sausage or making bread, she pours sugar onto the pan’s hot surface. The white sugar begins to turn a light brown, and as it bubbles, it gets darker. Mama takes a small stick and places it in the center of the honey-like syrup. Taking the pan off the fire she placed it on a stone. I ask her what she is making. “I am making you a lollipop,” she states joyfully.

Mama handed me the lollipop she made, and she instructed me on how to eat it. The browned sugar tasted like pure gold as it coated the inside of my mouth. My stomach yearned for more. Mama chuckled as I ravenously devoured the candy. Her green eyes twinkled over the fire as she cooked the remainder of our dinner. My Mama. At twenty-one years old sought out every chance to take the terrifying and cold world around us and sweeten it, even if it was only for a brief moment.

Berlin, Germany Autumn 1996

It rains here a lot. Tiny drops cover the old windows in our cramped apartment. It is seldom quiet. My family and I live in a tall building, taller than anything I have ever seen before. Mama, Tata (Dad), Majka (Grandmother), Deda (Grandfather), and Striko (Uncle) all share a two-bedroom apartment. Behind our building,

there is a vacant dirt lot, two swings, and even a slide. I spend all my time on the swings seeing how high up I can get before Mama tells me to slow down. That's the problem with living on the first floor, Mama sees everything. My Majka, however, allows me to swing all the way into the clouds, as long as I promise to help her with errands and chores. Majka is a small woman, her hair is the color of fresh snow, except for the very front which has turned a light yellow from the nicotine of the thousands of cigarettes she has smoked. She is pale, much like her blue eyes. Majka tells me the rain makes her knees hurt, I nod as I count the drops of rain running down the window and wonder how something so pretty could bother my Majka's knees.

It's a Saturday. It's not raining yet. Majka is being especially nice today which can only mean one thing: She is going to ask me to go on errands with her which means we are going dumpster diving. She brings my bright green and yellow coat into the room, handing it to me she says, "Imam dobar osećaj," meaning, she's got a good feeling. Majka's good feelings don't often pan out, but at five years old I couldn't argue with her logic. I get dressed and we are out the door before Mama even notices we are gone. Mama does not believe it is safe for Majka and me to ride the bus on our own, but Majka knows best.

The bus is crowded. Babies are crying as mothers rock them. A man sits beside me eating an onion sandwich, I wonder when the rain will begin. Majka holds my hand in hers, the other hand gripping a shopping bag that she intends to fill to the brim with anything we find. In Berlin, people throw away things that Majka always finds a use for. I close my eyes and wish we find makeup, chocolates, and dolls. I remember the time we found a bag full of expired chocolate. Majka tells me that we can stop at the candy store on the way to one of our favorite dumps, I smile big.

Stepping off the bus a cold wind curls around us as we struggle against it. The candy store is close by. The shop is small and painted an inviting light blue. Inside behind the counter, a stout, bearded man holds a pair of silver kitchen tongs between his chubby fingers. Surrounding him are jars upon jars of candies. Bright ones, small ones, and big ones. I point to the huge pink marshmallows before

me. Majka and I do not speak German, but I have learned that pointing is universal. The man picks up a paper bag and mindlessly places four of the sweet clouds into it. Majka pays him and we are on our way. She lets me eat the candy as she tells me about the things we need back home. “A vacuum, tablecloths, bed sheets, pillowcases, a broom, canned food, and if we God wills it, we will find something for our kitchen,” she says, her smile beaming revealing her white dentures that slip when she rolls her “R’s.”

I was beginning to feel queasy, maybe I wasn’t supposed to eat four large marshmallows at once. We arrived at the first dumpster, it towered over the two of us as Majka unhinged the door and opened it wide. It was full of brown boxes, Majka opened one after the other only to be met with trash. She sighed after the sixth box and decided to move on. “The next one will be better,” I tell her while I rub my aching belly.

The second and third dumpsters contain nothing of value. Majka curses at the ground. It begins to rain. Tiny cold raindrops begin to fall. Small wet specks cover us as we reach the next dumpster. I beg Majka to return to the bus where it is warm and dry and where people aren’t looking at us. Majka tells me this will be the last one we will visit for today. I pray that we do not find anything so we can just return home. People often pointed at Majka and me. Some of them would approach us and speak. Their voices were stern, harsh, and cartoon-like. I wonder what they are saying as I stare up at them. After some moments would pass the person would realize Majka and I did not speak German and they would move on, defeated.

The dumpster is dark green with yellow specks covering it. It has no door, and it is shorter than the previous three. Majka is about a foot and a half taller than me. I look at her face trying to decode what she is seeing. Her usually stoic face suddenly lights up as she reaches into the dark dumpster. My heart skips a beat. We’ve found something good I realize.

Maybe it’s makeup.

Maybe it’s candy.

Maybe it’s dolls.

Majka's head whipped back toward me, "Nećeš vjerovati šta smo pronašli!" she said, "You won't believe what we have found!" My stomachache vanishes as the excitement grows. Then she tells me I will have to crawl into the dumpster to retrieve the golden item. I've gotten into many dumpsters for Majka, and I knew there was no turning back now.

I step on a small ledge sticking out of the side of the dumpster and swing one of my legs into it. My foot meets something soft; I press my weight into it and allow my other leg to follow. I am inside. The cold outside does little to subdue the smell that is emanating from underneath me. I breathe through my mouth. I am forcing my eyes to grow wider because I think that will help me see in the dark. All I see are trash bags. Finally, I spotted it. A pot. It was white with a matching lid. Nothing appeared to be wrong with it. I approached the pot and pulled the lid off, curious about what was inside. Small rice-like specks wriggle around in the pot. An acidic smell rises, and my stomach begins to ache again. I am sweating and the smell of garbage is making my eyes burn. They're maggots. I told Majka, who told me to hand it to her and she would wipe it clean. My Majka is a brave woman I observe as I squirm handing the pot through the can's opening. I hop out of the dumpster as Majka uses a plastic bag to wipe the maggots onto the ground. She smiles at me.

Back on the bus, Majka criticizes the pot's previous owner who had thrown it away because they burned the bottom of it. She tells me how easy it is to clean the pot as I count the raindrops sliding down the bus window. A baby cries in the back of the bus, and the man next to me is slurping something from his bright purple cup.

Nashville, Tennessee Spring 1998

It was a cool March evening in Berlin, Germany. I could hear the neighborhood children playing behind our building. Their joyous screams filled my seven-year-old heart with sorrow. Today was the day my parents, two younger sisters, and I were going to America.

"America is full of all the toys you'll ever want," my Mama said.

"In America, I will have a good-paying job," my Tata said.

"You know, all the Rambo movies were made in America and

so was Terminator. I wish I was going to America! I could meet Stallone and Schwarzenegger on the same day,” my thirteen-year-old cousin said enthusiastically.

“Even if America does have all these things, I still don’t want to leave Berlin,” I told them all.

That entire last day I kept walking up to the single window in our kitchen to look at the sky. I could not tell the time, but I knew based on the brightness of the sun how long it was before the night came to end the day. The last time I walked up to the window I was dressed in my green winter coat, white floral tights, black boots, and a white shirt that read “ESPRIT” across the front. My Tata strolled into the kitchen wearing his “America Bound” outfit. He wore a black pair of dress pants, a pomegranate-colored velvet button-down shirt, and a black tie. I had never seen my Tata wear anything other than jeans and T-shirts. The drastic change made me unhappy.

“Tata, what is this?” I asked, pointing to the black material that hung from his neck.

“This is a tie, all important men wear ties,” he said adjusting the too-tight neck of his shirt.

I walked out of the kitchen and into the living room where my Majka was sobbing. Deda sat next to her stroking his mustache. She gave me a quick glance, looking me up and down. Her tear-stained face looked exhausted. A cigarette limply hung between her fingers. Taking a single pull from the cigarette she immediately returned to her crying. Mama came into the room to ask Majka if she knew where her prized leather jacket was. Majka informs her she had hidden the jacket back when she learned we were leaving and now she could not remember where she had placed it. Mama sighed looking at Majka’s miserable face. Mama wore a brown sweater, purple tights, white socks, and if she could find it, her leather jacket.

Mama dressed my sisters quickly. I assumed America didn’t really care how babies looked because my sisters were not as well dressed as the rest of us. Being the eldest, I took this opportunity to make fun of my middle sister and her ridiculous suspenders. “No

one in America wears those,” I said rolling my eyes. Mama snapped at me as my three-year-old sister began to cry. Mama dug through Majka’s “Save it, we can sell it” closet and finally found the piece that would complete her own “America Bound” outfit: a hip-length black leather jacket.

I could feel the tension rising as it got darker. Tata was pacing while Mama double and triple-checked the bag that contained my youngest sister’s diapers, bottles, and two additional outfits. We all stood cramped inside the living room, barely able to see one another from the smoke Majka had filled the room with. Majka coughed somewhere inside the smoke screen, she sounded weak. Tata sat next to her and Deda, hugging both of his parents. He said something to Majka quietly, and she resumed crying. Deda stood up for the first time that evening and shook Tata’s hand. “Take care of yourself and your family, son,” Deda said his brown skin hanging limply from his face. I stood behind my Mama crying silently. In Bosnian culture, it is bad luck to cry when someone is headed on a trip, and Tata had already scolded me three times about my tears.

Majka and Deda stood at the apartment door. Mama and Tata picked up two black tattered suitcases, one bag containing all the things a baby could need on a flight, and a navy blue briefcase. Mama begged Tata one final time at the door to leave behind the empty briefcase, but he stood his ground. “An important man with a tie must also have an important bag, a briefcase,” he reasoned. Mama looked away, her eyes like two bullets ready to penetrate anyone who angered her next and then her eyes landed on me. With all the crying and anxiety, I was feeling I had gotten extremely warm. I removed my coat and shirt, and I stood beside my Deda in only a white tank top. Mama didn’t have to say a word. I ran into the living room, put on my clothes, and returned to join the saddest family in Berlin on that cold March day in 1998.

We all sat silently inside the taxi that had picked us up. We were headed to a train that would take us to Munich International Airport. None of us had ever been on an airplane before, and we did not know what to expect. On the train, Mama changed both of my sister’s diapers while Tata continued to fill my ears with the American dream. I peered out into the darkness that surrounded

the train only half listening to my Tata.

The first thing we all noticed about the airplane was its enormous size. Never in our life had we seen anything as large. The people around us expertly handled themselves as my parents struggled to appease the attendant at the counter. Mama pulled page after page of documents from a folder while Tata held my youngest sister on his hip. I had been tasked with holding my middle sister's hand, and I was not enjoying it. "Tata, her hands are sticky, you hold them," I protested. Tata looked down at me and just nodded his head. He was gripping the handle of his briefcase so hard that it made his knuckles turn white.

We were finally allowed to board the plane. Mama sat next to the window, holding my baby sister, I sat in the middle, and Tata sat on the outside aisle holding my middle sister. I was happy to have my own seat and not have to hold any babies. The people around us spoke a language I could not understand.

"Mama, what language are they speaking?" I asked.

"They are speaking English, Amanda," she answered.

My attention had been so deeply invested in the English language and the different types of people on the airplane that when it began to move, I jumped. Tata chuckled and shook his head. Mama lifted the window panel revealing only small patches of light. And suddenly we were going fast, faster, and then even faster. An empty feeling developed beneath my feet, and I gripped the armrests with my fingers and closed my eyes. "America here we come," said my father holding my sister against his chest.

The only other memory I have of that flight is my parents switching babies midway through. Immediately after Tata got my youngest sister in his arms, she began vomiting all over the front of his new velvet shirt. The light pink vomit clung to the fabric. A flight attendant ran to his rescue, but she was too late, his shirt was ruined. Tata would not land in America with a tie after all.

We landed at Nashville International Airport at noon on the 9th of March. Mama and Tata hugged one another, my sisters cried, and I stood silently taking in a whole new world. The people, the smells, and the sounds flooded my senses. I gazed at the high ceiling, the

lights, and all the food people were consuming. My belly began to ache, and I asked Mama to take me to the bathroom. And there in the bathroom, I was faced with my first culture shock: Water inside the toilet. Mama had to hold my hand while I flushed because I was scared it would flood the entire airport.

My Tata and Mama retrieved our two suitcases. Tata unzipped one and placed his briefcase inside it. Mama smiled as she held one baby on her hip and the other by the hand. I look back on our first day in America and I am in awe of how composed my parents were. I am proud of the courage, strength, and resilience that flows within us.

Visual Arts



Tree Bark



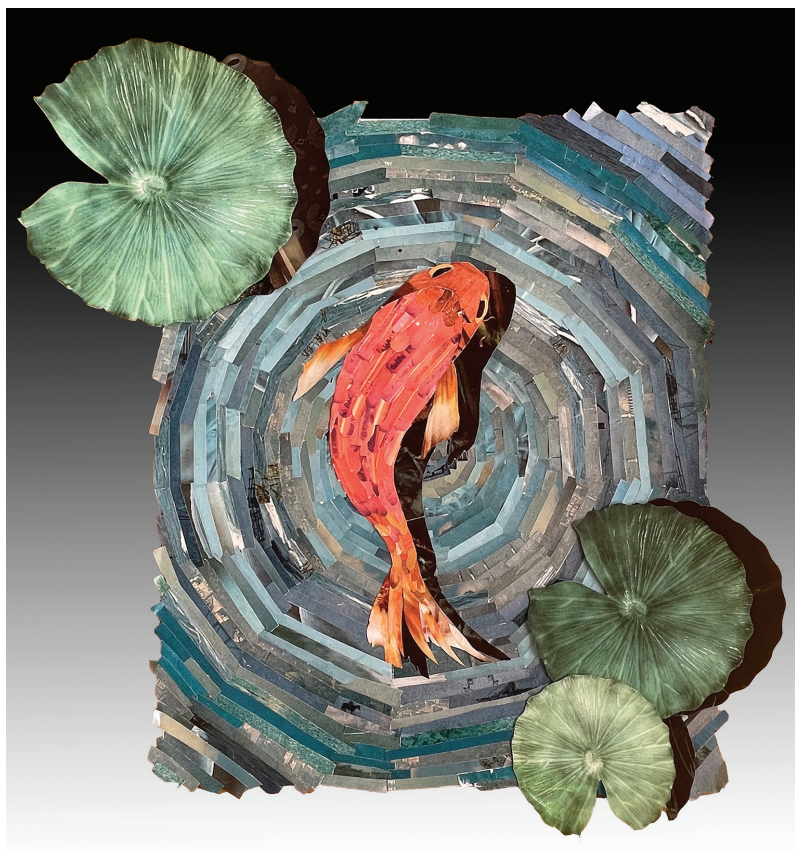
Rebekah Autumn Gobble Standbridge

Conversation Piece



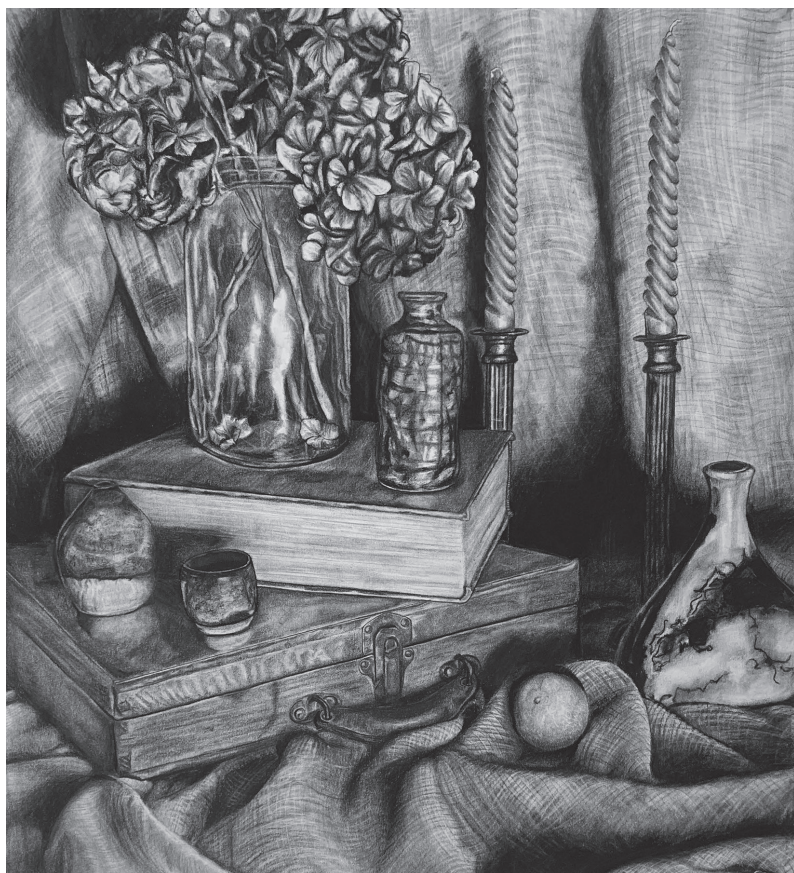
Laree McMurray

Golden Eagle



Ava Martin

Home



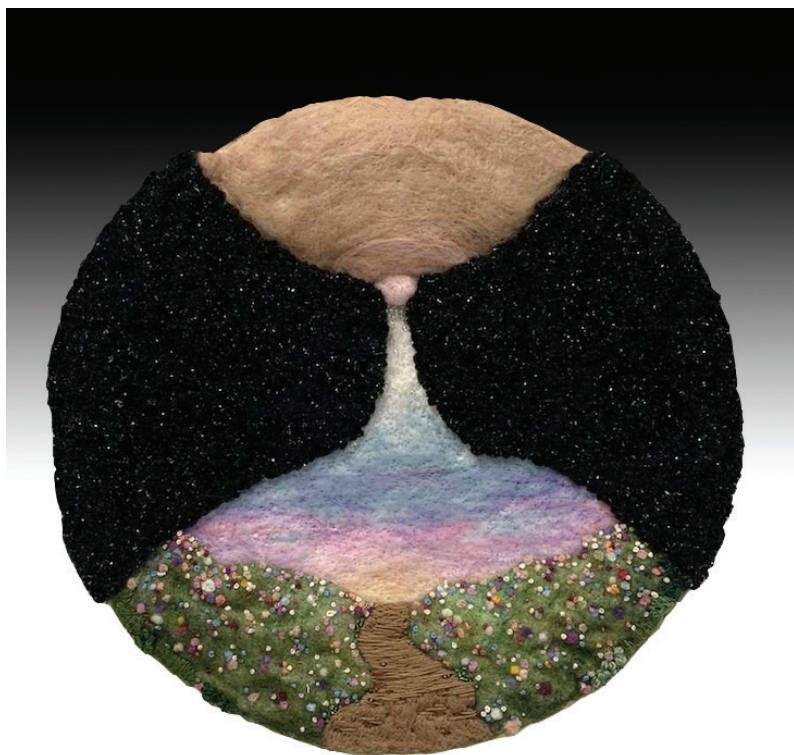
Elizabeth Rowe

Eyes on Me



Callie Honaker

Aphrodite's Fountain



Kathryn Ford

No Color



Are we not all human?

Surely it is the irony of racism that one man can look at another and declare that he is the better of the two. With all humans being 99.9% similar genetically, it is absurd to think that we are so different that we can justify any form of racial superiority. At the end of the day we are all essentially the same; we are all dust.

Nathan Lanning

Transformation



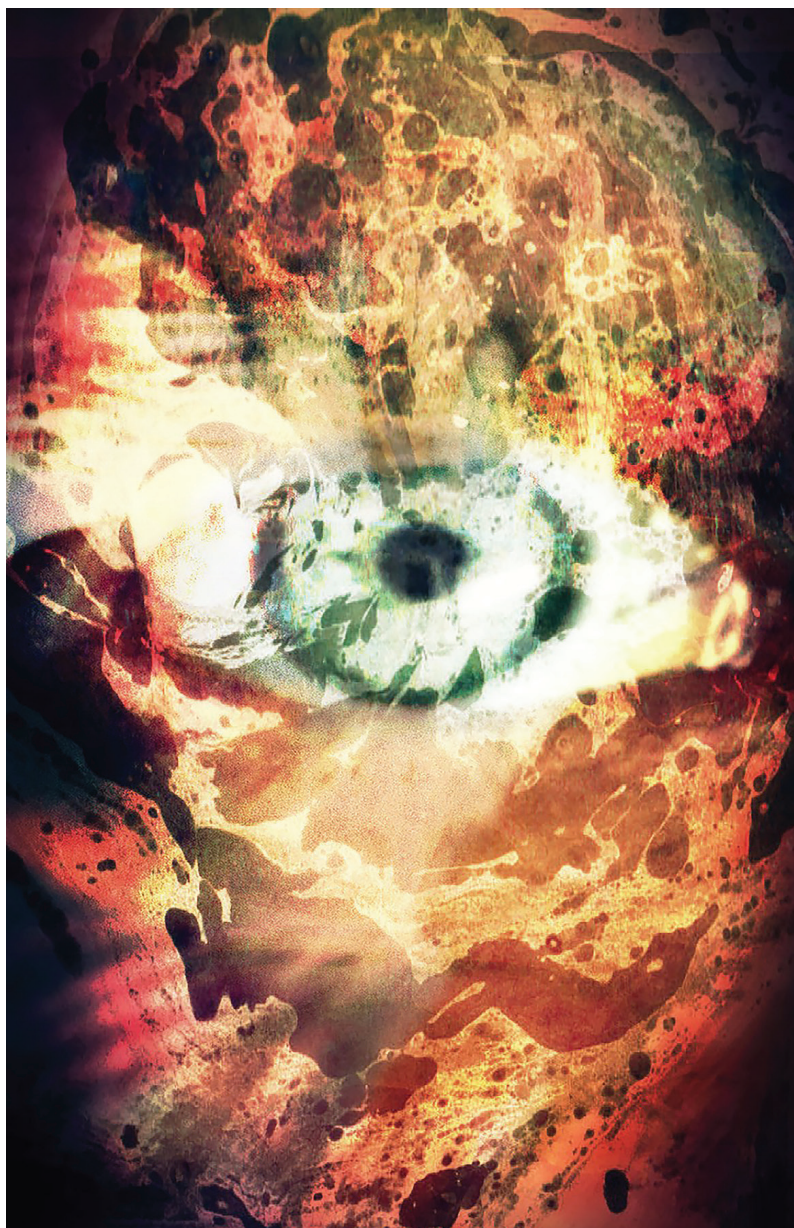
Goreti Lopez

Making Peace with the Past



Donald Miller

Creation



Nathan Wurmser

Requiem



Bledy

"Requiem"

1/5

Carson Haley

Model Audi R8



Rebecca Cox

There's Yearniú in the River



Morgan Bakaletz

Curio



Blake San

Going Insane Under Carnival Lights at the Tennessee Valley Fair

Suzi Peter

*At least 9% of the U.S. population will suffer
with an eating disorder at some point in their lifetime.
Anorexia Nervosa is the deadliest of them all.*

Dizzy from that thrill of hunger haunting every step and high off the adrenaline of being granted a chance to ignore it, I almost didn't care about the heat of strangers' stares shooting at my lower forearm at the Tennessee Valley Fair. Getting dressed that late-September evening, I was so hell-bent on showing off my emaciation that I'd left both arms entirely uncovered and forgotten to snip off my hospital bracelet. Now, in the abrasive glow of the carnival lights and the neon signs for every ride turned up to combat the dark of 9pm, the mint green ring around the brown of my flesh stood out like a neon sign itself, announcing that, just that morning, I'd been released from a psychiatric hospital for severe eating disorders.

Despite choosing to go to the yearly fair with my friends for the sole purpose of trying to force myself back into normalcy, I felt as though insanity must be radiating off me like smoke. I was certain that if anyone looked at my face for too long, they'd see in my eyes that I was exhausted and starving and depraved and so, so ashamed. My parents had all but tied me to my bed that morning, shouting that I desperately needed rest and a homemade five-course meal, and I had an uneasy suspicion that the only reason they eventually let me go is because my fervent and aggressive refusal of things that any newborn child instinctively sought and recognized as bare necessities was too pathetic for them to witness any longer. I wondered if, as the night went on, that might become the case for my longtime

friends whom I'd attended the fair with every year since the eighth grade and who'd watched me physically deteriorate with each fair since the tenth grade.

Everyone at school had been curious when, a week into my senior year, I'd suddenly disappeared for 6 weeks, but I think in the back of their heads, they knew. Although the downward spiral had started 3 years ago, it was only a few months ago that I'd gained the frightening boniness that identified me as an anorexic to strangers, no longer able to pass as a naturally thin girl, like I had for most of my disorder. Now at 17 and visibly unwell, people rarely said anything, but still I felt the pressure of eyes, both envying and expectant, just waiting for a stumble. There at the fair as my friends and I made our way through the cheerful chaos, I decided to keep myself together at least for the duration of the night and walk the thin tightrope between the pretense of joy and passing out, which felt mere seconds away.

"Hey," I whispered into Lily's ear. Madison and Madelyn were just out of earshot, though it wouldn't have mattered if they'd overheard. We'd all known each other since elementary school, which meant nothing was secret, even if you never said the words aloud. I was more concerned about the press of strangers, some of whom I could almost sense leaning forward to hear what the dark-skinned and bony teenage girl with a hospital bracelet and cuts lining her arm had to say to her normal-looking friend.

"What's up?" she replied, reaching for my arm and mindlessly pulling me closer. It stung a little, but I didn't say anything.

"Do you have, like, a pocket-knife or something? Like, anything sharp to get this shit off," I said, gesturing to my wrist. "Doesn't match my outfit."

And she just smiled and started rifling through her tote bag for some sort of sharp tool that any adult who knew me would absolutely refuse to hand over, but at 17, caution's a joke and self-destruction is the punchline; the only way Lily knew how to help was by doing exactly what I said, even if she knew better. All three of us had met in the third grade, uniting on a crowded playground with only location and a single personality trait in common, but having withstood the trials of high school house parties that gave

us an overflowing arsenal of memories to share, Lily, Madison, Madelyn and I knew every corner of each other. Still, straight-faced words were something we only exchanged in bits and pieces when it came to mental illness. It was easier to trade sad stories in off-handed jokes or drunk conversations we wouldn't remember or remember telling. Suffering was the backdrop to our wishful expeditions and the only way we knew to become something more than hurt was to not focus on our wounds for too long. So, when Lily said "Nothing, sorry," and the realization struck that I'd have to spend the next 2 or 3 hours in this mandatory discomfort and shame, I wanted to go home or rip off the banner for the Ferris wheel and use it to cover up or simply scratch at my skin until the whole thing fell off, but I just shrugged and said "Thanks, though."

Then, Madelyn was pointing us in the direction of a cotton candy stand and I let hunger wipe away those unspoken feelings, that inevitable sadness in its enveloping, familiar way. And the girls were talking about what they were going to order, eyeballing me surreptitiously like they always did around food, and I knew I was starving but would preserve that anesthetic until my hunger became painful again. And the pastels of the vendor's stand were obnoxious, like they were jeering at me for my childlike refusal to do the obvious thing and obey my body's demands, and I felt like the world was a little too bright and a little brand new, as if it had changed significantly during my six-week recess from it and so now, in my attempts to rejoin it, tonight's carnival was my big rejection. I desperately wanted out.

We reached the front of the line. Without an explanation, I wrenched myself away and made for the row of porta potties near the carnival's entrance. But half a second into my panicked journey, I was consumed by dizziness, regret and the chaos of hundreds of people hopped up on exhilaration and fried food all packed into a park at night. Staying upright felt like a challenge and moving forward felt like a death wish, but fear of what I would do around the cotton candy propelled my teetering, pathetic body forward. Face-painted children were laughing with a sugar-induced mania, packs of teenagers tangled their arms into their friends' and formed nightmarish, uncompromising blobs in my path, crooked lines that had formed for rides and vendors blended into each other, and by

the time I escaped the throng of happy people, I was light-headed and on the brink of tears.

That's when I saw the girl. More accurately, I bumped into her and only once she'd grabbed my arm to steady me did I notice the etherealness of her. Dark hair brushing her bony shoulders and a lavender top with cut-outs that accentuated her thinness, she would have caught my eye eventually. Her face was warped in a beautiful way that only happens to the genetically blessed, slightly malnourished or both. She had deep brown eyes under heavy eyeliner and a severe jawline that shook a little as she laughed at me.

"I wouldn't go in there if I was you," she said, gesturing to one of the porta potties. "But if you're in a rush, it'll do the job."

"I'm not," I confessed. "Actually, I just needed to step away from everything, but if it's that disgusting inside, maybe I'm better off out here."

She let go of my arm but didn't take a step backwards. As the spots retreated from my vision and the image of her emerged more distinctly, I could see the intricate map of freckles across her face and the violence of her collarbone protruding from under the neck of her shirt. Even though I'd all but forgotten about the hospital bracelet, I moved my hand behind my back and the entire arm felt colder the farther away it got from her grasp.

"I'm Cara," she said, leaning in like it was a secret. "And I'm supposed to be meeting up with my friends, but I have no idea where they are and it's been, like, twenty minutes so I'm getting pissed."

"Suzi," I said. "And honestly, if you want, you can come hang with me for a minute. My friends are just over there by the cotton candy booth. You could get some if you want."

"I shouldn't," she replied automatically. It was a perverse test I'd developed, first unconsciously then intentionally, throughout years of searching for the fellow hungry, and she passed with flying colors. It was in the quickness of her response, the instant dismissal delivered as if she'd done it a million times before. In full honesty, it was also her thinness that solidified to me that, in that very

specific and empty way, we were the same. And yet, the moment I registered our similarity, a part of my brain started meticulously cataloging all the ways in which we were probably different. Her superiority made me look pathetic—I was thinner, but she was taller, her bones seemed to point out gracefully and my joints were painful to look at, according to my parents. The biggest separation between us, though, marked like a black line on the pavement in my malnourished 17-year-old mind, was that I had a hospital bracelet, and she didn't. We were on the same journey, but I'd failed at secrecy and made a series of stupid, dangerous mistakes while she had walked the same treacherous path perfectly. With startling clarity, I realized that my entire night of hiding my instability and pretending to be fine had just been practice for Cara. I was crumbling before, and I would've collapsed if she hadn't been there outside the restrooms, away from the crowds, waiting like a knight on a chessboard for fate to decide it was her moment to save me.

I put my clean arm in hers, daring and free in a way I only felt empowered to be beside the carousel unicorns and glow-in-the-dark balloons bobbing up and down as if in prayer to an unseen whimsical god. Madison smiled welcomingly at Cara as we approached, the cotton candy smeared on Madison's lips making her look even friendlier than she was just by nature. In the back of my mind, I think that I knew the sight of food so recently eaten was probably not welcoming to Cara whatsoever.

As I introduced her and the situation with her friends, I was watching the pair of us from outside. Though usually reserved for observing how my body looked at different angles, I'd honed with frightening perfection this skill of obsessively self-surveilling and monitoring, analyzing each way that my actions could be interpreted. I viewed myself as a monster contorting itself into a teenage girl, visibly unwell and very troubled, slightly more disturbingly interesting than outright disgusting. I saw Cara as angelic, shocking enough to cause envy but nonetheless alluring.

As we headed towards the Ferris wheel, I noticed Cara wobbling a little bit. I noticed it because it was familiar and not because it was alarming. I still felt as if my bracelet was magnetic for every middle-aged mothers' pair of eyes and that all my senses were turned up to one hundred in this gleefully merciless environment,

but I was so focused on Cara that my other, less important anxieties were relegated to background noise. I was so intent on memorizing her every movement and word so that I could cater mine accordingly, I probably should have noticed her starting to tilt earlier. Anyone other than an anorexic would have seen her for what she was—a girl tangled up in the years-long process of dying, but I was in the process of dying too, just like every other person with a severe eating disorder who isn't actively pursuing recovery. Through the blurred filter of that mental illness, I viewed her as a heavenly being incapable of failure. I didn't think she could fall, so I just watched as she tumbled to the ground. With her hair spread on the pavement and her dark denim shorts deflating loosely around her scrawny Bambi legs, she permanently lost much of the grace I'd associated with her at first sight, though she was even more of an angel to me after passing out.

As people started to crowd and their eager hands reached for their cellphones to call 911, I felt a strange blend of horror, awe and gratitude. It was hard not to think about the fact that if Cara hadn't caught me earlier by the porta potties, I'd be in a very similar situation, the target of leering eyes aglow with sick fascination and the receptacle for such naked disgust, thinly disguised by pity. For the first time the entire night, I didn't feel like the most popular grisly attraction at the carnival—Cara was. In moments she'd probably be awake, but she would already be in the back of an ambulance, and in exchange for granting me relief from the pressure of my hospital bracelet and the heaviness of my paranoia, she'd be cursed with her own dreaded hospitalization and all its hefty consequences.

Smoke

Elisabeth Denis

*The light is on when I open my eyes.
I'm sitting upright before I know I'm awake.
Something inside me is trying to escape.*

Beside the bed, black smoke pours in through the cracks around an old door, long since screwed shut, sloppily, and painted over and over. The building was a mess when we moved in last year; that's what put it in our budget. Most rentals in this city are far out of reach for a preschool teacher and a freelance artist, even with a roommate. There are cockroaches in the walls. We make it work.

My roommate, River, stands by the light switch, eyes roaming the room. He's always been skittish, a lighter sleeper than I've ever been. I try to focus on the words that he's saying to me.

"I heard yelling," he tells me, and gestures to the smoke filling the room. "I smelled smoke."

My mind races as I'm getting dressed. *Where are the cat carriers?* They're in the closet, disassembled. *Where are the cats?* I find one of them; he slips from my grasp, darts away. Time doesn't seem to be working the way it did when I went to sleep.

*Somewhere far in the distance,
I can hear the people screaming.
The sirens never sound.*

With all of the lights on, we try to figure out the best way out of here. We're on the top floor, as far from the fire escape as it's possible to be, down a narrow hallway. I sit out there sometimes, texting a girl and looking out over the

cities, the glowing logos on distant buildings, the blur of traffic. This city is beautiful if you can get past the filth and grime. River touches the front door, like they taught us in grade school, with the back of his hand. He seems satisfied and opens the door. Time stretches like taffy. I can't get the words out in time.

*The light dies all at once, swallowed by the smoke.
My lungs are frozen. I cannot breathe.
My brain is frozen. I cannot think.*

On the floor, I try a breath and regret it immediately. My lungs feel like fire. Covering my face with the fabric of my coat, I try again.

*The air is too hot, too thick.
I can't tell where I am anymore.
The room is pitch dark.
My brain spins, finding no traction.
There is no way out.*

I hear River coughing.
We are going to die.
I hear myself coughing.
I am going to die.

My ears fill with unimaginable sound.
Inside me, something shatters irreparably.
The demolition crew will clean it up with the rest.

Light beckons me.

I follow.

Interlude in Numbers

Nicholas Artrip

Day one. Blood sugar 568. “Weight, 289 lbs.,” the Nurse said with clinical precision. 289. 300 - 11. 289. Anxiety, perhaps shock flooded my body. Not because of the number assigned to the waves and dips of my body, my mass. I hate odd numbers, all beginning with the dreaded one. The first day, the first word, the first attempt. The first shock.

I’m 27 and it’s my first time staying in a hospital. Covered faces hover over me hourly, pricking me for blood, my right index finger, a black and blue bruise. I’m asked to pick a different finger, but I implore them to only savage the one. Pain that is contained is easier to manage.

I’m ravenous, but not allowed to eat. I feel empty and I’m parched, barren soil begging for relief.

“168 lbs.,” the Nurse told me, an eyebrow raising at the comically surprised whoosh that had been audacious enough to leave my mouth, a moment of clarity in a sea of marijuana, Jungle Juice, and Pabst Blue Ribbon. The number warmed smugly in my mind as I considered.

“I’ve never weighed that much before,” I finally managed, sensing her confusion.

“Methamphetamines?”

“No!” Me? Methamphetamines? Sure, I’d met Molly dancing to Miley, but we’d never become close friends.

This interaction, one of the few I can recollect from that night, second only the memory of asking the stone-faced male officer how I was supposed to get home when I was released, I didn’t know the way from the Richmond City Jail to my apartment. He drew me a map on a napkin and allowed me to put it in my pocket. Turn right and walk straight, simple enough. Twenty-two and terrified, trying to

find the strand loose enough to unravel the memories too tangled by alcohol to form a complete thread.

A fight, hateful words flung at a sweet soul, love, maybe the second (but who am I to trust these feelings?) fractured. It wouldn't end, not then, but that's when the finality set in. There was still much love to take, to explore, to claim. Love that still exists, softened with time into fragile fondness, preserved with the sweetness of friendship.

A building, broken into. The evidence: one pair of broken glasses, one pair of piss-stained pants and underwear, one wallet with an ID; yes, that's me.

With release I walk myself home. It takes some time, my former boss finds me wandering in commissary slippers and borrowed athletic shorts, wavering without my glasses to ground me. She tells me she was there when I was arrested, she helped me as much as she could. Maybe it was time to consider going home, starting things over.

No, no. Not me, I would never do that. This was my life now, a life completely different from the one I had spurned. I was 22, maybe evens and odds didn't matter after all.

-

Eighteen, the year the first boy appeared. Soft-spoken and tall, a gentle giant, we loved the same Juliette Lewis movie; he showed me that real boys could love Juliette Lewis movies, Kirstie Alley ones too. Boys who love boys but have only been broken by boys will turn the stalest of crumbs into endless, magical loaves, our own special eucharist. Stolen laughs over Mad Dog 20/20 lit my soul, electric blue rivers swimming through my veins, making me bolder, tearing down the walls carefully constructed to keep our kind out.

I thought it was something special, something that tender, something that would last. 30 days spun into 30 years by the quaking of a learning heart. He came and went and came and went again, but the Mad Dog stayed with me, \$4 a bottle, pushing me forward, new walls to build and destroy with poorly trained, electric blue tinted tools.

-

A mint green trailer, a place of my own. Two cats to keep me company, a chance to start new. I've been wrung out and dry, I don't miss the taste of alcohol, not one bit, not at all. The rooms fill, but that valley within me is empty and the quiet is closing in. I stroll the aisles of the grocery store, avoiding that special aisle with the black racks pressed against the refrigerated mountains of beer cases. But it pulls, promising fermented rivers to flood my valleys.

Eighteen dollars, a box of Franzia – Sunset Blush, for me. That's two nights of sustenance, two nights of filling that valley of discontent. Two more mornings of bile burning my throat, two more mornings of searching for my phone, pressing my nose to sheets for urine stains. Four double glasses, four lit cigarettes. Better than a \$10 bottle of Pinot Grigio.

Twenty-four and the bills pile up, but they'll be paid eventually. Behind on the rent, but what's eighteen compared to 400, not when you're back, or somewhere even stranger - a home by name only. I'm queering in the wilderness, finding my way back to the person I was never meant to be. The pale sunset's blush trickles down my throat, spreading lightness to my toes, spinning in Lana Del Rey sad girl circles. Maybe not lost, maybe just forgotten

-

Boy number three, neither love nor hate, feelings of my own creation, plucked from my imagination and placed onto a boy too in need of fixing himself to see the cracks he pressed his fingers into, stretching what was already broken. He always has room for himself, wedging truth between lies to make space for three, but no matter how hard I squint, how hard I try, I don't see a place for me. How could there be? I wasn't even number three, number four, number five. What was special for one was special for all.

Twenty-five and the bills are due. \$17 every two days no longer feels possible. Twenty-five and five a day I can do. Steel Reserve softens my reserve, five dollars, 84 ounces – no longer the glass bottles of my teens – supersized and plastic, two extra ounces per bottle. It sits in my stomach like a rock for three years. Tanya Tucker soothes me, reminds me of Delta Dawn; I don't quite have

my flower on yet.

I feel practical, like Mary Tyler Moore I'll make it after all. I open the door to my past, seeing endless cardboard boxes crammed into a room, some folded, some sprawled out in unbroken glory. It makes me sick, but I stuff them one by one into large black trash bags that stretch and threaten to rip with the effort.

The room is cleared and I'm torn between shame and pride. The quantity of boxes overwhelms and I'm sick at the thought of the money gone, the amusement dried up like the shriveled bags crammed inside the cardboard. The emptiness overwhelms me too, but with a sense of pride, as if I had stepped into a new realm rich with possibilities, endless space to fill. It's got to stop, but that will be a problem for later, maybe when I can afford the peace to go without.

-

I was 26 when my mother died. Days spent at the hospital by her side, nights at her home with Steel Reserve, sealing cracks in the widening valleys with a malt liquor mortar. Maybe now I could stop, maybe now I should stop. There's not room for anything new, just because the old has been taken away.

I'm not there when she slips away.

I'm 26 and it's 4 AM and I'm still just a broken boy. I wake to phone a call, a crying voice piercing through the fog. The price of beer is cheaper than the price of grief.

-

I'm pale and gray, constantly nauseous. This is 27 and I'm tired, unable to eat, unable to sleep, held in bondage by the constant pressure of a mutinous bladder. WebMD tells me to get myself checked out, but I don't share the same concern. This feels right, miserable means to miserable ends. I only leave bed for work, four days on, four days off.

I search for silver linings, threads cutting into my skin. Promises made in the early morning hours, seeds of change planted and muddied by polluted waters. I leave the hospital, one foot in

front of the other, steps wavering only as the path becomes clear.

The days are long and irksome without the softened edges of alcohol. Twice I thrill in the feeling of mouthwash trickling down my throat, lighting small fires throughout my body as it makes its journey and in its lighted path, I am finally able to see myself clearly.

Three insulin shots a day, three little pills, a new routine. Maybe the old can be made new.

-

3,000 miles. More than Vanessa Carlton, The Proclaimers, Gatlin even. I'm 28 and if I can put one foot in front of the other, if I can make myself move, I know I'll be okay. It's been six months without a drink, without a bottle or a bag with which to latch my lips and swallow mouthfuls of ease. My body is restless and tired, propelled to move, but unwilling, but I push, keep walking. The first mile hurts, my body covered in a thick layer of sweat.

The cold wind chaps my skin, causes my bones to ache, but I push, trudging through snow.

The spring air tickles my skin, my steps become easier, more certain. Gaga and Ariana beckon the skies to rain on me.

The summer is hot, sunlight painting my skin, uncertainty gone, only measuring distances and time, new rivers to fill empty valleys.

Two shots, two pills are all I need.

Fall is here and I must keep moving. 5:30 AM, 10 miles a morning. The air is cold and I'm tired, but not weary, not captive to quilts and comforters. The leaves fall, but I do not mourn their transformation.

3, 512 miles. I've always found comfort in excess.

-

1, 224 days sober.

3 years, 4 months, 6 days.

I'm 30 and memories washed in soiled waters cannot be trusted, but they can be measured.

The first breath of frozen March air burns my lungs. I can't get enough. My vision, a darkening tunnel the moment prior, clears and sharpens. Time hasn't caught up to me here.

I hear screaming, muted. When I was little, I would hold my breath underwater until my hearing crackled like static, like a campfire, and my cousin would scream when I stayed at the bottom of the pool for too long. This sounds the same. Urgency without clarity.

This fire doesn't crackle.

It roars.

The window screen resists briefly, then caves to my weight, folding neatly where the frame has snapped. I watch it fall in slow motion. Distantly, it clinks against the roof of the business next door, echoing off of the frozen concrete. Three stories down.

Somewhere, someone is formulating a plan.

Behind me, the heat is oppressive.

Time's up.

I'm on the windowsill before I know I'm moving.

My body seems to think for itself, moving without input.

I inch toward the concrete, lower, lower...

The second I let go, the world goes black.

Is it over now?

In my dream, I am weightless.

When my eyes open, for a moment, they don't focus. I'm adrift on an endless ocean: icy, black, unforgiving. The world seems to reel around me, a seasick feeling twisting my stomach, stealing air from my scorched lungs. Surely, this is what death feels like. I close my eyes.

In my dream, I can breathe again.

Blink. The ocean settles into ripples, then solidifies.
Blink again. My eyes come into focus.

*Not the ocean.
Concrete.*

My head spins, the earth tilting violently underneath me.
Flashing lights bathe the surrounding buildings in red.

Alive.

I sit up and look around. Three stories above, smoke billows out of the window. I want to scream: *I'm here! I'm alive! Come and find me!* But there is no sound left inside me. My throat is raw. My mouth tastes of blood and ash. Darkness is eating away at the edges of my vision again.

Metal clinks to my left. *They know I'm here.* A ladder leans against the side of the building. *They know I'm alive.* There's something at the edge of my awareness, I can almost touch it...

Someone saw me jump.

When I try to stand, my stomach lurches in an unfamiliar way. Something inside me hisses: *Don't*. I obey without understanding as I crawl to the ladder, then slowly, down the ladder. I'm careful to keep the weight off of my left foot, which threatens to tear my stomach from my body.

When I reach the ground, someone speaks words that I cannot understand.

I stare blankly. The words come again. "Can you walk?" *No*. Out of nowhere, a stretcher appears. I don't remember how I got onto it. Out of nowhere, River appears. He says something that isn't in a language I understand. *He doesn't speak any other language*. I try again to understand, but reality is melting rapidly, falling away from me into the siren's song.

How did I get here?

I don't remember.

Did you hear the alarm?

I don't remember.

Do you know what happened?

I don't remember.

I don't remember.

I don't remember.

I remember.

How to be a Man

Elias Murphy

Uncle Bubba loved to scare the three of us when he came over with his big rig. I didn't know that we didn't see him often then. I just knew that he told us he kept a count of all the animals he killed, how he would swerve to hit them sometimes.

Lexi cried and he was told to stop after that. I was too little to remember if he did or not.

He always had a weird sense of humor, but at the end of the day, he was kind. I think he was kind. That's what I remember. I hadn't remembered that his name was actually Jason. Kyle called him Uncle Bubba so we did too.

I remember him and Aunt Mary and the boys moving; we kept their dining room chairs. They broke a couple years ago and we didn't have the room for them when we moved. We didn't really need them anyways. Most of us weren't in the house much then. We were too busy with school and part-time jobs and the future to worry about sitting together.

But we did have a table with different chairs (less comfortable) when Aunt Mary called Dad. We as a family didn't really talk to them because of the drama about our biological father. But Mom knew. She always had a sense for these things. She told him to answer the phone; that it was about his brother.

Uncle Bubba had been dying for a while. I think it was liver failure, but even that I'm unsure of. Because of them moving and the personal drama, we hadn't talked to them much since they moved. Only about them and I was too young to want to pay attention to the conversations I was too young to be a part of.

He was with Grandpa Joe when it happened. Aunt Mary hadn't yet called him to tell him they'd found him a new organ.

Mom told me that she thought he did it on purpose. To ease the burden of caring for him, of paying for his medical bills. Stopping a semi let alone two isn't easy. I've seen Dad do it; it takes a god five to ten minutes. To get it parked, to turn it off. But they did. And they got out. Truck drivers aren't allowed to carry weapons.

I looked it up. I don't remember why.

Truck drivers aren't allowed to carry weapons.

I didn't think that looking it up would tell me how it happened. Not that directly. Choked to death apparently. I had always thought it was a fist fight, or with a tire stick. It wasn't.

Uncle Bubba was not a small man.

It had been a busy year for Death, but his was the only one I cried for. The only one I saw Dad cry for.

They weren't driving the semi. The other driver wasn't a truck driver.

Ryan said Uncle Bubba started it, that he doused Ryan's car in oil, that he started the fight. I didn't know this until I started writing. Grandpa Joe doesn't talk about what happened. Now that I know the details, I see why. But Uncle Bubba isn't here to defend himself and Ryan is.

Charges weren't pressed.

Things happened differently in my mind, though it was foggy.

All I knew was that it changed Dad. He left to become a truck driver. Why would he become a truck driver when that was how his brother died? Why would he choose to be away from his family all of the time?

He was home for two days every other week. One to relax and do laundry, one to get packed up.

He wasn't there for the most important parts of my life. For the little ones that only mattered to me. For the ones I needed him for.

He was there for when I came out though. Screaming, crying, against my will like I'd been born again. I was so afraid of him.

I will never be his son. He lost a daughter, but he didn't. But if I'm not his daughter and I'll never be his son, what am I?

Classmates taught me men's etiquette. Unspoken bathroom rules.

Always take the furthest urinal unless there's someone standing at the one next to it.

My fiancée taught me how to shave. How not to cut myself. Shave

with the grain, follow the curves of your face gently, don't press too hard.

Older trans men on TikTok showed me what my future might hold. That I wouldn't always be a small twenty-something man. That I could live past thirty. I knew it was possible but I never saw anyone like me over thirty.

I think about the things I learned from my dad. I learned how to mow a lawn. How to take care of a garden. How to bottle up my feelings until it exploded like a bomb, hurting everyone around me. The only thing he never taught me was how to be a man.

Uncanny

Briana Presley

[The winter months could feel like an even smaller place in the valley. What's the Internet and good cell reception in a place like the valley on a good weather day? *Not much.* Non-existent on a bad weather day.]

No cable. No satellite yet. Just the VCR tapes from the rental place in town every weekend—that is, if no one shoves miscellaneous items into the player's mouth. It can't spit up pennies and gummies and pencils. When the TV went off, the house was somewhere else.

Kerosene heaters and old wind-up clocks made it easy to get lost further in this uncanny home. The light shining from the kerosene heater would give off a warm glow and show little pores and crevices in the center of the house, but the dark corners were always prominent. The chimes from that clock, when it reached 11 PM after listening to the pendulum swing back and forth for so long, would make my insignificant body lock up all the air in my tiny lungs.

Those dark shadows made me remember what my Nana said about the house. It's slowly sinking. You can't do much about a sinking house as old as this one. My eyes created strange twelve-fingered, knotted hands grasping at the lit areas of the room. The wind blowing outside sounded like deep, lulling whispers asking why you were still awake.

You could see where the mean cat would stretch his body up and scratch at the beam for years. The textures from the wood make my skin crawl with unease. His lean body could reach higher than most cats. People found him impressive when they met him only to be attacked later. He would start scratching again soon in the quiet night.

It was hard to imagine the mountains and hills just outside the door a few feet away from me. Those mountains that made our house in the valley still stand over us. Their

large bodies could peek in and watch the tiny humans through the windows. I used to wonder if mountains moved at night. I wondered if the Devil's Nose leered in the valley once the humans slept. Its unsettling rocky white cartilage sticking out from beneath the trees made me wish it would wipe some of the trees over onto its open wounds.

I would tuck the comforter under my chin and force my eyes shut. I hoped the shadows wouldn't drag me out of the house and give me to the Devil's Nose. How would they find me in the morning when the crooked mountain would creep back to its own land miles away?

The clock chimed once, and my tired eyes finally let me sleep.]
The valley can wait.

FWD: ENGL 2120 002 - Messed Up, May Not Make It To Class

Quinn Daniels

(Sent: Monday, February 13, 2023 10:25:52 AM)

Hello Mr. Fine,

I'm sending you this email because the hubris of humanity is too large for its own good and the detriment posed upon itself is too great to understate. In other words, I am finding myself in great pain upon this morning, and I am deeply saddened to say that it is, regrettably, self inflicted.

I have ate a hot chip and I fear that I will perish.

The creations of white people that bastardize the inventions of other cultures know not of the disgrace that they bring upon the human race. Please refer to Doug Lyon, who, in 2008, committed the cardinal sin of founding the Paqui chip brand, an act that surely must have reserved him a spot in the deepest reserves of Hell.

In 2022, Paqui released the "One Chip Challenge". This single packaged chip is made with scorpion pepper and curses that were forbidden by cultures that were lost to time. In an ill-informed act, spurred on by the hope to impress the father of my fiancé, known to me by his ill repute and malicious acts towards fellow human beings, I ate one of the chips this morning, so that he would be more amicable in peace discussions later today whilst discussing tax documents. I now see that this was a covert act of terrorism and a declaration of war.

The bioweapon banned by the Geneva convention that I will simply refer to as the "One Chip" was not good. You see, spicy foods created by cultures that contain more melanin that Doug Lyon and my fiancé's father, were made

with flavor in mind; the spicy nature of the food was put in place to complement and bring out other flavors within the dish to create an enjoyable experience for the consumer. It seems that the concept of enjoyment, happiness, love, and empathy was not known to Doug Lyon, nor David Perkins, my Fiancé's father. The pain created by the One Chip was instead accompanied by a harrowing lack of taste other than More Pain. I could not even enjoy the humble crunch I have come to associate with the experience of eating tortilla chips. One shudders to think about the ramifications that social media and the pursuit of meaningless clout has brought upon society to have caused this chip to exist.

While I have subdued most of the pain from my tongue and throat, my stomach — which is usually resilient against most foreign invaders of spicy nature — feels like it is experiencing the storming of Normandy on D-Day. A battle of the ages is being fought within me and the Allied powers — whole and oat milks, tums, Pepto Bismol tablets, Alka Seltzer, Ritz crackers, Blue Cheese, and Cough Syrup — are fighting to free me from the fascistic hold of the One Chip and its blitzkrieg upon my body. I fear that I may be destroyed in the process.

Please do not be alarmed if I am not in class today. I will be unable to obtain a doctor's note as I do not have the resources to give to a physician in this time of need. To supplement, please look forward to the recording of this morning at the point of no return, supplied to me by my Fiancé. However, if I do appear in class, know that I am the ruins of my former self and that i am likely still in great pain.

Thank you.

Sincerely, Student (she/her).

RE:RE: ENGL 2120 002 — Messed Up, May Not Make It To Class
(Drafted: Thursday, October 12, 2023 10:57:52 PM)
[To: Fine, R.; McGill, J.; Marlow, G.]

Hello Professors,

I hope that you are doing well! As you suggested in all of your replies, I am submitting this “work of art” to the Mockingbird right

now. Though scarred, I have lived to tell the tale. Thank you for letting me take it easy that day.

Did you enjoy the video link that I sent you?

I couldn't have made it through the semester without you all.

— Student (she/her)

Dust Bunnies

Abby Clement

December 28, 2011

“Granny, you got new toys!” I squeal while I open the old trunk my Granny keeps all of my stuff in. It has been a year since I have last seen her, and much longer since she had gotten new gadgets for me to play with. I look up at her, and the smile she returns back to me rivaled the stars at night.

A wave of silence passes over us as I start searching for my favourite dolls, and Granny just watches over me. Once I find them, I smile again and hand one over to Granny. As I’m about to ask her to play, I look up and see a picture of her and my great-grandfather, who my *Papa* calls Grandpa Clement.

“Hey Granny, I never hear you or anyone talk about Grandpa Clement. Since I’ve never met him, can you tell me what he was like?” I see my Granny’s bright smile falter, and I start to regret even bringing him up.

“Darlin’, come sit with me please,” Granny says and I nod, too scared to do anything else. I sink into her sofa that’s most likely older than me. She reaches over and pulls out a ratty photobook that looks like it’s been through hell and back.

“You know how I grew up in a small town?” Granny asks me, her voice wavering with uncertainty. I nod slowly and sink further into the couch out of shame, and slightly out of fear.

“Well I met Grandpa Clement in that small town. We had known each other since we were kids, got married right when we turned 18. That’s what was common in the

olden days, I would never wish that upon you girls now.” I nod along, not quite sure what she’s saying but knowing it’s important.

“The first time we met, I was playing in my parents’ garden. There was this little bunny eatin all of our plants, so I was tryna catch him. Your Grandpa Clement saw me and offered to help. We spent all day tryna catch the damn thing, but its little legs were too fast for us,” Granny says as she wraps her arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer. As I felt her wirey frame through her clothes, a weird sensation rolled over me. I brushed it off quickly, and decided to push Granny further.

“He spent all day tryna help you find a bunny? He must have really loved you then!” I smile warmly at my Granny, and she gives me a soft smile in return.

“He did, and he loved y’all even more.”

“How could he love us even more? None of us have met him!”

“You don’t have to meet someone to love them. Just the thought of having great grandchildren as wonderful as you kept him going for a few more years,” Granny says while ruffling my hair. I giggle at her action and smooth out my hair after she pulls away. She looks down at her watch and frowns, wrinkles more prominent in her face than before. It is then that I notice how thin she’s gotten since I had last seen her.

“I have to go out and water the plants darlin’, but if you want to bring this photobook outside and join me, you’re welcome to.” I nod excitedly and snatch the book from my Granny’s lap before running out the back door.

It takes Granny a little longer than usual to get outside but once she does, she grabs the hose and starts watering the bushes that surround her house. I sit on the hanging porch swing she has in her front portico and flip through the photobook.

I stare wistfully at all of the old photos of Granny and Grandpa Clement, and giggle at the childhood photos of my *Papa* that are scattered throughout the pages. I flip to a photo of my *Papa* and Grandpa Clement, smiling at how happy they look together. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a gray blur run through the bushes my

Granny was currently watering. When I look up from the book, a gray bunny is staring right at me, eyes wide when I meet them.

“Granny, look! A bunny!” I point at the bunny and my Granny looks over, tilting her head in curiosity. The bunny tilts its head in return, then scurries off into the neighbors yard. I kick my feet and giggle before turning my attention back to the photobook.

“What a cute little bunny, I wonder if that was Grandpa Clement coming to say hi to us!” I say offhandedly while continuing to browse through the pages of the scrapbook. A few moments of silence go by before I feel Granny move some pillows to the side and sit next to me.

“You know darlin’, I think you may be right. Whenever I’m sad about your Grandpa Clement, I always go outside and look at what we’ve created. I haven’t changed the house since he’s passed, I couldn’t bear gettin’ rid of anything he planted or built. Everytime I’m out here thinkin’ bout him, a bunny always seems to appear. I’ve never thought bout it cause they’re so popular round here, but I can’t shake the feeling that maybe he’s still lookin’ after us,” Granny says with tears in her eyes that are a sliver away from rolling down her face. I close the photobook and put it to the side before hugging my Granny tight, pressing my cheek against her bony collarbone.

“I thought reincarnation didn’t exist Granny? They taught me in Sunday School that after we die, we go up to Heaven and rest there for eternity if we’re good,” I say with childlike curiosity laced in my voice. Granny just shakes her head and wraps her arms around my shoulders, pulling our hug just a little bit tighter.

“It’s all so much more complicated than that sweetheart. Learning from the church is important, but you need to think for yourself too. Listening to one person’s interpretation of life will make you a *couyon* when you’re older. If we believe that that bunny was Grandpa Clement watching over us, then so be it. You’ve heard of guardian angels, haven’t ya?” I shake my head at her words and she sighs, slowly pulling away from the hug and instead grasping at my hands.

“Think of it as an invisible person watching over you and making sure you’re okay. I always feel like Grandpa Clement is still

here, even when he passed many years ago. I feel better knowing that he's watchin' over my shoulder and that I'm doin the right thing," Granny says as her hands shake in my grasp. I smile and nod while squeezing onto her a little tighter.

"I wanna be brought back as a puppy when I pass! What about you Granny?" I see my Granny's smile melt in a way I've never seen before. She gives my hands one more squeeze before letting them go and looking up at the sky.

"I want to go wherever your Grandpa Clement is. If he's resting in Heaven peacefully, I will rest with him. If he's down here as a bunny watching over us, then I suppose I'm gonna be a bunny in my next life. Now let's wash up before eatin' some supper. How does gumbo sound?" I jump up and give Granny my dimpled smile in glee. She laughs at my reaction before standing up herself and bringing me inside.

* * *

"Granny, are you excited for my birthday party tomorrow? We're gonna pick up a cake from Rouses in the morning!" Granny laughs at my excitement before kissing the top of my head gently.

"Of course I'm excited, my youngest granddaughter is turning 7! You asked for a cake at Rouses for your birthday? There's nothing else that you want darlin'?" Granny asks with her eyebrows raised.

"Spending my birthday down here with y'all every year is more than enough! The Rouses cake is just a *lagniappe*," I say with a giggle in my voice. Granny fake gasps and holds her hand to her heart, making me laugh even harder.

"Where are you learning all these words? Has your *Papa* secretly been teaching you Cajun French behind our backs?" My giggles turn into a full chortle as I put my finger over my mouth with a grin.

"That's a secret between *Papa* and I," I say, still chuckling through my words. Granny just rolls her eyes at my response and looks up at the clock. She grimaces and clicks the TV off, making the small house fade away into darkness.

"Your *Papa* and *Maman* would kill me if they knew that I was

letting you go to bed this late. *Allons* my darlin', it's time for bed," I groan before getting up and shuffling my way towards the guest room. I slip off my slippers before crawling into bed and snuggling into the mattress. Granny walks in a little while after me and tucks the blankets in carefully, placing my stuffed dog plushie beside me.

"Does everything feel comfortable for you darlin'?" I nod my head before I reach over and grab the weathered dog, tucking in under my chin and flipping over to my side to face my Granny.

"Thank you Granny, I love spending the day together every year. I can't wait to do this every year for the rest of my life!" My Granny's eyes sparkle at my innocence, but she doesn't even try to correct me.

"*Fais do-do*," she says with a smile and I grin cheekily back at her.

"Does that mean a dance party, or should I go to sleep?" Granny laughs at my joke before smoothing the top of my hair gently. I close my eyes and try to relish in the moment, knowing it'll be another year before I'm able to experience it again.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart. Your *Papa* will be here in the morning. *Je t'aime* my darlin'," Granny says before walking over and flicking the lights off, making the bedroom go dark. Before she can close the door, I rush to respond.

"*Je t'aime aussi* Granny!" I yell back before seeing the last bit of light disappear through the closed door, which signals me to snuggle back into the blankets, and hold Puppy Jr. tighter into my chest.

December 30, 2012

As I stand in the small church surrounded by strangers wearing all black, I look over at my sisters, who're trying not to let their tears fall down their faces. I look over at my *Maman* and *Papa*, who look more composed than my siblings, but on the verge of crying as well. As I gaze around the room, I realize that no one is crying. No one but me. I walk over to my *Papa* and tug on his suit jacket lightly. He looks down at me and gives me a tight lipped smile.

"*Papa*, why is no one crying? I thought that's what we're

supposed to do when someone passes?” I say with a wavering voice, similar to how my Granny sounded when she spoke to me about Grandpa Clement. My *Maman*, who is standing right besides my *Papa*, just shakes her head and smooths out my hair, which is still wavy from the french braids I slept in the night before.

“A lot of us already shed all of our tears honey, so we’re grieving in silence today. This is just giving her a place to lay peacefully,” she says while her eyes go glossy. I let a tear run down my cheek before I hugged her waist tightly, trying to contain my sobs.

“But no one ever cried, *Maman*. Y’all couldn’t cry yesterday because it was my birthday, I know that, I’m not a *couyon*,” I blubber into my *Maman*’s dress, trying to stay quiet so I don’t draw attention to myself. My *Papa* sighs before pulling a kleenex out of his pocket and wiping my cheeks softly.

“Honey, please don’t worry about us, we’ll be okay. Now go collect your sisters so we can go back to her house and say goodbye one last time,” *Maman* says as I snifle the rest of my tears back into my eyes. I look around and my sisters are already looking over at me, the pity clear on their faces. I scrunch my nose in annoyance, angry that no one seems upset but me. I motion my head towards the door, and they begin to walk over that way.

* * *

The car ride over to Granny’s house is the most silent my family has ever been. I can feel the tension stretching over all of us, like a rubberband that someone is pulling back to snap at someone across the classroom. My *Papa* didn’t even turn the radio on, so there is nothing to distract me from the emptiness I feel in my heart. As we pull into her driveway, I feel another pang of hurt in my chest. I push it down and stumble out of the middle seat my family tends to cram into, since I’m the youngest and smallest child.

As I walked into her house for the last time, I almost let myself break down again. After seeing that no one else is crying, I force myself once again not to let my tears fall. I look at all of the old walls, where her picture frames no longer hang. The spare bedroom I used to stay in is bare, and her red toy chest is nowhere to be seen. The only thing left is a ceramic bunny knick knack placed

on her kitchen windowsill, and a small note placed in front of it. I contemplate telling my *Papa* about it, but my curiosity overwhelms any other thoughts I had. I walk over and slowly pick up the note, careful to not drop the bunny or bring attention to myself. When I open the note, I see that it was handwritten by Granny herself.

Abby,

I knew that this day would come, and that you would be the one taking it the hardest. You must understand that death is a part of life, and no one can get around it. I wish I could've been around for longer, but sometimes, things don't work out the way we want them to. If you're reading this, you also have found the bunny figurine this was placed by. I was given this at my wedding, and I've kept it on the windowsill as a reminder of Grandpa Clement and I's first meeting. Now that I have passed, it is now yours to keep. Let it be a reminder that no matter where you go, I will always be looking over your shoulder, like your personal Guardian Angel. I love you darlin', and I promise everything will be okay.

Sincerely,

Granny

This time around, I cannot stop the tears from flooding down my face. I slip the note into the small black purse my *Maman* had given me this morning, and I pick up the bunny in wonder. I coughed and blinked quickly as the dust bunnies flew into my face from the movement of the ceramic piece. It was glossy white in colour and smooth to the touch. The only extraordinary thing about it was the ceramic flower vine around its neck, which was light green in colour with light pink flowers placed sporadically around it. I look up from the porcelain bunny, only to see that same pink colour painted all over the walls.

Suddenly, all of the air leaves my body and I cannot breathe. I look around and see the walls closing in on me. I reach up and press two of my fingers to my pulse, which is going faster than I've ever felt it go before. Bile rises in the throat and as soon as I feel like I am going to throw up, I run out of Granny's house, the bunny figurine still in my hand.

I sat on the splintered porch swing, clutching the bunny to my

chest. I finally allow myself to truly cry, knowing that the rest of my family is still inside making sure the house looks okay. These cries feel like my heart is being ripped out of my chest, the same feeling I had when I was told that she was gone.

December 29, 2012

As my sister wakes me up from my slumber, my vision is blurry as I try to adjust to the light in my bedroom. Once my vision starts to clear up, I can see my sister standing over me with a forced smile on her face.

“Why are you so slow to get up? Have you forgotten that it’s your birthday today? There’s biscuits in the kitchen for you, straight out the oven too!” And with that, my sister scurries out the room. At the mention of biscuits, I slowly sit up and stretch my arms over my head, similarly to a cat who has just woken up from a nap. I look over at the alarm clock to see that it’s only 8 in the morning. I groan at the fact that my sister woke me up so early, but remember that there are biscuits waiting for me.

I slink my way out of bed and make my way towards the kitchen, feet shuffling in my pikachu slippers. Once I get into the kitchen, I see the biscuits piping hot and sitting on the counter, almost as if they’re waiting for me. Before I can grab one though, I notice both my *Maman* and *Papa* sitting at the table, a somber silence stretching in the air.

“Good morning! Do you know when everyone is coming over for my birthday?” I say to my parents, who both whip their heads up to meet my gaze.

“Happy birthday sweetie! Get some breakfast and come sit down, we have something to tell you,” My *Maman* says, voice cracking towards the end. It is at this point that I realize that something has happened, and they wanted to tell me sooner rather than later. Wondering what could possibly be wrong, I quickly grabbed my food and sat down next to my *Papa*.

“Honey, you know how we visited Granny in the hospital the other night?” I nod my head slowly, curious as to what could’ve happened to Granny since I last saw her.

“As you know, Granny was really old. She’s been in the hospital for a while because of that,” my *Maman* takes a deep breath that shudders through her whole body before she keeps going. “She passed away this morning, a few hours ago. I’m so sorry sweetheart, I wish this didn’t happen on your birthday.” It was at that moment when I felt my whole world go silent. It felt as though I couldn’t breathe for a few seconds before the tears started welling up in my eyes.

“She’s gone? I saw her last night and she was okay, what do you mean she’s gone?!” My voice raises towards the end, breaking as a tear slips down my face. They both looked down at the table, not wanting to meet my gaze any longer.

“I’m so sorry honey. At least you were able to see her one last time, it’s almost as if she waited for us,” my *Maman* says while slowly wrapping her arms around me. I lean into her hug, but I don’t feel comforted like I normally do with her hugs.

Instead, all I feel is dread knowing that my Granny’s arms will never pull me into a hug again. I will never stay the night at my Granny’s house again. I will never have to endure eating her dry, overcooked roast again. I will never have her at a birthday party again. The only time I will see Granny again is through old photographs we’ll plaster on the wall, even though they’ll only be looked at once in a blue moon. *I will never get to see Granny again.*

“Finish your breakfast and get dressed honey, we already told everyone that you’d be celebrating at Chuck-E-Cheese this year, we don’t want to disappoint anyone,” my *Papa* says, finally looking up at me. It’s at this moment when I realize that I haven’t seen a single one of my family members cry, only look at my own tears with sympathy. I clench my jaw for a few moments, but slowly untense due to the mental exhaustion of the day, despite only being awake for a few minutes so far.

“Yes *Papa*.” I take the last bite of my biscuit and go back to my bedroom, knowing that today is going to be the worst birthday in my life.

* * *

“We got you guys the all inclusive play, so don’t be afraid to play everything you want. Go have fun, we’ll be over here if you need anything.” My *Papa* says while handing out the cards to all of the kids. My cousin Brock runs off as soon as he’s given his card, along with one of my older sisters, Emma. I stare at my card in silence, forgetting where I was for a few moments.

“Go on and play honey. We reserved this table for a few hours, so make the most of it,” my *Maman* says, resting her hand on my shoulder. I give her a small nod before walking away from the adults and towards the games. After walking around for a few minutes, I finally found the claw machines. My eyes light up when I see a cute stuffed puppy towards the back of the machine. I don’t hesitate to swipe my card and start playing.

My eyes lock onto the puppy and I move the joystick towards it. The first time I press down on the button, I’m a few inches too forward. I swipe my card and try again. This time, the claw wraps around the puppy, but the plushie tumbles out as it’s getting pulled up. I swipe my card once again, getting annoyed at how the machine seems to be against me winning. This time, the claw grabs the puppy perfectly and when it reaches the front of the machine, drops the stuffed animal right into the collection box.

“Yay I got it!” I grab the plushie and hold it close to my chest, excited that I won my first prize. I run over to where my family is sitting to tell them about my new toy, but I come to a pause when I see them all hunching over the table, talking in hushed voices. It’s in that moment when I remember what had happened just that morning. I looked at the puppy in my hands, instantly upset that I had so much fun trying to win it. I squeeze the stuffed animal in my hands before walking over to a different table and slamming it on the table, leaving it for some other kid to take home.

* * *

I’m torn away from my memories when a flash of white catches the corner of my eye. I look away from my feet, only to see a white rabbit staring up at me through the bushes. As I lean forward to get a closer look, a gray one pops up next to it. The two rabbits stare at me, and I look at them in awe. The gray one reminded me of

something, but I couldn't pinpoint why it looked familiar. The white one, however, was one that I was sure I hadn't seen before. I can't stop staring into their eyes, and it seems like they can't help but stare into mine.

The moment ends as soon as my *Maman* opens the creaky old screen door. The two rabbits scatter back into the bushes, but I can't seem to take my eyes off of the place they were previously sitting. I feel the swing move a bit as my *Maman* takes a seat next to me, and I make no move to look towards her.

"I know this is hard for you, and I promise that it's hard for all of us as well. I was hoping that Granny leaving you her favourite knick knack would help you feel better, knowing that she was always thinking of you." I look down at my porcelain rabbit and my eyes go wide in realization.

"*Maman!* I think Granny's still here watching over us! I just saw two bunnies appear in the bushes, one of them looks exactly like this porcelain rabbit, and the other one looks like the one me and Granny saw last year!" My *Maman* just chuckles at me while I stare at the porcelain rabbit in my hands, admiring it. For the first time in days, I felt like I finally had my Granny back with me.

"If you believe that honey, then I'm sure that you're right. Do you wanna go back inside, or wait out here a few more minutes until we're done?" I peel my eyes away to look at my *Maman*, and I can tell that she doesn't believe me. She believes that Granny and Grandpa Clement are up in Heaven, and so does everyone else in the family. Not for the first time in my life, I wonder if my family is wrong.

"I'll stay out here if that's okay with you *Maman*," I say quietly, gazing up at her with wide eyes. She nods before making her way back inside, not looking back at me once. I move my eyes towards the porcelain bunny in my hands, which looks more lifelike than it previously did.

"Granny, do you think it's okay that I don't believe in God? I can't believe that you've come back as a bunny on Earth *and* that you're in Heaven at the same time, so I have to pick one." I pause for a moment, thinking about what I just said. *If you're really back*

to watch over me, I want a sign. Those words echo in my head over and over again. My hands twitch, waiting to see something, anything that would prove me right.

It's not until I see that flash of white fur blind my vision again that I snap my head up. I faintly see the white and gray rabbits through the leaves, which makes my heart beat faster. I slowly stand up from the porch swing and creep my way over to the bushes, careful not to make any noise. I go around the corner of the deck and see the two rabbits frozen in place, but very clearly staring at me. I tiptoe about 5 feet away from them and put the figurine in the dirt, backing up a few paces to sit down in the grass afterwards. The two rabbits go up to the figurine and nose at it, looking back up at me in curiosity.

"Hi Granny and Grandpa Clement! I can't wait to see you again next year!" I smile and wave at the bunnies, who are now backing away from the figurine. They stare at me for a few moments before hopping away into the sunset together, like I'd always imagined them doing. I pick up the figurine and make my way back inside, where I see my family grabbing the last of the boxes Granny had left behind.

"Doing better kiddo? We're gonna head back home, but only if you're ready to go," my Papa says with worry laced in his tone. I give the house one more lookaround before returning his gaze with a small smile.

"I'm tired. Can I have the first bath when we get back?" Everyone just snorts at my words while my Papa smiles for the first time in what seems like days.

"Of course sweetheart, whatever you'd like."

December 29, 2022

I suddenly stop in my tracks, staring at the tomb that says her name in big letters.

Dorothy N. Clement

Hey Granny, it's been 10 years since you've passed. I'm sorry it took me this long to see you, no one would let me. How are you doing? A lot has changed since you've passed. I'm 18, I converted to

Buddhism a few summers ago, I got together and broke up with my toxic girlfriend, and I picked what college I'm going to next year. And that's only the past 2 years of my life, a fifth of the time you've been gone. I don't know what else to say... so I guess I'll just recite my favourite mantra for you.

I pull myself out of my thoughts and take out my *Mala* from my pocket, wrapping it around my left hand, similar to what I used to do with a rosary when I was little. I start at the *guru bead* and close my eyes, rolling the bead next to it between my index finger and thumb.

“*Om tare tuttare ture soha. Om tare tuttare ture soha.*” I repeat this phrase 108 times, moving onto the next bead as soon as I'm done with the mantra. Once I get back to the *guru bead*, I take a deep breath before opening my eyes.

My jaw drops when I see a gray and white bunny next to my Granny and Grandpa Clement's gravestones, staring up at me. Tears well up in my eyes at the sight of rabbits for the first time in years, and my fingers shake slightly in shock. I stare for a few moments and when my body finally forces me to blink, they're gone. I feel frozen in time for a few moments before I look back down at my *Mala*, finally allowing the tears to fall down my face. They were gone so quickly, it made me wonder if they had ever been there at all.

Sisyphus' Notice

Elias Murphy

CAST

Sisyphus, a tired worker at the end of his rope

Hades, his manager

Hades sits behind a desk, typing on a laptop which obscures his face. At a knock he stands up, displaying a tidy, clean shirt and dress pants. He walks off stage momentarily, then returns with the sound of a door closing; Sisyphus enters behind Hades, wearing a tattered loincloth. Hades sits back down and continues typing. He does not look at Sisyphus.

SISYPHUS: I quit.

HADES: You can't quit, you need to keep pushing the boulder.

SISYPHUS: No, I said I quit, you can't keep asking me to push this boulder by myself. I work all day at this while you sit at your desk and watch me. You complain when my lunch breaks are too long, but you make twice what I do.

HADES: But you have a job to do and if you want to quit you have to put in your two weeks.

SISYPHUS: I don't have to do anything.

HADES: You signed the paperwork; I told you the job expectations. Push the boulder forever, thirty-minute breaks every six hours, \$9.25 an hour.

SISYPHUS: I can't do it with you watching me, telling me how I'm doing it wrong. I can't stand here, don't talk to my audience. No stopping to breathe. And you didn't tell me how much you make off my labor. I bring

in the audience, I entertain them.

HADES: I manage them. I'm the manager.

SISYPHUS: You wouldn't have anything to manage without me.

HADES: Someone else can push the boulder. Prometheus wants a promotion.

SISYPHUS: He can have it; I'm not doing it anymore. You've never done labor like this. Or maybe you have. I don't know. You've forgotten if you had. I'm always exhausted, I spend my breaks tired, usually sleeping. Because your job makes me tired. I'm drenched in sweat and you're completely dry.

HADES: Customers don't like when managers look gross.

SISYPHUS: No one likes anyone who looks gross. You're not listening.

HADES: Get back to work.

SISYPHUS: I hate you. I hate this job. Sometimes, I just want to let go of the boulder so it hurts me, and I can stop. I don't care about worker's comp. I'm just tired. I don't have time for hobbies. I haven't gone out on a date in so long. You have a family, I know you do, I've seen your wife. She's beautiful. I don't have time to find a wife. I have to ask myself what matters most when I buy food for lunch. My lunch costs thirty minutes of work. And it's just a soggy sandwich and a flat drink. I've seen your lunch. It's nice. And you order pizza every Monday. What do you do that makes you hungry enough to eat almost an entire pizza by yourself?

HADES: Now look here. You can't get mad because I know how to save money. I've worked hard to afford those pizzas. They're my treat for working so hard. I started off just like you and I built myself up to this position. It's not my fault you don't know how to budget. If you keep acting like this, I'm going to have to dock your pay.

SISYPHUS: You can't dock my pay. I already quit. Just give me what I'm owed from this last week, and I'll go.

HADES: Nobody wants to work these days. You're so ungrateful.

Sisyphus turns as if to walk away, but Hades grabs his arm.

HADES: You're so spoiled, you know that? My job isn't easy! I have to deal with the customers you piss off. 'Hades, Sisyphus crushed my kid', 'Hades, Sisyphus isn't entertaining anymore', 'Hades, why isn't he pushing the boulder right now? I paid to see him struggle". I make sure your work is easier by handling all of the awful customers.

SISYPHUS: I handle them anyways. They come to me first. I redirect them to you. I've been yelled at. A lady threw a pomegranate at me yesterday. Have you ever had someone throw food at you?

HADES: Well... No... But people yell at me all day! I had to give that woman a refund, y'know.

SISYPHUS: You gave her a refund? I had a concussion! You should have charged her for my medical bill! Instead, I missed out on three hours of work and had to sacrifice lunch breaks to make it back up. Fuck. Off.

Sisyphus again goes to leave. Hades reaches for him, but Sisyphus is ready this time and grabs his instead. The two look at each other's eyes. One apathetic, one angry. Sisyphus leaves. Hades is left alone.

HADES: I'm taking that costume out of you pay if you don't return it!

Lady (Opening scene from a full-length film)

Claire Webb

EXT. MOUNTAIN HIKING TRAIL-DAY

The hiking trail is beautiful, surrounded on both sides by misty mountains. It's spring, so everything is green and blooming. The trail is a well-used one, so it's wide and made with gravel. The day is nice and sunny with few clouds. Two women with similar features are walking the trail with a large, brown-and-black, short-haired mutt named LADY. One woman, CHARLOTTE, is stern, but attractive and in her mid-twenties, the other woman, NATALIE, is around the age of twenty with a more carefree air to her and is holding Lady's leash. They both wear hiking clothes. They are coming up the trail from a ways away and we can barely hear the start of their conversation, but it grows louder as they walk closer.

CHARLOTTE: Yeah? That's good. (*Charlotte takes her phone out to check it*)

NATALIE: Yeah. Is everything alright?

CHARLOTTE: Sorry, I'm just expecting a call from work.

Natalie frowns.

NATALIE: Thought you got off for the weekend.

CHARLOTTE: Yeah, but you know how it is. Anyways, tell me more about this guy, what's his name again? (*Charlotte stuffs her phone back in her pocket and Natalie blushes*)

NATALIE: Devin. He works at this bar on fifth street and he's so sweet. He took me out to Rugen's the other night for dinner.

CHARLOTTE: Oooh, Nat, that place is nice.

Natalie grins.

NATALIE: I know, right? And he wants to take me to this—
Charlotte's phone rings and she stops to pull it out. Natalie stops too and glances at it. Although she seems like she wants to say something, she doesn't.

CHARLOTTE: It's work. Sorry Nat, just give me a sec.
Natalie gives her an eye roll as Charlotte hurries off to the side of the trail and answers the call.

CHARLOTTE: Hello. Yeah. What's the emergency? Sorry, I'm having trouble hearing you. Yeah, I think my connection's bad. What's that? Her contact fell through? Just have her talk to Sean. Yeah, he'll help her. What? No, I can't hear you again. I said I can't hear you.

As Charlotte talks on the phone. Natalie stands off to the side looking bored and irritated. She squats down and pets Lady's head affectionately.

NATALIE: She's always got work, Lady. Never takes a day off. This was supposed to be our girls' weekend.
Natalie glances over at Charlotte who's still on the phone. Charlotte catches her looking and waves Natalie on. Charlotte silently mouths go on.

NATALIE: Alright, Lady, looks like it's just you and me.
Lady cocks her head at Natalie who sighs and stands up. She continues up the trail with Lady, passing two women around Charlotte and Natalie's age who are on their way down. They laugh and talk as they walk, and Natalie watches them with envy. Charlotte runs up just after they pass, and Natalie stops to wait for her.

CHARLOTTE: Sorry about that. You know how work is.

Natalie nods, drags her shoe through the gravel and starts walking again. Charlotte follows her and sighs.

CHARLOTTE: Oh, come on Nat. It's not like I want to work all the time.

NATALIE: I know, I know. It's all my fault.
A man in his late twenties wearing hiking gear and who's heading down, comes into view and they go quiet until he passes.

CHARLOTTE: Now that's not fair.

NATALIE: But I'm the one with the expensive medical bills.

CHARLOTTE: I didn't say that.

NATALIE: You didn't have to.

They see a group of teens, two girls and one guy, up ahead who are stopped on the side of the trail. They are taking pictures. They are just leaving, heading down, when Charlotte and Natalie reach them. Once they're gone, we can see that the group had stopped at a natural overlook that provides a beautiful view of the mountains to take pictures.

CHARLOTTE: Here. *(Charlotte gets her phone out her pocket and pulls up the camera feature)*

CHARLOTTE: Let's get Lady in it.
They squat down to get Lady in their picture.

CHARLOTTE: Ready?
Charlotte and Natalie smile and Lady looks over at the right time, capturing the three of them looking at the camera, a view of the mountains in the background. Charlotte looks at her phone and smiles.

CHARLOTTE: This is a good one.
Charlotte shows it to Natalie.

PHONE SCREEN-PHOTO

There's the picture of Charlotte, Natalie, and Lady with the mountains in the background. The camera pulls back and the picture of them is now in a picture frame. As we pull back even farther, we see the framed photo is sitting on a side table in a hospital room.

INT. HOSPICE ROOM-DAY

The hospice room is nicely furnished and full of personal items: a pink stuffed dog, some pictures, one picture sitting on the table next to the bed is of two women and a dog out hiking, a vase of dying flowers, a beat-up suitcase overstuffed with clothes, and a bag of toiletries. Natalie lays in a hospital bed. She looks frail and is a bit older, in her mid-twenties, with a sallow complexion. She is hooked up to a monitor and IVs and wears a comfortable looking pair of pajamas. Charlotte, also older now, in her thirties, and wearing business clothes, is by Natalie's side and seems lost in thought. She is staring at the photo of them at the mountains.

NATALIE: I need you to take care of Lady.

CHARLOTTE: What?

Charlotte snaps back to attention, looking over to Natalie.

NATALIE: I need you to take her once I'm, gone.

Charlotte takes a deep breath, sits in one of the plastic chairs next to the bed, and stares at the photo again.

CHARLOTTE: Remember that day? It was so nice out. Perfect weather for the perfect day.

Natalie glances at Charlotte and frowns.

NATALIE: But it wasn't perfect.

CHARLOTTE: Yes, it was. I had the day off. We went hiking that morning and then had lunch in town at our favorite brunch place.

Natalie scoffs softly.

NATALIE: No, I ate at Sugar 'N Spice. You paced outside the entire time, talking on the phone. Even during the hike, you took a phone call.

CHARLOTTE: Well, I'm sorry. Would you rather we have starved?

There's a knock at the door and a nurse with the name tag PAYTON comes in carrying a tray of medicine.

PAYTON: It's time for your medicine Natalie.

Natalie and Charlotte stare at each as the nurse works until Natalie has to break eye contact to take her pills.

NATALIE: Thanks, Payton.

Payton nods with a small smile and leaves. Natalie messes with her blankets absent mindedly and Charlotte grabs her purse and places it on her lap before sighing.

CHARLOTTE: I'm sorry.

Charlotte reaches into her purse.

CHARLOTTE: I brought you something.

She pulls out a small stuffed dog that looks like Lady.

CHARLOTTE: I was saving it for your birthday, but I thought you might like it now.

Natalie reaches delicately for the stuffed dog and inspects it before hugging it to her chest.

NATALIE: It looks like Lady.

CHARLOTTE: She misses you.

NATALIE: Take her for me. Charlotte, please.

CHARLOTTE: What are the doctors saying?

Natalie glances away and Charlotte sighs and nods.

CHARLOTTE: Okay.

NATALIE: Make sure you get her bed too and all her toys, she likes to play fetch the most.

CHARLOTTE: I will.

Charlotte checks her phone and Natalie glances at the digital clock on the wall.

NATALIE: Do you have to go yet?

Charlotte checks her phone one more time before putting it in her purse.

CHARLOTTE: I can stay. Just a bit longer.

Natalie grabs Charlotte's hand and looks up at her, pleadingly.

NATALIE: Will you sit with me? Like old times?

Charlotte gives Natalie a small smile.

CHARLOTTE: Sure.

Charlotte climbs into the bed with Natalie and they lie together.

Charlotte puts her arm around Natalie and hugs her close. Natalie rests her head on Charlotte's shoulder.

Birria Tacos

Claire Webb

It's 9 o'clock at night and Ian's just now getting dinner started. It's already dark out, a sign that winter is coming, and he flips on the harsh overhead lights. Gordon, his roommate, is sitting in the living room, typing away at his computer. Coffee shop music plays softly in the background. Gordon looks up when Ian walks inside and gives him a nod before going back to writing his paper. Ian rummages around the tiny apartment kitchen, gathering all of the ingredients he needs, chiles, tomato, onion, garlic, spices, tortillas, and meat. He lays the items out in a methodical order, keeping those he needs first, closest to him. He's heating up his pot of water to rehydrate the chiles when he gets a call from his girlfriend, Sara. He lets it ring twice before answering.

IAN: Hey, what's up? (*carefully deseeded the dried chiles, four guajillo chiles and two árbol chiles*)

SARA: (*hesitant*) Are you busy?

IAN: I'm making dinner. Will you be by tonight? (*dumps the deseeded chiles, onion, garlic, and tomato into the boiling pot of water before bringing it down to a simmer and turning the knob left, to a medium-low heat*)

SARA: I'm out with my friends for dinner, remember?

Ian checks to make sure the water won't boil over.

SARA: Can you talk now?

IAN: Sure, what's up? (*gets out the food processor*)

SARA: I've been talking with my sister.

IAN: Yeah? (*snaps the bowl into place on the food processor*)

SARA: Well, we were just talking about expectations.

IAN: Expectations? (*fits the blade into the bowl and secures it*)

SARA: About having kids.
The song playing in the background has ended and the click-clacking of Gordon's keyboard fills the silence.

SARA: I mean, I know you don't really want kids and all, with everything that happened with your ex, but- I don't know.
Ian sighs and stirs the chiles around, checking to see if the onion is soft yet. Not quite. Replacing the lid, he watches the steam form droplets on its glass.

IAN: What do you want? (*rips a sheet of paper towel off to rest the spoon on. It makes a tearing noise. He grabs a carton of beef broth from the fridge and pours it into a large glass measuring cup, the type that holds two cups, filling it to the top. The pot of water begins to hiss furiously, and Ian reaches over to turn it down, pulling the lid off and stirring to prevent it from boiling over*)

SARA: Well, you know that I like kids. I've always dreamed about having my own. Just one, a daughter maybe. I don't know. It's just, I feel like that's the thing I'm really missing. You've heard of those women whose dream is just to marry and have kids. I'm not saying that's my dream, but it might be part of my dream. What do you think?
Ian stabs the onions with a fork, swirling it around in the now red, chile infused water. The onion bends and folds easily, now tender and after checking that the chiles have been rehydrated, he turns off the stove.

IAN: I don't know. (*uses a slotted spoon to scoop out the onion, tomato, chiles, and garlic and dump them into the food processor bowl. They make a wet plopping sound as they drop in. He pours in some of the chili water and takes the lid, twisting it into place*)

IAN: Hold on. (*plugs in the food processor and presses the low button, it whirls on, creating a miniature explosion of red that splatters the mixture against the lid. He watches it closely, before turning it on high. It goes for a minute, before Ian decides it's been sufficiently pureed*)

GORDON: *(coughs from his spot on the couch and gives Ian an I'm-trying-to-work-here look)*

SARA: So, what I'm trying to say is, I really want kids and you don't.

IAN: Right. *(pours the puree into a large strainer and strains it back into the pot. A runny tomato liquid runs through it, splattering on the white stove top and laminate counter and leaving a paste-like substance in the strainer)*

SARA: Do you think you'd change your mind?
Ian turns on the burner to medium and pours in the broth he'd measured out earlier.

SARA: I was just wondering if there was a chance.
Ian begins to add his assortment of spices that he'd gotten out.

IAN: Maybe. *(adds a splash of apple cider vinegar)*

SARA: Really?
Ian adds a shake of oregano.

IAN: Maybe, *(adds a sprinkle of cinnamon)* if that's what you really want. *(adds a pinch of allspice)*

SARA: It's really important to me.
Ian adds cumin.

SARA: I wouldn't ask otherwise.
Ian adds clove.

IAN: Maybe. *(grinds the peppercorn into the pot, making a grating, cracking noise, then adds a generous amount of salt)*

SARA: *(excitedly)* Okay!
Ian pulls a slab of beef from the fridge and adds it to the pot. The reddish, pink meat sinks to the bottom.

IAN: Okay.
The mixture begins its slow, three-hour simmer that will cook the meat to a tender, shredded state. Sara hangs up.

GORDON: *(looks over at Ian)* Girl problems?

IAN: I think so.

GORDON: Sorry man. *(turns off the music and retreats to his room)*

By the time the meat finishes cooking a little after midnight, the tortillas have been put up and other than the pot on the stove, everything else has been cleaned. Ian turns off the burner and stirs the birria slowly, letting it

cool. He hesitates before grabbing a spoon from the drawer and dipping it into the red liquid. Steam wafts off of the spoon and he gently blows on it before trying it. He lets the flavors of the sauce run across his tongue and down his throat. After a moment of contemplation, he grimaces.

IAN: *(sighs) Too much cumin. (heaves the heavy pot over to the sink. When he pours it out, the red liquid splatters and steam fogs up the metal sides of the sink. The meat, now tender and falling apart, plops wetly into the sink. It doesn't stop steaming until Ian begins to run the water, washing the meat and sauce down the garbage disposal)*

IAN: *What a waste. (flips on the switch under the sink, letting the disposal run until it sounds smooth. He washes the pot out, scrubbing the red oil from its sides, drying it and replacing it on its shelf. He turns off the lights, leaving the apartment kitchen in darkness)*

Little Lord Hellbender

Colby Lee Dugger

It was a still night on the mountain, misty from the hard April rain that had swept through its winding road only an hour prior, filling its many cracks with the sort of wet muddy slime that trickled from the rising embankment on the left, and gently dripped off its weathered face and grassy shoulder into the deep holler on its right and into the black waters of the stream that lay far below. The road was an old one, bridging the gap between one county to the other, and running through a deep impenetrable system of hills and hollows thick with moss and foliage. It was one of those roads that had pretty much always been there and probably always would, its span of concrete weathered from use and its yellow lines all but completely washed away. The air was silent, almost naked without the rustles of nocturnal activity reserved for fairer weather, and unspoiled save for the static dripping of rain off of so many leaves.

Through the perfect veil of misty silence a sound came and shattered the calm; a washed-out 99' Toyota Corolla the color of wet sand, its muffler clearly shot to hell and the barely contained sounds of Nazareth's "Hair of the Dog" blaring from within its sealed frame. The inside of the car reeked of the sort of dollar-apiece black ice air fresheners you'd find at a gas station, and rowdy hard rock lyrics roared out of the stereo and intermittently mumbled out of the mouth of the man driving. "Nosy pricks", the man slurred mid-song, "They're all so full of shit their eyes are brown." The man, whose Christian name was Jim Fields though he always went by "Slim", was a gruff mass of lean muscles hidden under a greasy gray long-sleeved shirt. He was prickly of chin, tired of eye, and looking somewhat like he had discovered a new age between 29 and 30. He

might have been handsome after a shower, a shave, and about 48 solid hours of real sleep, but any good looks he might've had were buried under a deep layer of plain hard-living. Slim stunk of alcohol and bad decisions, it was a smell that had begun following him not long after the funeral where he'd buried his mother some months prior, and the very same smell that had managed to get him "escorted" out of his favorite bar that same night, despite the halfhearted protests of similarly disheveled patrons the likes of Mitch, Tony, and Tits. He winced at his growing headache as he urged the car along the winding mountain road and thought sourly of the night's events, events he likely wouldn't remember through the fog of hangover come morning, and he spat another curse at the bartender's suggestion of "maybe getting some help man." The kind of "help" he was referring to was no doubt the same exact sort of help that had been forced on him when he'd lost his father as a child, and the sort Slim did not want any part of now. "Touchy feely shit", he mumbled before feeling the familiar lurch of a sudden need to pee, and pulled the sedan cockeyed off the shoulder of the road. The stereo gave one last wail of protest as the car was unceremoniously clicked off right at the tail end of the too-loud chorus. Slim's booted left foot kissed the slick roadside and the rest of his drunken form staggered after, gracelessly slinging the door shut behind him as he started to make tracks in the mud and watered-down scrubs of grass that lingered a ways off the side of the road and stretched down into the ravine below.

"Breaking the seal" Slim snickered to himself. This was the term he had always used for that first long piss one takes when drinking, a fitting name, considering its place as the start of many pisses soon to come, and as a solid indicator that you've officially crossed the line that separates the buzzed from the well and truly hammered. Slim aimed his stream as best he could at a waterlogged cigarette butt bobbing up and down through a mud puddle in the weeds, like a sad little one-man shooting gallery being held in the middle of scenic nowhere. He did his best to think of nothing, not of having to go to the temp agency yet again in the morning, not of the horrible drink creating a stew in his stomach and swallowing his mind like a piece of chewed-up bubblegum, not of Ma or Pa, just peaceful static silence and nothing more. This usually proved

to be a complete exercise in futility but, hey, every once in a while it works, Slim silently mused. The cigarette butt had all but completely given up on continuing to float in its sorry state and, feeling the closest thing to relief he'd feel until he would no doubt have to pull over again within the hour, Slim gave a quick three shakes for posterity and zipped up. Standing there on the roadside, he noted the gentle slope of the embankment and just how close he was to the edge. Through the light haze of post-rain fog and the white noise dripping from the canopy of trees all around him he could swear he heard water running somewhere, not loud enough to be a river, but running water all the same. Naturally, in the midst of his mildly inebriated curiosity, he took a step closer to the edge, his motion signaled by the hollow sucking sound his boot made as it transitioned from the mud and clay of the roadside to the mud and reeds of the place where things stopped being a road and started being a forest. He gave a slow look over the edge, fruitlessly, being greeted only by the dim outlines of wilder plant life below and the same low babbling sound of water somewhere down deeper. He knelt down and grabbed a mud-caked rock near his foot, wondering if he could hear it hit water below and, rearing his head and shoulders back like one of those plastic birds made to bob in and out of a cup of water, he chucked it deep into the darkness. He did not, in fact, hear it hit water. What Slim did hear was the sound of his left foot, having been jarred by the sudden exaggerated motion, sliding in the mud followed by a stuttering "s-s-SHIT" unconsciously escaping his mouth before sending him tumbling after down into the gloom of the ravine below.

He'd only managed to spin himself halfway around before sudden contact with the ground knocked the wind clean out of him like air leaving a popped Ziploc bag. He was falling now, mad flashes of wood, root, bramble, and vine painted purple bruises and angry red cuts along his face and body yard by yard. Slim's mind recoiled in horror, unable to see and seemingly unable to communicate with the rest of the body. There was no telling how far down the ravine went or how much longer was still to go, but time seemed to slow to a crawl as Slim fell, the white-hot spikes of adrenaline carving lashes down his spine and turning his feet to meat jell-o. "Any second now I'll hit a tree, I'll slam right into the

base of some big damn fir or oak and it'll be lights out, I won't even feel it." The man didn't have time to finish these thoughts before a mossy rock punched him in the stomach, and set a ringing in his ears like the trumpets of judgment day. This managed to slow his fall somewhat, and he rolled only a little ways more before coming to rest in three or four inches of muddy shallows at the edge of a stream. In an odd moment of lucidity, Slim noted how the water felt nice and cool against his beaten body. He turned his head to one side to cough and sputtered vomit once, twice, and then, silence.

Slim awoke to a feeling unlike any he could put a name to; not quite numb, not quite anything. He felt no pain, neither from the fall nor his former headache, and he wasn't cold either despite being thoroughly exposed for anywhere between fifteen minutes and fifteen hours as far as he knew, though he could see it was still dark out. His "sleep" had been dreamless; Slim was dead to the world, dead to himself. And yet, here he was, laying there in the cool mud, thoroughly unwilling and somewhat afraid to move. It was at this point that he felt something, ever so gently, nibble an exposed bit of skin where his jeans had been torn right below the small of his back. Simply put, something bit Slim's ass. Slim let out a sharp gasp and scrambled from where he'd been lying on his side to a frantic sitting position up on the bank, his eyes having adjusted to the dark and looking wildly into the shallows of the creek for the ass-biter. He was greeted by two distinct things: his own body still laying there in the mud as if he had jumped out of his own skin, and what was easily the biggest salamander he had ever seen peering up over his apparently vacant frame. He sat there in a state of confused horror staring at the two foot long thing as it hoisted its weird little river rock shaped head up over what had seemingly been his body and, like it was the most natural thing in the world, opened its wide toothless mouth and flatly said, "Oh. My bad. I thought you were dead."

Several seconds elapsed as the Slim gawked in slack jawed awe at the fever dream before him, and the fever dream stared back with marginally less concern before finally breaking the silence. "I mean, you aren't dead, right?" Slim didn't completely understand or know the answer to the question, but he seemed to himself to

be at least be some kind of conscious so he elected to go along with whatever fresh hell he was clearly in and mustered up the clarity to stammer back, “N-no. No sir I don’t think I am.” And quickly following up with, “what were you gonna do if I was?” The salamander didn’t have to think hard, “well, I was probably gonna try to eat you.” There was another pause as the man struggled to collect himself, squeezing his eyes uncomfortably tight shut as he attempted to make some sense of his situation. This lasted all of five seconds before, rapidly and on the verge of confused and frightened tears, Slim began to hemorrhage panicked questions aimed more at himself than what was in front of him, “Why? I mean, how? What the hell are you? What the hell is this? Why am I here? Why is my body there? Why... What the hell are you doing?” Slim trailed off as he opened his wild eyes and noticed the thing lazily stacking little river rocks and pebbles *Jenga*-style on his lifeless temple before looking up at him and, seeing he had calmed down somewhat, replied, “you ask a lot of questions. I didn’t say I was gonna eat you, I just said I was gonna try. As far as why you’re taking up space down here, I don’t know. I just assumed you were thrown down here by that big scary stopped up there” and pointed to the embankment above, “those things are too loud and entirely too fast.” After a moment, Slim put together that the “big scary” the thing was referring to was almost definitely his car and unconsciously chuckled in spite of himself at the thought before remembering what was happening. “So uh, what are you?” The salamander cocked its head slightly at the question and replied, “I’m Hellbender” then pausing to add another pebble to the growing mound on what should’ve been the man’s head. While he listened Slim noted how the thing’s mouth moved up and down a little bit like Kermit when it talked and allowed himself another small chuckle, “That’s a pretty tough name for a thing like you.” The Hellbender sharply retorted, “Gee, thanks. Smart-ass, you or something like you gave it to me,” and flicked another pebble on its pile, “you oughta know.” Slim laughed at this outright, having accepted that if he was dead then the afterlife was actually pretty funny, and with a kind of grim fascination played along, “whoa whoa, no offense” and threw up his spectral hands in mock surprise, “so tell me, little lord Hellbender, what are you doing there exactly?” Hellbender looked at the man, and then looked

to the pile he'd accumulated on what was also, kind of, the man, and replied, "You were upset. When I'm upset, I go underneath a rock." Hellbender paused for a second before continuing, "I also go underneath rocks when I'm not upset, I don't know, you just looked like you needed to be underneath a rock" and, gesturing with its little fishy paws at the pile, continued, "you're vulnerable."

"Vulnerable", that was a word that never failed to piss Slim off. It had pissed him off when the counselors had used it when he lost his daddy to the mines when old number 38 went up in flames, just another man fed to the USMC, and it pissed him off now that Ma was gone too. "Is that so? Well thanks a million for the pile of ice-cold mud and gravel, since I'm so damned vulnerable, you little turd. I just don't know what I'd do without you." Slim made a motion to kick at the little creature to scare it off and was disappointed to see it still sitting there, no worse for wear. "You're a crummy liar, whatever you are. You or what's left of you here is lying smack in the middle of my creek, one half shivering to death in the water and the other half hasn't quit whining at me since I found it. If you're so in control, then why are we having this conversation?" A small vein popped up on Slim's semitransparent forehead then, and all at once the man exploded, "Because you swam up and bit my ass! I'm not exactly here on vacation either, hell, I'm probably gonna die here if I'm not dead already and it's none of your business if I do." Hellbender paused, if it had a brow it probably would've been furrowed, "you think I want to be here?" This puzzled Slim, nearly pulling him out of the conversation altogether as the salamander continued, "I'm the only one of me for miles around as far as I know. Back when my front legs hadn't even grown in proper, I watched the waters upstream get filled with hooks and nets. I watched big things like you pull things like me out from under rocks and stone them to death, they said we were ugly and ate up the fish, and that last bit is just an outright lie. When I became strong enough, I swam just as far as I could until I eventually made it here, and I still feel pretty vulnerable if you'd believe it." Slim leaned forward from where he sat, eyes fixed on the Hellbender, "Then why approach me in the first place? I don't get it, if you still feel vulnerable then why come out from under your rock?" Hellbender slinked up over Slim's lifeless shoulder

and to the side of his head, sweeping away the rock pile with his tail, "Because it's not a choice. Nobody wants to be vulnerable, but they still are. Being under a rock is nice, but you have to come out to move, eat, and see the sun sometime. What are you gonna do? Just lie down there and die?" The salamander cocked its head up towards the tree line and, before Slim could respond, mused, "The sun is coming up, and it's about time you got out of my creek big fella." And Slim watched silently as, rearing his slimy haunches back, the Hellbender stomped down on his body's temple, pushing the mouth and nose beneath the shallow water. Before Slim could react there was a rush of cold, freezing him where he sat, and once again there was silence.

Slim shot bolt upright, coughing up muddy water and gasping in fresh mountain air until he was confident he was no longer drowning. It was early morning and he was still there at the edge of the creek; the indent of where his body had sank into the shallows and mud after falling down the ravine was already being smoothed over by the fresh water that flowed when he sat up. There was no trace left where he had remembered sitting up on the bank. Shakily, he got to his feet and took inventory on himself. "Unbelievable" he looked up to the tree line and just barely saw where he guessed his "big scary" should be parked high up on its face. His fall down that mountain must have been a one in a million shot down a maze of narrow oaks and sycamores; it should've killed him before he even made it halfway down. And yet, here he was, spattered with cuts and bruises but no worse for wear, any trace of a hangover had mysteriously left him entirely as well. He looked back to the creek and through the first glimmerings of the dawn sun on the green water he could just barely make out a small pair of eyes and a vague amphibian face peering up over the surface before quickly vanishing deep into the murk below. Slim stood for a moment and thought hard, he thought about everything and, still thinking, he pulled off his wet shirt and wrapped it about his waist to cover the fresh hole in his jeans before turning towards the upward slanting trees and, gradually, he started the climb back up.

The Lighter

Claire Webb

The gas station was unusually slow today. Jeff paced around the small building, arranging and rearranging the packs of cigarettes on the wall. He hadn't had a slow day yet, but it was getting cold, and people weren't coming out like they did in the summer. His Uncle Roger had said this was natural and business would be fine. People would always need gas. Hopefully, he was right. Jeff hadn't always had a stable income, but this gas station was his chance to change that and finally give Mary what she deserved. She'd always supported him since they'd first started dating ten years ago in college. When she'd had to drop out to move back to Jeff's hometown when his mom had gotten sick, she hadn't said a word.

However, Jeff found out recently, Mary was starting to doubt him. He'd overheard her talking with her mom. She'd been downstairs in the kitchen on the telephone, and he'd come down for a glass of water.

"I know mama... yeah, Jeff's on it again about that gas station... no, well- I don't know. He says it'll be up and running in a couple months, but you know how it is...yeah, don't worry about me..." Mary's voice carried through the dark kitchen to the stairs where Jeff stood. Disturbed by her lack of faith, he crept back up the stairs and returned to bed, silently vowing to make it work.

Now, Jeff had finally opened the gas station and things were going well. So well in fact, he'd quit his old job to run the gas station full time. This slow day, however, worried him. Eddie, a young and rather restless man he'd hired early on, seemed a bit on edge too. He kept going to the garage to check on the stock of oil as if he hadn't already done that five times today.

“Eddie, please.” Jeff finally said.

“Man, that Texaco down the street’s probably got all our business. I saw their gas was 26 cents a gallon on my way in today.” Eddie muttered and Jeff was seized with a fear that his gas was too pricey, but then a red Dodge Dart 440 rolled in. The large windows in the front of the store seemed as if they’d been made to showcase the shiny new model.

“Now there’s a real nice car.” Eddie said with a whistle, but the car wasn’t here for gas. It pulled right up to the front, parking crookedly. Another car, an old Chevy, pulled in next to one of the two gas pumps.

“I’d have liked to help that new car instead.” Eddie sighed but shrugged on his coat and jogged out to the car at the gas pump. Jeff watched Eddie, but not for long when a woman stepped out of the red Dodge. She wore red knee-high boots, a pair of red gloves, a wool black overcoat with fur trim, and a pair of sunglasses. The doorbell rang as she came in. Sunglasses still on, she headed straight for the counter. When she got closer, Jeff could see her bright red lipstick and sharp eyebrows arching above the dark lenses, her dark hair framing her face to make her look as if she belonged on the cover of a magazine.

“Welcome in.” Jeff said, but the woman didn’t acknowledge him, instead, picking up a red colored lighter.

“I’ll take a pack of Virginia Slims, light.” The woman said, her voice coming out in a smoky rasp. Jeff nodded and looked for the pack on the shelf behind him.

“How are you doing today ma’am?” Jeff asked as he searched and was met with silence. The sound of the gas starting to pump outside filled the air and Jeff was grateful for the noise. Finding the cigarettes, he cleared his throat and rang up her items. “That’ll be a dollar ninety-six.”

The woman placed two dollars on the counter and before he could give her change, she left. Jeff watched the Dodge squeal away down the busy highway. Eddie jogged back inside with cash from the chevy.

“Aw man, I missed her. She really peeled outta here. What’d she want?” Eddie asked, putting the cash in the register.

“Cigarettes.” Jeff said, back to straightening the packs on the wall.

“A broad like her, I would’ve let her have them for free.”

“If I catch you giving anything out for free, you’ll be fired quicker than you can say sorry.” Jeff said, making Eddie throw his hands up in defense.

“It was a joke. Hey, that Chevy needs new oil. Mind helping me?”

“Sure, let me grab my coat.” Jeff said and promptly forgot about the odd encounter, going on with his day. It wasn’t until he came home that night and saw a red Dodge in his driveway did he remember the strange woman.

It was late when Jeff got home, staying longer at the gas station that he would’ve liked, but it couldn’t be helped. A customer had needed work done on his car that Eddie couldn’t do. Jeff had been coming home late more often since he’d opened the gas station. When he stepped into the house, he noticed the stale, ashy smell of cigarette smoke hanging in the air. Jeff was not a smoker and his wife had quit nearly a year ago. He tried not to cough as he hung up his overcoat and took off his shoes.

“Honey, is that you?” Mary called. Jeff made his way to the kitchen where the offensive smell was thicker. He tried not to inhale deeply.

“You didn’t let me know you’d be late tonight. Dinner’s been ready for an hour and the food’s gone cold by now.” Mary continued as he came into the kitchen.

Mary stood by the stove, although it was turned off, and she had the windows open, and a cool breeze blew in. It was always hot in the kitchen when the oven was on. The strange woman from the gas station was there, smoking a Virginia Slim in his kitchen with the red lighter she’d bought from his gas station. She was no longer wearing her dark overcoat and now, Jeff could see the bright red dress she wore underneath it that matched the color of her car.

What struck him the most were the dark sunglasses she still wore, their black frame a stark contrast against pale skin and red fabric.

“Can’t you just heat it back up?” Jeff gave Mary a quick kiss on the cheek, though she was stiff as he did so.

“It’s not quite the same, but...” The stranger in their kitchen cleared her throat. Mary straightened her apron, pasting a smile back on her face. “Right, Jeff, this is my sister Burgundy.”

“Everyone calls me Burdie.” Her sister said and took a long drag on her cigarette. Mary turned the stove on, the burner clicking.

“Nice to meet you, Burdie.” Jeff held out his hand which she ignored. He cleared his throat and glanced at Mary, thinking of her old smoking habit she’d kicked. She didn’t seem bothered, but when Burdie exhaled another puff of smoke, he added, “we don’t smoke in this house.”

“Oh,” Burdie paused, cigarette halfway to her lips before stubbing it out in the sink and moving to sit at the kitchen table, already set and almost ready for dinner. Jeff sat across from her.

“Why didn’t you let me know we were having a guest?” Jeff directed the question towards Mary, though he was looking at Burdie. She’d pulled out a red lighter, flicking it open and closed with a snap.

“She came by earlier than I’d expected. It was a bit of a surprise for me as well.” Mary said, and though her voice was bright, it sounded strained.

“You came to the gas station today. Bought those cigarettes and lighter.” Jeff nodded at Burdie and the lighter she was playing with in her hand. The flame seemed to swirl around her fingers like smoke, as though she could control it. It looked like a waltz, Burdie and the flame dancing in time to music only they could hear. Her sunglasses reflected the fire, creating a chilling effect that made her look like something from a horror movie. Jeff watched in mild fascination.

“Oh Burdie! You didn’t tell me you stopped to see Jeff.” Mary said with a glance over her shoulder, working furiously on a pot she was reheating. Its contents hissed and steamed angrily, about to boil

over.

“I didn’t know it was your husband’s gas station.” Burdie said, with a shrug, though Mary had already turned back to her pot. It was more for Jeff anyways and he took it as an apology of sorts. Mary dished a pot of rice into a bowl and topped it with roasted meat and gravy, the mouthwatering smell floating over to the table where they sat.

“So, Burdie. Where are you living? I thought all of Mary’s family lived here in Oklahoma.” Jeff asked, sure he’d have remembered something about a sister from out of state. He’d never heard of Mary having a sister before this. In fact, he’d always thought she’d been an only child.

“Arizona.” She said, then added. “My parents and I don’t have the best relationship.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. Jeff looked up in interest. He’d never gotten to know Mary’s family all that well. He’d only met them a couple of times before their wedding and even less often, after it. Most holidays were spent with his parents and Mary never seemed to mind.

“Burdie, that’s not true. You shouldn’t say that.” Mary said, her step faltering as she brought the food over to the table.

“Of course not.” Burdie said a bite to her tone as she lit her lighter absentmindedly.

“What’s this you’re talking about?” Jeff said, trying not to sound too interested. Mary had never been eager to talk about her family, though he knew she spoke with her mother every week.

“Burdie, the lighter please.” Mary said, holding out her hand as she leaned towards the candlesticks at the center of the table. Burdie, however, didn’t move, staying still. The entire evening since Jeff had come home, she’d been doing something, smoking a cigarette, playing with that lighter, fidgeting, but now she sat rigidly, staring at Mary.

After a moment, Burdie dropped the lighter softly into Mary’s open palm. Mary lit the candles carefully, leaving the lighter flame on each wick for a second or two after it had caught fire. Burdie watched her with narrowed eyes and pursed lips, grabbing the

lighter back as soon as all the candles had been lit.

“Let’s eat. Dinner’s ready.” Mary said and served herself some steamed asparagus. Jeff followed suit and plated some of the rice and meat.

“Mary, you can’t avoid this forever.” Burdie said and Mary stopped cutting her asparagus, her fingers tightening around the knife.

“Let’s wait until dessert.” Mary ran her fingers unconsciously over her bottom lip, her nails lightly scraping her teeth. “Please.” She added. Burdie didn’t respond and Mary seemed to take that as a yes, moving on.

“How was work today, honey?” Mary smiled up at Jeff from across the dinner table.

“Good, busy as always.”

“It didn’t seem busy when I was there.” Burdie said and Mary looked up at Jeff with a look of puzzled interest. Jeff cleared his throat and tried to shrug off the comment casually, inwardly wishing Burdie had kept her mouth shut.

“It slowed down around the time Burdie was by, but business is doing great.” The conversation slowed and the scrape of silverware on plates made Jeff anxious.

“So, Burdie, what brought you to town?” He finally asked, trying to start a conversation.

“Work.”

“Work?” He probed, trying to get more out of her, but she simply nodded. With her sunglasses on, he couldn’t tell if she was looking at him or not when she spoke. The disconcerting feeling gave him the creeps and so he asked, “would you like to take off those sunglasses?”

“No.” Burdie’s voice was curt as she continued to pick at her plate. Jeff tensed, not at her answer, but her tone. What was so awful about his question?

“How’s Eddie doing? Is his family well?” Mary attempted to

restart the conversation. Burdie picked at her plate.

“He’s fine. Haven’t heard about his family in a while.” Jeff’s answer was short and clipped, Burdie’s annoyingly uncomfortable presence affecting his mood. Despite the inviting smell of food wafting off the table, no one was very hungry, and Mary cleared it with lots of leftovers to store. She put a pie in the oven and set the timer.

“Let’s move to the living room. We’ll be more comfortable there.” Mary said. There was a shuffle of pulling out chairs and pushing them back in before everyone settled on the couch in the living room. The sofa creaked a bit with all of their weight. Burdie stood and sat across from the couple, in a wingback chair with a light floral pattern.

“We ate. Now it’s time we talked, Mary.” Burdie said.

“Wait,” Mary stood suddenly in protest, but Burdie had already pulled off her sunglasses. Mary flinched and Jeff stared at the burn mark over Burdie’s left eye and down her face, the rest of the scar hidden by long, dark hair. With her sunglasses off, she looked a lot like Mary.

“Burgundy, put those glasses back on. You know how I feel about that.” Mary said tightly, hands clenched. It was the first sign of anger Jeff had seen from her all night.

“Look at me Mary.”

“We can talk without it.”

“No, we can’t.” Burdie insisted and turned to Jeff suddenly. “Did Mary ever tell you about her childhood? What happened?”

“Do not bring him into this. Jeff, honey, I think this is a private conversation. Could you let us talk alone for a moment?” Mary said in a clipped voice, bringing her fingers to her mouth before pulling them back and twisting her hands together. Jeff could see her resisting the urge to bite her nails, a bad habit she’d broken long ago in high school.

“No, I think he needs to hear this. Mary burned down our family’s home. We were twelve. She escaped just fine, but she left

me in the house.” Burdie’s voice rose as she spoke, “I barely escaped and was left with third-degree burns all over my body. She blamed me. Said it was my fault.”

“That’s enough.” Mary said sharply, making Jeff flinch. He’d never seen her like this before. His wife had always been sweet and mild tempered.

“But you’d told them I’d been the one playing with the lighter, didn’t you?” Burdie’s voice was softer now. “And so they sent me away to Arizona to get better.” Burdie added the last part sarcastically and Mary stiffened.

“You were sick. You needed help. It seems like you still do.” Mary said tightly, shaking her head, the muscles on her elegant, white neck straining. Jeff watched Mary with a new sort of wariness, like she was a firecracker about to go off. Before Burdie could answer, the timer dinged, startling Jeff. Mary stood.

“I’ll be back. Jeff, could you help me?” Mary said and they went into the kitchen.

It was stuffy, despite the open window, and the smell of apples and cinnamon flooded his nose. The light here was brighter than the lamps in the living room and Jeff could see Mary better. She looked pale and nervous, her long, dark hair falling into her face. She walked to the stove and grabbed the oven mitts on the counter. Putting them on, she opened the oven, and a wave of steam pillowed out.

“What’s going on Mary? What’s Burdie talking about?”

“Jeff, honey.” Mary took a deep breath. “Burdie has issues. She’s been sick for a long time, and we thought she’d gotten better, so we invited her back home. Everything she said about me is some elaborate story she’s created in her mind. The doctors say it’s the guilt for what she’s done.”

“But-”

“Did you really lie about being busy at the gas station today?” Mary set the pie on the stove and tested it with a knife. It came out clean.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You can tell me.” Mary said, looking over at Jeff. She was calmer now. She brushed her hair back out of her face and straightened her apron before grabbing plates from the cabinet and ice cream from the freezer.

“It was slower today, nothing to be concerned about.” Jeff answered, looking at Mary who was silent for a moment, watching the steam rising from the pie. Turning to Jeff, she pressed a hand gently against his chest and leaned in to give him a kiss.

“Okay.” Mary cut the pie and scooped the ice cream and Jeff helped carry the plates.

Burdie had pulled out her lighter and played with it, flipping it open and closed, moving the flame between her fingers deftly, as if she'd practiced this hundreds of times. The act seemed to calm her. The smell of apple pie and cinnamon floated into the living room, making Burdie look up as Jeff and Mary came back carrying three plates of pie served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

“I came back to see you. See how you're doing.” Burdie said, flipping her lighter closed with a click. Jeff couldn't help but stare at her scar. It was an angry red color and her red lipstick seemed to make it more vibrant, like it was alive, like there was a dark flame dancing across her face. Jeff ate his pie slowly while the two women resumed their conversation.

“We're happy here. I'm happy.” Mary said, sitting down with her knees angled to one side and her hands resting in her lap. She looked at ease, almost normal then and the pose reassured Jeff somehow. Mary was still Mary, his beautiful, tepid wife.

“Of course.” Burdie said, but she didn't sound convinced. Neither woman touched their plate as the ice cream slowly melted into a puddle around the pie, making the crust soggy.

“You shouldn't have come.” Mary said.

“Maybe not.”

“We're happy here.” Mary repeated more forcefully and took Jeff hand as if to prove it. She squeezed his fingers so tightly, he

dropped his fork with a clatter on his plate.

“Mary,” Jeff said, flexing his fingers in an attempt to loosen her grip, but she didn’t let go.

“We are happy.” Mary said again, as if that was all she could think to say.

“You’ve already said so.” Burdie said, looking at Jeff’s fingers which were starting to turn red.

“I think it’s time you got back on the road.” Mary said and stood, letting go of Jeff’s hand to his relief. For a brief moment, he’d been worried she’d squeeze his fingers right off his hand.

Burdie nodded and sighed. She stood and held out her hand, “Jeff.” She said and he followed suit and shook it. She dropped something into his palm as he did. “Take care.” She said and left abruptly. Mary stood in the doorway and watched her leave. While her back was turned Jeff looked at what Burdie had left him. The red lighter she’d bought at his gas station glinted dully back at him. Mary shut the door and Jeff quickly shoved the lighter into his coat pocket. It didn’t seem right to show her, and he was afraid it might trigger her somehow.

“About ready for bed honey?” Mary asked, seemingly already back to normal. The sudden shift back to normalcy chilled Jeff and he nodded, afraid to speak and disturb the sudden peace that had washed over Mary. “Go on. I’ll be up in a minute.” Mary smiled softly and began to clear the plates from the living room.

Jeff took the stairs slowly and halfway up he paused to look back. Mary had stopped cleaning and was standing at the sink, looking out the half-opened window. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke still lingered. Jeff could only see her from the side, and he thought of how elegant she looked standing there, her head held high. He followed the slope of her nose, over her lips, down the line of her throat, along the curve of her breasts and hips, to the cream-colored heels she wore.

But as he was staring, something caught his eye. In the window, the reflection of a flame flickered, and he realized that was what she was staring at. Before tonight, he wouldn’t have thought twice about

it, but now the sight made him shiver, and he hurried the rest of the way up the stairs.

Jeff was in bed by the time he heard Mary resume cleaning. He thought she'd be up soon, but an hour later, she still hadn't come to bed. Concerned, he went back downstairs and found Mary on the back porch. It was cold and her breath billowed in the night air. Through the screen door, he could see she was holding a cigarette, unlit. The lighter she'd had from earlier lay in her lap and she slowly, after a moment of thought, picked it up and lit her cigarette, bringing the slim, white roll to her lips. She closed her eyes and inhaled, holding the smoke in her lungs before exhaling, blowing it out into the chilly night. Jeff grabbed a throw from the living room and stepped out onto the porch.

"Mary?"

"Oh honey, I thought you'd gone to bed." Mary didn't turn around as she spoke and Jeff walked up behind her, wrapping the blanket across her delicate shoulders.

"Come inside, dear. You must be cold."

"I'm alright. Go back to bed honey and I'll be up in a minute." Mary took another drag of her cigarette and Jeff didn't move.

"Do you remember that first night we'd met?" Jeff's voice was soft, and he sat down in the chair beside her.

"The football game. Of course I do." Mary smiled as she said this. "It was so cold that night and my friends had left me for a group of boys they'd met."

"And I found you shivering all alone."

"You offered me your coat." Mary said with a chuckle. "And then you were cold, so you wanted to leave early."

"We're okay, right?"

"We're okay. Go to sleep honey. I just want to sit here a bit longer." Mary's cigarette butt flared red in the darkness as she brought it to her lips. Jeff sat a moment longer, watching Mary stare out into the dark, but he finally got cold and went back inside. Now that he'd had time to digest the events of the night, he was more

confident in the knowledge that his wife was still the woman he knew and loved. Comforted by this, he headed to bed, exhausted. He fell asleep to the image of 10-year-old Burdie trapped in a burning house.

The sound of the front door closing woke Jeff. He felt for Mary, but her side of the bed was empty and cold, still made. The clock told him he'd been asleep for only an hour. It was a little after 11pm. The sound of heels clicked up the stairs and he pretended to be asleep. Mary was quiet. He didn't hear her again until she slipped into bed next to him, smelling faintly of smoke. It must be from that cigarette she'd had earlier he thought briefly before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Something was ringing. Mary shifted beside him, one arm draped over his chest, murmuring something. "Honey, the phone." She said in a voice still husky from sleep. Jeff sat up and shook off the last dredges of lethargy as he came down the stairs. The kitchen was cold, and he thought of the open window as he answered the phone.

"Jeff, it's Roger." The voice on the line sounded urgent. "I've been trying to get a hold of you."

"Uncle Roger? What is it? What's wrong?" Jeff rubbed his eyes, more alert. He felt a sense of dread in his stomach.

"It's the gas station. Night shift called an hour ago, said someone set it on fire. They didn't see who, but the hotel down the street reported a woman in a red car driving away from the scene."

"I'll be over as quick as I can." Jeff said and hung up.

"Something wrong?" Mary asked, coming down the stairs. Jeff sighed and Mary turned on the lights, pulling her robe more tightly around her.

"The gas station. Something happened to it." Jeff ran a hand over his face and shook his head. "I'm heading over now."

"I can go with you if you want. Give me a second to get dressed." Mary said. Jeff looked at her in surprise but nodded. Mary had never been interested in the gas station, but he was glad she offered. He didn't want to go alone.

The car was cold when they got in and Jeff didn't want to wait for it to warm up, so they buttoned up their coats and started on their way. The windshield fogged up with condensation almost before they'd made it down the street and so, Jeff turned on the windshield wipers to clear the view. That was the only sound that filled the car on their drive over. Jeff couldn't decide whether to tell Mary about his suspicions or not and just as he made up his mind to speak, he stopped.

They'd made it to the gas station. Flames leapt high into the sky, climbing up the tall road sign, dancing fiercely in the wind. It looked like the pumps had already exploded and eaten through half the store despite the fire department's best efforts. If Burdie's lighter had been a waltz, this was a tango. Jeff would have thought it was beautiful if it wasn't his life's savings burning away.

They got out of the car and Jeff shoved his hands into his coat. That's when he remembered the lighter Burdie had left him and a chill went down his spine. Burdie could have a spare lighter besides this one, but something told him she didn't.

Jeff looked over at Mary. She didn't seem shocked or horrified, but entranced by the sight, eyes wide. In the dark, they reflected the flames and she looked so beautiful, so horribly, wonderfully beautiful.

When the Rain Comes Down on Leitchfield Road

Claire Webb

A clock on the wall ticked loudly as Sienna waited for the gynecologist. Were there normally clocks in the doctor's office? Sienna certainly didn't think so and she was annoyed by how loud it was, alerting her of every passing second. She imagined getting up from the exam table, ripping the clock off the wall, and smashing it on the corner of the counter. Little bits of plastic would fly everywhere, and the tiny minute hand would dangle from the clock's face. Maybe a nurse or doctor would hear her and rush in to ask what happened, but at least the clock would be silent.

Sienna cleared her throat, pushing the thought away, and readjusted herself on the thin sheet of paper covering the exam table. It crinkled and rustled loudly as she tried to make herself comfortable. The nurse had taken her back to the examination room five minutes ago. It was just as bare as the waiting room had been, its TV playing *House Hunters* monotonously in the background, a show she and Tom had become very invested in before they'd bought their first house. The white, sterile walls felt almost too clean. Fluorescent lights made everything look harsh and she thought of how different a pediatrician's office was. She'd taken Allie, Tom's youngest daughter, for her annual checkup a few years ago because Tom had been busy. Warm lamps had welcomed her and Allie in the lobby and the colorfully painted walls had entertained Allie while they waited. Sienna had watched the young girl explore the office, playing under the painted rainbows, pretending to find gold at the end. Allie's constant, "watch me! watch me!" had Sienna laughing the entire time and she'd taken a

video to send to Tom.

Sienna pulled out her phone to find the video but found herself scrolling mindlessly through Instagram instead. She was met with a barrage of family pictures her friends posted, happy children playing at the beach, eating ice cream in the park, and hiking through the forest. A soft ding and banner notification told her that Madison, Allie's mother, had texted her. She opened the message.

Hey, can you pick Allie up from school today? - 1:17pm

Sienna's fingers twitched before tightening around her phone to click the off button and she tucked it back into her purse. She turned instead, to stare at the walls, a sterile white. It was pristine except for one spot, a small scratch near the door. It reminded her of the walls of the first house she'd bought with Tom. It had been newly remodeled, new paint and flooring when they'd bought it. The first day they'd moved in, Allie, who was five at the time, had already scratched the walls trying to move her doll house into her room. The movers had left it in the living room, unsure of where it needed to go. In the chaos of moving day, Allie had tried to move it by herself and crashed it into the living room wall.

Sienna had been in the kitchen putting away dishes when the sound of plastic scraping the wall and clattering against the new LVP flooring startled her. Allie was crying in Tom's arms by the time Sienna had made it to the living room. She'd assessed the situation, the long deep scratches in the wall, the heavy doll house which had miraculously only lost one piece, Allie in tears, Tom trying to calm her, and Bear in the backyard barking to be let back in. Sienna gathered the two pieces of the doll house first and glued them back together while Tom carried Allie to her room. Once the doll house was safe, she let the dog back in who went straight to Allie's room. Bear always went to Allie when she was upset, as if he could make her feel better even though he usually ended up accidentally stepping on her.

When the house had dried, Sienna brought it to Allie's room and showed her how she'd fixed it, that it was as good as new. Allie had resisted for a moment. She'd wanted to sulk a little longer, but soon gave in and grabbed her dolls to play house. By the end of the night, Allie had forgotten all about dropping her doll house and Sienna

had already added patching compound and paint to her shopping list.

“Mrs. Brown, did you hear what I said?” Dr. Finnley’s voice made Sienna look over from where she’d been staring at the mark on the wall. Dr. Finnley wore a sharp red, boat neck shirt under her white coat, something Sienna hadn’t noticed when she’d first come in.

“Um,” Sienna cleared her throat.

“You’re here for a preliminary fertility evaluation, is that correct?” Dr. Finnley asked as she pulled on a pair of blue latex gloves that Sienna could smell from where she sat on the exam table. The strong rubber scent made her wrinkle her nose.

“Yes, that’s right.” Sienna said, clearing her throat.

“Great, I’m going to need to do a physical exam and ask you some questions before we start the tests.” Dr. Finnley checked her heart rate, temperature, blood pressure, and reflexes. She poked at her stomach and back, shone a light in her eyes, and looked in her ears, before finally sitting back and taking off her gloves.

She got on her computer, typed a few things out and began to ask questions. Just as she started, Sienna’s phone dinged once, then a second time, and a third. Sienna turned it off, keeping eye contact with Dr. Finnley to keep from checking the notifications, half afraid she’d see Madison’s name pop back up.

“How’s your period? Is it regular?”

“Umm, yeah. I guess so.” Sienna bounced her leg nervously on the exam table, but the paper sheet crinkled each time she moved, and she stopped.

“Do you usually have a heavier flow or lighter?”

“It’s heavy for a few days, then lightens up.” As Sienna answered she could hear the click clack of typing as Dr. Finnley took notes.

“Do you ever have any abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge?”

“No. I mean, I’ve had a yeast infection before, but that was probably five years ago.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“Yeah,”

“How many times in a week would you say you have sex?”

“I don’t know, a couple times, once or twice a week I guess.”

“Do you use protection? Birth control, condoms, etc.”

“Not anymore. I was on birth control, but I’ve been off it for a year.” Sienna shifted uncomfortably on the exam table, the paper sticking to her legs. She wished she hadn’t worn shorts.

As Dr. Finnley began to ask more questions about her medical history, she went on auto pilot. The questions bled into the sound of the ticking clock until Sienna couldn’t distinguish one from the other. She didn’t like how personal they were, though she knew the doctor had to ask them. Sienna’d had the urge to lie when the doctor had asked her how many times in a week would she say she had sex. She and Tom used to have sex more often, but the longer they tried to have a baby, the greater her disappointment grew each time they tried. It wasn’t Tom’s fault. She was the one who really wanted a baby anyways, but her disappointment was starting to affect him. She could tell.

Her phone began to vibrate, someone was calling her. This shook her out of her thoughts, and she realized Dr. Finnley had told her something and was expecting a response. She tried to discreetly click the off button to ignore the call before turning her attention to the doctor.

“I’m sorry. What was that?” Sienna said, giving her an apologetic smile. She’d have to go into the settings and turn off her notifications completely. She’d never realized how distracting the vibrate notifications were.

“We’d also like to have your husband come in and have a semen analysis done.”

“Oh, I don’t think he’s the problem. He has four children from before our marriage.” Sienna said, shaking her head. Tom had already had four children when they’d started dating and she’d surprised herself with how happy she’d been about it. His time with

Allie split half and half with Madison and his older daughters lived with their mom more than Tom. Now, Allie was just starting high school and the older three were in college, living their own lives.

“Still, things can change. I recommend you have him set up an appointment as well.”

“Sure.”

“Great, now we’re going to do some tests. The nurse will be in to draw your blood and then we’ll do an ultrasound, okay?” Dr. Finnley looked up when Sienna didn’t respond and so she nodded.

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry, our nurses are great at drawing blood. You won’t even feel a thing.” Dr. Finnley said and gave her a brief smile. Sienna gave her a half smile back. She wasn’t afraid of needles or getting her blood drawn.

When the doctor left, Sienna was alone once more. After a moment of hesitation, she pulled out her phone and checked her messages. It wasn’t Madison who’d messaged or called her, but her brother, Brian. His wife had gone into labor last night and she was having complications delivering the baby.

Riley’s started contractions! I’ll keep u updated - 3:03am

She’s 6cm dilated. - 1:19pm

8cm - 1:21pm

10cm! - 1:25pm

Doctors want to do a C-section, the baby’s not turning around. It’ll be a breech birth. - 1:27pm

Too late for a c-sec - 1:30pm

Her head’s stuck. - 1:34pm

**the baby’s head - 1:34pm*

Sienna knew she should call Brian back, but if he’d called that could only mean very good or very bad news and she didn’t feel like hearing either. She scrolled through the texts he’d sent. It’s not like she didn’t care. In fact, she cared quite a lot. Riley had become

one of her closest friends, but when she thought of her newborn baby in her arms, the exhaustion, but also the joy of having brought something into the world that is so much a part of yourself. It made her stomach twist and her hands tremble.

The more she thought about it, the worse the feeling got. She started to see not just her brother and his wife, but Madison with Allie when she was first born. Sienna bounced her leg as she sat on the exam table, trying to push these thoughts away, but there was no going back now. The images flooded her mind, and she was taken back to the night that Allie had dropped her doll house. Sienna didn't want to remember how the night ended, but the film was already rolling, and she couldn't stop it.

Sienna and Tom were cleaning up while Allie played in her room. They could hear her from the kitchen, laughing and talking, making up games with her dolls. Sienna wrapped her arms around Tom who was cleaning the dishes, but she kept glancing at the clock, watching the minutes pass almost obsessively.

It was 7:27pm when Sienna heard a knock at the door, three minutes early. She pulled away from Tom before he could say anything. She felt like a fraud in that moment, caught red handed in her own home.

Tom called Allie from her room while Sienna stayed rooted to her spot in the kitchen. She heard Tom open the front door, Allie's squeal of delight, and the voice of a woman with a rural accent, Madison. Sienna rubbed at her jaw which she hadn't realized she'd been clenching. The ache distracted her for a moment and in that moment, the house went silent.

Sienna was at the sink washing dishes when Tom came back to the kitchen. She made sure to look down so he couldn't see her puffy eyes or the long, wet lines that marked her cheeks. Tom came up behind her, rested his head on her shoulder and started to kiss her neck, but she stiffened and gently shook him off. She wanted him to know how she felt, how she hurt, but he said nothing and quietly let her go, leaving the kitchen to grab more dishes from the dining room. The silence hung between them like smoke, making it hard to breathe. Sienna could hear nothing, but the clink of dishes and the soft sound of her sponge scrubbing away at the plastic cup

in her hands. She could hear nothing but a silence so loud it was almost ticking.

Sienna looked up and let out a shaky breath as she remembered she was at the gynecologist's; the clock was still ticking. She touched her jaw lightly, her fingers coming away wet with tears. Sienna used her phone to check her eyeliner and wipe the streaks from her face. A nurse came in just as she finished cleaning up her makeup. Sienna blushed, but the nurse didn't seem to notice. She was young, with a kind smile and she wore scrubs that made her blue eyes shine.

"Hi Mrs. Brown. My name's Payton. I'll be drawing your blood to do some tests, okay?" Payton said, arranging various needles, tubes, and syringes along the counter. The latex gloves made an elastic stretchy noise as she pulled them on, like how balloons sound when they rub together. Sienna tried not to shudder.

"Okay."

"How are you doing today?" Payton asked as she prepared the first needle.

"Fine. Good, I mean. Good." Sienna said as Payton pulled and pinched along her arm, looking for the best spot to draw blood from.

"Okay, good. Now, you're just going to feel a little pinch here." Payton wiped the skin on the inside of her left elbow with an alcohol wipe and Sienna looked away. Shots had never really bothered her, but she didn't love the sight of a needle going into her skin. Only the barest pinch told her it was in. Payton worked in silence and Sienna appreciated this. She didn't like going to the doctors and small talk always made her feel more awkward. Her phone vibrated with another call, and she cursed herself for forgetting to turn off the vibrate settings. Curling fingers, she ignored the urge to check it.

"Alright. We're good to go." Payton stood up to leave, but Sienna stopped her.

"How long does it take to get the results?"

"For some of the tests, it'll only take a couple days and for

others it'll be between a week to two weeks." Payton nodded, as if to affirm what she was saying and left.

Sienna pulled out her phone and saw she'd missed a call from Tom this time. She clicked on the phone icon, made it to his name in red letters, but then she stopped, her thumb hovering over Tom. She paused so long that the screen went dark, her reflection staring back at her, a slight frown on her aging face. She wasn't old, but the stress of a hard life at a young age had put premature lines on her face and wrinkles by her eyes.

She turned her phone on, went to the settings, and silenced her phone entirely, turning off the vibrations setting. She tucked her phone under her leg and tried to empty her mind. She stared at the stark, white walls of the room, trying to imagine that her brain was like that, blank and devoid of life. Instead, she imagined that she could see the outline of painted gray mountains with soft, white peaks and a sea foam green background. She'd spent hours painting and repainting that room until it was perfect. She wasn't an artist, nor had she ever painted a wall before, but she'd wanted to do this herself. She'd changed the colors four times and after reading an article about how light and dark colors can have different effects on a baby, she'd finally settled for something in between.

Beneath the windows of the nursery sat a mahogany crib, sturdy and elegant. Sienna had seen it while driving by a yard sale, the day after a party she and Tom had gone to. It had been for his niece's first birthday. The birthday girl, Jinette, had been dressed in a little red dress and matching bow. As people talked and ate, she was passed around like a doll, everyone cooing over her. Sienna was a little off put, she'd never been one of those girls who'd just loved babies and had never really understood.

When Jinette got to Sienna and Tom's table however, Tom took her right into his arms, and it was like he was a different man. He bounced Jinette on his leg, swaying her in time to the music, giving her little kisses all over her stomach to make her laugh. When she wanted off his lap, he put her down and walked bent over to hold her hand so she could go where she wanted. Sienna was enamored by the two of them, the way Tom smiled when Jinette laughed, how small Jinette's fingers were when they reached out for her, her soft

squishy cheeks because yes, babies really do have cheeks that you just want to pinch. At that moment, she'd wanted nothing more than a baby of her own.

Now, she couldn't walk into any store without stopping by the baby aisle to look at clothes or toys. She filled the mahogany dresser she'd bought to match the crib with clothes and shoes and stuffed the closet with all sorts of toys and books. Tom was supportive at first, he said nothing about the baby clothes for a child that hadn't even been conceived yet. He let her paint their guest room, buy the crib and sell the extra bed. He didn't even blink when she announced they'd be building a little playground in their backyard. However, as the months went by and the pregnancy tests continued to come back negative, Sienna's excitement flagged. She was left with an ache so strong, she'd fall into bouts of depression. Tom finally suggested going to the gynecologist to check her fertility and she quietly agreed.

A knock brought Sienna to her feet as she hopped down from the exam table to greet Dr. Finnley who motioned for her to follow. Dr. Finnley led Sienna down the hall, turning into a room at the end.

"We're going to do an ultrasound scan while you're here as well. This can tell us more about your ovaries, endometrial lining, and uterus." As Dr. Finnley said this, the words ovaries, endometrial lining, and uterus lit up Sienna's brain with recognition. She'd done some online searches before coming here to learn more about fertility evaluations and different reasons for infertility, none of it sounding too promising.

"Oh, alright."

The room was dimly lit and Dr. Finnley had Sienna lay down on the bed that was next to this monitor with all sorts of buttons and wires. Dr. Finnley tapped away at the monitor's buttons for a moment before pulling on those latex gloves that smelled so awful. She picked up a white bottle labeled ultrasound with a red cap and flipped up the lid.

"Can you lift your shirt? I need to put this gel on your stomach for the ultrasound."

Sienna nodded and lifted her shirt, gathering the hem to her chest. The air sent a chill over her bare stomach, and she flinched when Dr. Finnley began to spread the cold gel across her skin. It felt thick and slimy, as if aloe vera had been mixed with Vaseline.

“It’s cold. I should’ve warned you.” Dr. Finnley said unapologetically. Sienna shrugged with a grimace as if to say it can’t be helped. While Dr. Finnley prepared this long white stick that looked a bit like a large thermometer.

Sienna closed her eyes and tried to breathe normally. She thought of her nursery and its calming colors, the baby clothes in the closet, the crib, but this made her scoff as she remembered how adamant she’d once been about not wanting her own kids.

“Please, hold still Mrs. Brown.” Dr. Finnley said, but Sienna wasn’t listening. No, she was thinking about how, up until she’d met Ron, she’d never wanted kids at all. Not when she’d been in college, not when she’d graduated and seen all of her friends starting families, not even when her older brother had married, and she had become an aunt. No, she’d told herself, no kids. It was almost funny if she thought about it and a giggle escaped her lips. Dr. Finnley looked up at her with a peculiar smile as Sienna let out another involuntary laugh.

“Are you ticklish? I’ll try to be gentle.” Dr. Finnley said, but she couldn’t be heard as Sienna began to laugh harder and harder. She knew that she must look crazy, but now that she’d started, she couldn’t stop. She laughed so hard she curled up on her side, clutching her stomach from the pain, hot tears leaking from the corners of her eyes as the gel, now skin-warm, smeared her arms. She laughed until she had no breath left, and still she laughed a silent howl that shook her entire body and the bed she laid on. She laughed until she couldn’t anymore. Suddenly, she began to gasp, trying to put air back into her lungs and her gasps became sobs, her tears of laughter becoming fat drops of salty water, so abundant and endless, she thought this must be what clouds feel like when it storms.

Where Words Fail

Raven Rhue

I've always thought words were such beautiful things. They are these beautiful little miracles that bridge the gaps between our minds. From conversations to records of history, it feels like all we humans have to connect us is words. I love words. So much so that I've made a career of them, studying literature in college. So, I hope you can understand my deep frustration with the way these bridges of humanity, these lifelong teachers and companions of mine, fail me in this moment. More than failing me, they cage me with their impudence, their sheer inability to convey myself onto the page.

And why do I even want that? To reduce myself to words printed on the page? To become a frozen moment in time for irreverent readers to look upon and ponder? For the slim hope, the fraction of a chance that *someone* might actually *get it*? It's idiotic. Yet, I can't shake the feeling that just that chance, however slim, makes the effort worth it.

I hope she would agree...

I suppose when words fail, it's best to start with just the facts. You're probably wondering who "she" is and, moreover, who the hell *I* am. My name is Jane. I'm a college student, and an English major, and that tells you about everything you need to know honestly. I'm young, broke, socially awkward, a little pretentious, and just self-deprecating enough to make that last thing socially acceptable.

"She," was Beth.

I met Beth the same way you meet a lot of people in Uni: largely through happenstance. We had the same major, and were both Juniors, so we may or may not have

had any number of classes together for years without noticing each other. Regardless, it was when we had Shakespeare together that we happened to sit next to each other in the far back corner of the class.

The first thing I noticed about Beth was that she was crazy pretty. To be fair, I think that about most girls, but that fact does nothing to reduce my aesthetic appreciation of Beth in particular. She had a vaguely androgynous look about her, with short, fluffy, brown hair, thin lips, and a tall, angular face. She typically wore a combo of jeans and an oversized flannel, and always smelled vaguely like sawdust. What stood out most of all, however, were her eyes. I feel like I'm stuck in a bad romance novel whenever I talk about them, but they really were stunning: a stormy grey color with swirls of blue. It gave her eyes the look of hurricanes, her pupils the eyes of the storm. Prolonged eye contact was never exactly her thing, but when she did lock eyes with you? Those eyes pull you in swift as the storm they resembled.

The second thing I noticed were her notes. Beth was a serial note-taker. I was always more of a "if it's worth remembering, I'll remember" type of girl, which works out for me about as often as you'd think. My own bad habits aside, with no notes of my own to focus on my eyes would inevitably drift towards Beth scratching away at her own notebook. This became a habit over the first few weeks of the semester, and no, not just to look at Beth herself... at least not entirely. Beth's handwriting was also hypnotic in its own way. That is not necessarily to say that it was pretty-looking. Quite the opposite, it was borderline illegible.

It was the *process* of her writing that had me fixated. Even that was not something I'd really call elegant or pretty — her hand jerked rather erratically across the page as she wrote — but combined with the tactile sound of pen against paper, I found it soothing in an odd way. In time I came to notice more than just her handwriting, the details of her notes themselves catching my attention. Specifically of interest were the margins.

Dozens of scratchy lines ringed every page in her notebook in stratified clusters. At first, I thought they were doodles of some kind, but the longer I looked at them the less sense they made.

They never seemed to construct any image, clear or abstract, nor did they have the look of any sort of pattern. Even if she just wasn't particularly good at art, at least one of her doodles should have resolved into some sort of coherent idea after looking at it long enough, but they never did. I thought for a while they might instead be attempts to draw the ink out of a malfunctioning pen, but the consistency and volume with which they lined every page convinced me otherwise.

I suppose I could have just asked her, but I worried that admitting I'd been staring at her notes trying to make sense of her scribbles for weeks might make me come off just a bit obsessed. And maybe part of that worry was because, well, I kind of was.

I tried to start up conversation casually with her several times over those weeks, but every time I came up unsuccessful. Perhaps unsuccessful is the wrong word for it because what I got were technically conversations, but they were awkward, stilted things about assignments, due dates, and other meaningless things. I always came away from them feeling anxious and... kind of gross.

And yet, with each half-conversation I grew more fixated on her. She wasn't a great conversationalist, but beyond her awkwardness I felt I could detect a great deal of charm and intelligence. I wanted to unearth those unseen depths of her personality. I can see now that perhaps I was falling more in love with the idea of Beth than Beth herself, for I never once considered the possibility that I might not like what I found what I found within those depths. So, I persisted.

To my fortune, I managed to strike up some more substantial conversations eventually. Talks about hobbies, family, other classes, and the like. Each was still awkward and stilted — with Beth that seemed a constant — but I began to walk away from each knowing more about her than before, beaming with pride for each small success. Eventually I even worked up the courage to exchange contact info, and these conversations grew more routine.

That's about when the dreams started up.

They'd always take place somewhere vaguely familiar: a classroom, a local café, or even my own dorm room. Whether or

not the dream took place in a public space, there would seem to be nobody around but myself, at least at first. After a while in the dream, I'd always begin to hear this *awful* scraping echo all around me. It sounded like metal being filed down, but somehow more... hollow. I'd search for the source, and following the noise would always lead me to Beth.

The first time I had the dream I started in a classroom — the very one I met Beth in — and I found Beth out in the hallway. She was facing a wall. Spread across that wall around her were odd smudges and dark lines. I stalked steadily toward her, feeling as if I were trespassing upon something I wasn't meant to. To my surprise, As I got closer, I began to recognize the lines on the wall. They were exactly like those found in the margins of Beth's notebook, but bigger and... red.

I was within inches of her. Her shoulders were tensed and flexing, and even though I couldn't see her hands I could tell by the motion that she was still drawing more of those odd patterns. The scraping was louder than ever, but even so I could also hear Beth's voice. She was chanting the same words over and over again.

"I'm sorry."

Barely feeling in control of my own body I reached out to touch her shoulder. Her head whipped around to face me. I jumped, very nearly running away in fear, but her face made me stay.... Fat streams of tears ran down her face, twin tendrils of snot fell from her nose. Her eyes were bloodshot, and angry red splotches were all over her face.

"It's okay..." I found myself saying.

My eyes drifted away from that mask of sorry towards her hands, which her shift in posture now allowed me to see. She held no writing utensil. Instead, multiple of fingers were jammed firmly against the wall, and were clearly... not whole anymore. They had been filed down at the tips like the lead of a pencil. Even as she looked away from the wall, her hands continued to jerk around, painting more bizarre lines with her own skin, blood, and bones, all the while continuing to send that scraping noise echoing down the halls. It was at this moment that I woke up with an immediate need

to run to the bathroom and purge the contents of my stomach.

The dreams would always end more-or-less exactly like that. Sometimes I'd hesitate and find myself just... sitting there, listening with a pit in my stomach to what I now knew was the sound of bone scratching stone. One time I even tried to escape it and wandered around an eerily empty copy of my campus. Yet, no matter how far I went, the scraping seemed to follow me. More concerningly, despite being fully aware that it was a dream, the dream never seemed to let me wake up. And so, I would always find my way to Beth. Sometimes she would be drawing the lines on tables or furniture, other times on the floor. Always she was in a similar state of silent weeping. Each time I had the dream, I would find her with less of her fingers than before. Eventually she was down to scraping with the edges of her palms, and then the stumps of her wrist. Further and further down her arm, Beth continued to give up more and more of herself to continue drawing those... senseless lines.

I... never brought up the dreams to Beth herself. At least not directly. I did allude to the subject one time over text — complaining of a lack of sleep due to reoccurring nightmares. Her response scared me out of bringing it up ever again, sending nothing back but one simple line.

“I'm sorry.”

And then I asked her on a date.

I'm sure it's easy to look down on me from an outside perspective, but what you have to keep in mind that, for the most part, to me these were just weird dreams, completely contradictory to my own lived reality in which I was enjoying talking to Beth every day. Part of the reason I didn't want to bring it up was *because* things were going so great. I didn't want to ruin it.

And so, we met up at one of the local cafés on a Saturday afternoon, our first formal meeting outside of class. I was an anxiety riddled mess leading up to the date, partially because, well, it wasn't *entirely* clear whether or not it was one. I had chosen to frame it simply as “hanging out” over text, and well, being gay is

kind of complicated. The topic of sexuality just hadn't come up, so I really couldn't be sure whether Beth shared the same feelings or intentions as me. I resolved myself to not get my hopes up, but also to make sure it was clear where I stood with Beth by the end of the "date."

"College has been the best part of my life by far, though," I said over the rim of a coffee cup held up to my lips. "Despite all the stress. Just living away from my parents has been a massive relief. I honestly think I've discovered more about myself in the past 2 years than in my entire life before that."

"Yeah..." Beth replied. "Makes sense. Parents really like to weigh their kids down with words."

I blinked. "Words? You mean like, expectations?"

"No..." She replied slowly, "well, yes *and* no. Expectations are part of it, but I mean words as a whole."

I frowned at that. "Could you... elaborate?"

A long silence hung between us. Beth didn't make eye contact with me, instead seeming to look past me in thought as she took a long sip of her coffee. She set it down before finally replying.

"I think... words are the worst thing people ever invented. Words and names. They're just a bunch of nets we use to try to catch things that are... better off free. In the process, we end up tangling ourselves up in the nets too. Freedom becomes a scarce commodity, and people get convinced that if they can make other people have less freedoms than them, then they'll have more. I suppose that's kind of right, but only so much as you believe that the suffering of others can be sweetener to your joy. So, they toss words around recklessly, and it really only makes things worse. Everyone gets tangled up. But easy targets most of all. People that don't make sense to everyone else, people that assholes feel like they need to spend word after word to describe and understand because we're so different. They come up with lots of names too. Yet they never get any closer to understanding. I suppose it's because that isn't the point. Words aren't about understanding. They're about capturing. And if they tangle us down with enough words, then they may not get us, but they'll have immobilized us, reduced

us enough to look down at us and give themselves an illusion of understanding. All the while they don't see that all they've really done is make a mess, a giant tangle that makes everything worse for everyone."

I just sort of sat there silently for while after Beth finished talking, not sure what to make of all she had just said and even less sure of how to respond. Beth took another sip of coffee before breaking the silence herself.

"Guess I just made a tangled mess myself, huh?"

And just like that the tension shattered, and I couldn't help but burst into a fit of giggles, made of equal parts nerves and genuine mirth. Beth laughed too; a hearty belly laugh I had never heard from her before. Just like everything new I discovered about her, it was beautiful.

"I think I get what you're saying, though," I finally said.

"You don't," she shot back with shocking bluntness, "But it's nice that you think that. You may not understand it, but you understand something. Your own version of 'it' I guess."

Even for Beth, that response was *really* weird. It bordered on condescension, and yet it was spoken so matter-of-factly and with so little malice that I couldn't help but snort at the adorable absurdity of it.

"I love you," I blurted out without thinking. Yet, before I could even regain good enough sense to be embarrassed about the sudden confession, Beth replied.

"Do you?"

I felt the world around me stop cold. In that utterly bizarre moment, I couldn't help but find my eyes darting down towards her lips. The rational part of my brain was long gone by this point, and so all that remained was an oddly nihilistic part of my brain that looked at how far past gently testing the waters I had shot in a single moment and figured "what the heck?"

So, I leaned across the table, closed my eyes, and kissed her.

I won't lie and say her lips were soft. As a matter of fact, they

were rough from what I could tell was a habit of biting them. Even so, they seemed to fit perfectly against mine. I could've stayed there forever, had the rational part of my brain not come screaming back at the very moment our lips touched.

I recoiled back, away from the kiss.

"I'm... *so* sorry."

"Why?" Beth asked, blinking in evident confusion.

"That... wasn't exactly consensual..."

She frowned.

"Yes, it was."

"I didn't ask Beth..." I said, shaking my head "That wasn't right."

"Ye-" she started before seeming to interrupt herself, pursing her lips for a second before continuing. "I didn't consent verbally... I get why that's concerning for you. Your concern is... sweet, but misguided. That was entirely consensual, I assure you. Though, ask first next time. It'll help you feel better."

"Uh, right."

I leaned back in my chair, flushing furiously. Logically, I should have been over the moon, Beth had more-or-less just confirmed that she felt the same, but I couldn't help but still be frustrated with myself. This wasn't the perfect storybook moment I wanted for our first kiss, and I couldn't help but feel like Beth deserved so much better. Moreover, Beth just took it all in stride, like it was no big deal. It was very characteristic of her, but for once I couldn't help but be more frustrated than charmed by her quirks. Couldn't she at least have the decency to be just a *little* flustered? But no, instead, I alone was left to stew in my own damned awkwardness.

I took a few sips of my coffee, searching desperately for a way to change the subject.

"It sucks," I finally muttered.

"No, it doesn't," Beth replied immediately

I snorted, remembering all at once why this woman charmed me.

“You don't even know what I was gonna talk about.”

“Well of course not, but that doesn't make what I said any less true.”

I just shook my head, not really even sure what she was talking about.

“It sucks” I continued, “That people like us gotta deal with all that bullshit. The names, nets as you put it. It makes being ourselves so hard. Hell, I didn't realize I was a lesbian until I got to college, or I guess I just couldn't admit it to myself... I really do get what you meant with all that net stuff. All the labels and expectations and taboos... it's all so suffocating...”

Taking another sip and peering over the rim of my coffee mug, I caught Beth biting her lip again.

“I'm... sorry you feel that way.”

“You... still disagree that it sucks?” I guessed, a small smile dancing across my lips.

“Yeah.”

“Why? You just spent a whole lot of time complaining about it yourself.”

“Well yeah, but the nets aren't real.”

I frowned, beginning to lose track of the conversation again.

“I... what?”

“The nets aren't real, so they can't really tangle you up.”

“Wh...” I stuttered, “Obviously. It was a metaphor, right? The words still trap us.”

Beth shook her head.

“I suppose they trap you, and everyone else who believes in the nets.”

“But... not you?”

“Exactly.”

“Because... you don't believe in your own net metaphor,” I said

slowly, as if sounding out the words.

“Exactly.”

“That... doesn't make any sense.”

Beth bit her lip yet again.

“Sorry...”

I opened my mouth to say some variation of “it's okay,” but before the words could escape my lips Beth stood up.

“Wait, where are you-”

“It's getting too tangled up here,” Beth said matter-of-factly.

“I...”

I felt my heart sink. It only made sense though, I had obviously come on way too strong for her liking. I looked down at the table, feeling my eyes begin to grow hot with what would soon be tears.

“So... safe to say you don't wanna do this again?”

“That's not what I said.”

I blinked, looking up at Beth with a newly stoked ember of hope. But, before I could ask for any further clarification, she walked away. I didn't feel the need to chase her. I knew this wasn't the end of our... whatever we had, so I figured for now it was best to respect her need for space, no matter how oddly she declared it.

We didn't go on another date for a while after that. Not for lack of effort on my part, but my invitations via text were always met with convenient excuses and polite declines. Blundered first dates were a familiar thing to me, and normally I would just let it go and move on... but I couldn't get Beth's parting words from our first date out of my head. She didn't not want to go on another date, but she still seemed to feel the need to hold back... I resolved to settle the matter once and for all by asking her in person. If she still gave a lame excuse, then I really would just move on.

I started the conversation as we were packing our bags up,

getting ready to head out of class.

“Hey, Beth-”

She muttered something I didn’t quite catch, and I interrupted myself.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Stop casting nets.”

I felt my mouth go dry. My nerves were screaming at me to abandon ship and move on from this failed romance. Yet still, I spoke my next words without thought.

“And what if I want to catch you?”

Those stormy eyes met my own with noticeable shock behind them. Then, a smile spread over her face.

“I already told you; those nets won’t work on me.”

“Right, because you don’t believe in them?”

“Right.”

“Well,” I said softly, finding a smile of my own, “Won’t you believe in my net?”

For the first time ever, I saw Beth blush.

Gotcha.

That night we sat in my dorm bedroom, sitting side by side on my bed and watching movies on my dinky little television. The air was thick with tension, the implication of where exactly we had chosen to take our second date being painfully clear to both of us. I had hoped Beth would save me the trouble of making the first move, but by the end of the second movie I just couldn’t take it anymore.

As the credits rolled, I turned to face Beth beside me. I reached my hand up, pressing my palm gently against her cheek, prompting her to shift her body towards me as well.

“Can I kiss you again?”

“Are you sure you want to?”

Uh, duh was my first instinctual response, but that was stifled by her continuing.

“I can’t promise I’ll be able to stop myself if you do. That threshold can’t be uncrossed, Jane.”

I couldn’t help but smile. That was just about the most Beth-like sentence ever spoken: complete cryptic nonsense, but laden with more genuine love, care, and sentiment than any comprehensible sentence could ever carry.

“Beth... I trust you.”

To my dismay, I saw a frown spread across her lips.

“Beth...” I stuttered, “if you don’t want to that’s perfectly okay. We can take things slower, I-”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Jane,” She said with noticeable frustration “But...you still don’t understand...”

I brought my other hand up, cupping either side of her face and gently guiding her eyes to meet mine.

“I *want* to understand. Help me, Beth.”

Behind the stormy grey I could see concern and desire swirling in equal parts. Fluttering like debris in the storm was a million questions, unspoken and unspeakable. For a moment I understood both all of it and none of it. I felt the threshold, the cliff I stood upon. It was danger, it was faith, and it was love. It was all that humanity ever was and ever could be, it was all that we strive to convey with our limp, useless words, and all that we can never comprehend. Our eyes locked, standing at this threshold beyond which words failed, I did the only thing I could.

I nodded.

All at once desire swelled over doubt. Her lips collided with mine. Darkness overtook me as I closed my eyes and let a kaleidoscope of sensation overtake all that I am. I felt my back fall onto the sheets, her weight on top of me. I drank deeply of her flavor. It became the horizon of my entire world, an infinitely vast

starburst of beautiful colors: incomprehensible, unreachable, yet here it sat in my arms, consuming me.

And suddenly, another flavor: metallic and bitter. Suddenly, another color: crimson sunset.

Blood.

It came flooding into my mouth from hers like a wave, with no warning and with such volume as to shock myself into a single immeasurable moment of pause. It filled my cheeks. It leaked from the corners of my mouth, dripping down my face like scarlet tears. And still yet more continued to cross the bridge of our lips, relentless in finding its way to me.

And so, I drank.

I drank greedily of her, mouthful after mouthful, I chugged as if dehydrated. Indeed, it almost felt that way. I was compelled to continue drinking that sanguine nectar as if it were life itself. And so, I did, mouthful after mouthful. I drank more of her than I felt any human body can reasonably hold.

And still the flow continued. More than just continuing, it grew textured. chunks of what I intuitively knew to be gore brushed my lips and cheeks. It was at this point that the deeply buried part of my brain—the small part of me that was repulsed by this display from the start—came screaming to the surface.

My eyes shot open. Even as I continued to swallow, I attempted to pull my head away. Beth's head moved with mine, our lips remaining coupled. I screamed, muffled and — evidently — unheard. I reached up, frantic, placing my hands on her face and attempting to pry her off me. My eyes watered. My vision grew fuzzed as the exertion began to deprive my brain of its already-scarce oxygen supply. Desperate, I peeled one hand back from Beth's face and slapped her. It was an impotent motion, barely inciting so much as the slightest twinge of pink in Beth's cheek. Despite that, her eyes opened wide in shock. Seeming to see me for the first time in an eternity, I felt her lips relax their grip on me.

I stripped my face away from hers, the sudden release sending me tumbling over the edge of the bed. As I hit the ground in a

barely coherent pile of limbs, I coughed up flecks of blood and bits of pinkish gore, staining the carpet below me. Still hopped up on adrenaline and the millions of thoughts running through my mind, I stumbled to my feet and whirled to face Beth. The whirlwind of expletives on the tip of my tongue died the instant I saw her.

She was *pale*.

“Beth...?”

I grabbed her hand with both of mine. It was ice cold. Her head slowly lulled over to face me, once again those stormy grey eyes pulling me in.

“That wonderful thing that touched me so long ago, I now pass to you,” She whispered with ragged voice.

“What are you talking about!?”

I said it far louder than I intended, my voice cracking. I could feel hot, wet streaks making their way down my face.

“You know.” Beth replied, somehow sounding serene, peaceful, despite the rough texture of her voice. “Soon, you’ll be the only one alive who knows. Its name is unspeakable, for no alphabet can contain it. Some call it the Beast of Connection, for they fear its twin. I prefer its common name: Love. I once knew it as Edward. You knew it as Beth. One day, another lucky soul may know it as Jane.”

“No... I... no!” I stammered, refusing to accept what I had already begun to understand. “Don’t go! Nobody but you can know me in this way!”

Her hand came to life in mine, intertwining fingers and giving a weak squeeze.

“Fear not Love’s twin, for this moment makes it all worth it. This moment is eternal, while the sea of painful moments beyond may seem vaster on the surface, they will always be overshadowed by This. And be joyous, for you are lucky. Like me, you may yet experience this moment once more, you need only embrace the twin. Accept Loss.”

I was shaking, body wracked with sobs. I squeezed her hand

back, hard. I couldn't look away from her eyes, but I could see light fading from them.

"Please... no. We... we need to get you to a hospital, we-"

Beth broke eye contact with me, looking instead to the ceiling.

"Acceptance, carry me home," She breathed.

"No!" I screamed, dropping her hands, and grabbing her cheeks, forcing her to face me. Her neck was limp and offered no resistance, and when I met her eyes... I knew.

The storm was gone.

And so here I sit today, betraying all that Beth believed in, throwing around useless words in some vain attempt to capture what happened that day. I understand perfectly, *I don't need* these words and yet...

As I type this, in my hand I hold a pen, and before me sits a pile of scrap paper. They are covered in strange, scratchy lines. They would not make sense to you, but I see the whole picture now. Humanity is a constellation. All you see are stars, but I now see the lines between, as I know she did. You are all in Hell, trapped in an existence only defined by traps. I want to help... but I cannot imagine how.

I cannot help but wonder, why Beth, who saw this truth, debased herself, trapped herself with me. Maybe because it was necessary, the only way I could ever understand. And so, I must conclude that, though she never said it, she loved me more than words could capture. And if she saw trapping herself to make me understand as worth it, then maybe what I write now will also be worth it. So, I wonder...

Will you see me in your dreams?

Wraith of the Grave

Adeline Rosebush

The realm belonged to color and death, and time long passed.

Sprawling fields of pale grass fanned out in every direction, reflecting the skylight as if the countless stalks were made of mirror glass. On and on the pasture spread; in the faraway distance, almost out of sight, towered endless sweeps of mountains, ageless and regal, that bordered her vision. To the mortal eye, this place was no more opulent than a common meadow at sundown.

But it was *above* that Einraithe had cast his paint. Its beauty made it difficult to accept that its creator was a god of death, Wraith of the Grave.

Eons and galaxies waltzed with each other overhead, their feet spiriting across the striking heavens in a flurry of light Laonfahr struggled to behold. Stars littered the clouds as azure, jade, and crimson waged war among them, their blood spilling onto the horizon, dripping and blending into indescribable shades. There was no midday sun nor glowing moon- the realm seemed to exist in an endless state of twilight, where the gods were free to use the landscape as their canvas, their glory the brush.

Laonfahr stood knee-deep in the wild grass, head back to fully view the magnificence of the sky. Her feet were rooted to the ground, freezing her in place as the gentle, sweet breezes whistled through the grass, tugging lightly at her hair. Her eyes fluttered shut as a familiar feeling settled in her chest, the one that told her whenever the Wraith's presence was nearby. It was like a feather brushing against her soul, almost too faint to register.

She wondered if those departed had felt the same

sensation washing over them as Einraithe took their souls and ushered them into the next life. Had her father?

Laonfahr sighed as she watched Einraithe materialize before her as if stepping through a veil of blustering wind. The old god looked at her in silence, his gaze untethered as if a landscape lay far away, with Laonfahr as the window through which he looked. His brows drew together.

There wasn't a specific name for the color of his eyes; they were a mosaic of hues solely found in the roots of the world. Each iris caught the unsullied vibrance of life and cast it through prisms long since tainted by sorrow, leaving nothing more than two fading stars within the Wraith's face. Was it regret for the souls he had taken? Shame at his existence? In his silence, Laonfahr only heard the pound of her beating heart and the aching absence of those she had failed. Those he had *stolen*.

"You took everything from me," she muttered, feeling the biting chill of anger lash against her throat.

Einraithe's vacant stare refocused, and he tilted his head. "No, child."

"You did. My mother, my father, even your own acolyte. You took them all from the world. How could you? How—"

"That is the way of things," Einraithe said almost apologetically. He turned his hands over to show his palms to her. "The tomb is not a villain; it's merely the stillness that awaits everything once the knell fades out."

She shook her head viciously as her stomach tightened. "My father believed that. Nodilok too. They believed your delusions, and now they're *gone*. They are dead because of you."

The Wraith flinched as if struck. "I do not control the deeds of men," Einraithe pushed. "My purpose of creation is to shepherd those finished into the tomorrow plane. That is all."

Laonfahr fought down the sympathy rearing inside her. Einraithe was a creature at best and a devil at worst. Baseless in origin. Unending. Illimitable. Merciless. Cold.

Forsaken.

The word echoed inside her, an outsider to her mind. Though it felt foreign to her thoughts, there was also an underlying sense of familiarity. Laonfahr looked into the patchwork of Einraithe's eyes and felt herself step closer to him.

He retreated.

She extended an arm, despite herself, her palm upturned in reflection of him. "When that thing butchered my father," Laonfahr said, "he smiled. He welcomed your touch like an old friend's. I... I do not fear you, Wraith."

Something shifted in Einraithe's demeanor at that. His shoulders pulled back a fraction, and his gaze flickered like a struck match. Einraithe slowly stepped forward and placed his fingers on Laonfahr's open palm. A lance of winter's breath and summer's kiss pierced through her.

"No," he murmured, "you do not fear my cradle, child. It is the settling dust that turns your blood to ice. You chase me down because you're afraid I shall never notice you remain on the earth alone."

Laonfahr stared at Einraithe blankly. Her lips moved, yet no words emerged, for the truest of them, those crafted by her soul, were too craven to face the light. She stood stunned in the face of what she'd always known, in the face of herself at its basest form.

Einraithe's fingers curled around Laonfahr's, his thumb sliding across the side of her fist. "Barriers encase that heart of yours. I know them well. But such is not your nature; no, you are more. More than a passerine, more than a hound."

"I am Syerenai's hound." Her voice was heavy and unsure.

A darker shade of anger fanned across Einraithe's features. He squeezed her fingers. "You are not," he said.

"Then what am I?" Laonfahr bit. The bearskin cloak blanketing her shoulders became insufferably hot. She itched in the deepest crevices of her being with anxiety more ferocious than any desire or greed from her past.

For a moment, Einraithe said nothing. He looked at her with

the same melancholy that always seemed to accompany him like a shackle long rusted. His hand remained in hers, simultaneously frigid and white-hot, unlike anything she'd ever felt. She wanted to tear away from his touch, but it had a peculiar element of comfort, a strange sense of kinship.

With a sigh, Einraithe raised his other hand and gently laid it upon his own. "You are something I have not seen in a long time, child— something to have faith in."

Laonfahr thought of her goddess. Even twelve years beyond that fateful day in the forest, she could still smell the frosted pine of Syerenai's power as it streamlined across Laonfahr's brutalized face and burrowed into her essence. Her patron had been her savior... but hadn't she also been Einraithe's?

"Faith," Laonfahr said quietly, "is what I have given Syerenai since I was just a little girl drenched in blood and rain."

"I did the same once. I believed in that *thing*." He drew a long breath. "In her."

"Is she truly that monstrous for giving you a second chance at life?" Laonfahr asked, not trying to hide the venom in her tone. "There are countless who do not get such a blessing."

"I am thankful for that," he replied sharply. Then, he pressed Laonfahr's hand between his own to focus her attention solely on his words. Einraithe looked down at their hands and said as if praying, "Life is a gift, my child. That is not a dispute. But, as with all gifts, its temporality makes it so sweet and blessed. My existence is to merely billow through stalks and collect the pollen. It is not a cruel duty nor a beloved one. Syerenai... She chose not to understand that I, at the end of all things, yearned for my reward. To her, death was a punishment to battle against, so she took it away from me. The Wraith of the Grave, robbed of it."

Laonfahr's face twisted in anguish for him and herself, hearing of Syerenai's actions. She steadied her breathing. She opened her mouth to speak, but Einraithe's frail voice came first, barely loud enough to hear.

"Why?" he whispered, and a tear kissed their hands. "Why did

she bring me back?"

Laonfahr could only say, "Because she loves you."

The Wraith raised his head with a scoff, diamonds glistening in his eyes. That dark anger returned to his face, shrouding his sadness. "Love. That is the fuel of it all, isn't it? Creation, death, birth, and murder— all for the heart."

"There is no love in murder," Laonfahr said.

"Love *is* murder," argued Einraithe. "It is the killing of sense. Despair makes a corpse of logic, and passion buries the blade. Syerenai's love has recalled me to life, yet the poison is withering me to naught."

A fury erupted inside Laonfahr, and she wrenched her hand from his grip. Her heart thundered against her ribs, rattling her teeth. "Did you kill Nodilok out of love? Was that mercy in your eyes?"

The Wraith bowed his head again in guilt. "As I said, that was simply the way of things. If mercy existed, I would be dead, and your beloved would kiss your lips and carve a life by your side. But..." He swept his arms out wide, yielding.

Einraithe smiled sadly. "Look at us now, child. I speak; he sleeps. One of us is in the wrong spot, and we both know whom."

She heard his unspoken request, for so often before, she had sought the same.

Affinity ebbed and flowed between them, caressing with hands calloused by fate. Einraithe endured as a being with nothing to lose, kept from his rest, bound to a heart he neither knew nor wanted. Laonfahr stood akin as the remnant omitted from fate's mind, collecting dust and legacy and filling an absence she prayed was just a dream. Though their bodies remained separate, Laonfahr knew their souls were made of the same substance, yearning for the same epilogue. Both were fashioned by that which lay beyond the earth's stretches. That was their homeland, and both were homeward bound.

"I'm sorry for what she did to you," Laonfahr said, and Einraithe

lowered his wing-like arms. "But that hatred you feel, it's not all that you are."

Einraithe's face bloomed with pity. "Do you truly think that?"

She nodded. "I've spent most of my life drowning in my anger—at myself, the world, everything. But I know it'll all be for naught when my rest comes. I have lived just as promised and will know I did well when my time comes. You did well."

For a fleeting instant, blind fury burned in the Wraith's eyes before he smothered it under the shadow of anguish Laonfahr could practically taste. He curled into himself, hand raising to palm his forehead.

"I hope she rots for all time," he whispered gratefully to the air. "If I could burn her rotted heart out, I would. Forgive me, my child. Please forgive me."

"Forgive?" Laonfahr echoed, coldness washing over her.

Einraithe kept his focus on the ground. He trembled violently. "That pit-spawned devil. I may live as the husk she has made of me, but every moment this soul festers within, I near desolation more and more."

Laonfahr, despite herself, stepped closer to Einraithe. "What are you talking about?"

He continued to shake, clutching his head and middle, folded over as if in agony. "Damn Syerenai, and damn me. I want to wipe her scourge from the earth and with it my own."

"Don't you love her?" Laonfahr asked numbly.

Einraithe stopped trembling and raised his head, locking with Laonfahr's gaze. Tears poured down his face from reddened eyes, and the veins around them pulsed. It was as if his ribs snapped one by one or his heart squeezed in an iron fist. He looked up at Laonfahr with more sadness than she had ever seen. He spoke.

"Long ago, perhaps. But nevermore. I cannot love a beast such as her. Not after what she has done for me."

Then he drew a breath.

"And to you."

Her voice belonged to a stranger when it creaked past her teeth. "Explain your meaning, Wraith."

The twisted feeling from before reared its head again, raking claws of ice along her flesh. Perhaps it was because of the whisper of connection between them, but Laonfahr could feel Einraithe's anger and pain and guilt in her bones as if those emotions were her own. Her mind thundered like a summer storm, trying to put logic behind his words.

The old spirit offered his hands out to Laonfahr just as he had, turning his palms upright once again, wordlessly surrendering to whatever reaction he anticipated from her. Hate and despair pulsed off his figure like the blistering heat of a wildfire.

He spoke, and the world fell out from under Laonfahr.

"I wish my existence on no other," he said. "For in my renewal of paradise, there too came the robbery of another's. Syerenai, in her madness, blinded herself to the depravity of her own actions; so long as I was brought back from oblivion, she would make the necessary sacrifices— not even if they were my own happiness, the sanity of her mind, or even the soul of a lost little girl."

Of Gorro, Protector of Lorchèa

Gabriel Tabor

It was cold, and the damp winds ripped wet autumn leaves from their branches and scattered the warm colors across the wide dirt path. Gorro sniffed and wrinkled his lip in an unamused way as the gust smote what skin he had exposed. He was tired of the harsh breezes and the chilled, moist air of autumn, for he rather preferred when winter arrived, and the snow came. Every breath Flea let out from her wide nostrils turned to a cloud of gray mist, and that did little to help Gorro shed the chill. He had the hood of his midnight-colored cloak thrown over his head and it halfway covered his face. Beneath that layer, a tunic of chainmail rested atop a linen shirt of black. He could feel the steel forged rings through the linen. *'I should have chosen wool,'* he thought to himself as the metal pressed against his back.

Gorro could see cooler colors through the red, yellow, and brown mirage that was the dense forest which surrounded him. The gray sky was turning bluer by the minute, and morning was well-nigh. The sunrise ride through the Lorchèa countryside was a thing Gorro had done for the past thirty-one years. It was never hard for him to wake up and saddle Flea in the early hours when a torch was needed to see one's business. It was peaceful on the road with no one but the two of them, and though it was rough on his old, worn cheeks, he enjoyed the gentle song that the wind whistled. War was tiring, and that was all Gorro had known before he arrived in Lorchèa. He had been part of many great conflicts in his youth; the old man even played a role in the battle which had sent many of his Oghi brother's souls to the Halls of Forevermore. Not a day passed that the image of their faces did not make an

appearance in his mind, nor a night when their screams did not haunt his dreams.

A wicked, not so gentle, gust of wind rattled the trees and whipped a handful of leaves onto his face. That snapped Gorro from his daydream, and quickly rubbed his face and gray beard clean again. When he looked up and focused on the world around him, he realized that he had crested a hill, and at the bottom of that gentle slope sat the Lorhèa docks. The newly risen sun beat the river's water with thick rays that made the cool current steam in the warm light. The wide, wooden walkway, which spanned a half mile across the river's shore, was already bustling with people. Far across the waterway the trees were scarcely visible, for the Nadi was wide, and its girth even more vast the closer it came to the sea. Men were loading into big-bellied barges along the boardwalk, preparing to drift down current and make way to the open ocean. Fishwives strode from out of their shacks and uncovered deep and wide carts preparing to sell sea life, nets, or whatever could earn them a coin.

Gorro heeled Flea down the hill and towards the dock's entrance; tall, wooden boards with nails hammered through the inside at their tops stood as a fence so that all had to pay a tax to walk onto the pier. The old man tied his girl beside a handful of other horses that stood hitched to a stand. 'I will check on you throughout the day,' he said as he rubbed her slick, black nose with soft strokes. He then walked to her rear and undid one of the saddle bags. From its contents he took a ripe pear for Flea, his tanto short sword, and a handful of silver pieces. After feeding the hungry horse her fruit, he slid the tanto under his cloak and strode towards the gatekeeper.

'How is it Gorro?' the gatekeeper asked as he leaned up to the oval opening in the wooden shack's side. He then slid out a tray from a slit under the opening he spoke through.

'It goes,' Gorro responded as a silver piece clanked against the tray's bottom.

The gatekeeper let loose a small laugh. 'It always *goes* for you. Have a good morning.' Gorro nodded, then strode past the guards upon either side.

The dock was less busy when Gorro finally stepped foot onto the old, damp planks. Only a few ships remained where there had been many, and now the walkways were scarce, with farm folks filling their wicker baskets with the sea life brought back the afternoon before. He walked straight past dozens of carts without doing so much as peering into their holds, for he knew where he pleased to go.

After a few minutes of walking, two children, barely ten, stumbled across the dock before him. They wrestled, and one, much smaller in height and girth, put the other into a solid chokehold. Gorro sighed as he watched for a moment, then pulled the two apart as if they were pups biting at one another.

‘What is this fuss about, boys?’ he asked as he pushed them firmly.

The boy who had put the other into a hold was red-faced and quick to respond. ‘He took my copper!’ he yelled, with rage filled tears coming from his eyes. Gorro turned his hood from the tomato faced child, to the other. That one was standing still as bamboo on a windless morning, and his eyes were looking straight down.

‘Is he speaking the truth?’ Gorro asked, though it was plain to see the answer.

The boy only nodded.

‘Here,’ the old man said, and flipped the copperless kid a silver instead. ‘That will cover your loss.’ He then turned to the boy who thought it was okay to steal from the smaller child. ‘And you, do not be quick to take from those who are lesser than yourself. Strength is not measured in how much you take, but how much you give.’ Gorro then motioned his hand. ‘Now, run along and be friends, the world will not offer you many.’ To that they shook their heads and ran down the boardwalk.

It was only half a hundred yards until Gorro finally arrived at the cart he cherished. The trays were filled with crabs and oysters and all the shellfish one could think of. There were shallow wooden plates sat on a stand before the cart, and he took one into his hands. He then quickly picked out four crawdads and two, three-inch-long clams which looked thick.

'Is that all Gorro? You usually get at least one crab,' asked a girl who stood behind the wooden display of salty snacks. She had a head full of bronze hair and her face was lit with a youthful red blush. The smile she wore stretched across her entire face, and Gorro could not help but feel warm at that grin.

'For now. I think this is enough to cure my morning belly. The breads I had at the Wet Oak last night still occupy most of my stomach,' he mumbled as he dug around his pocket for the silvers.

The girl wrinkled her forehead. 'You were there last night? I did not see you, and this black cloak you always wear is hard to miss,' she giggled. 'Do you not have any other outfits besides that dreary thing?'

'This black cloak is good at hiding me in shadows, so no one knows I am there,' he responded as he handed her three silvers. 'And I have worn this *dreary thing* since before you were born, Wendya. Ask your father; rarely is it off. And if it is, my undershirt is even darker.'

She took the silvers and placed them into a large sack as she shook her head. 'Trust me, Gorro, everyone knows of your . . . style. It is no wonder I have heard father call you Night's Wanderer.' She tightened the string and pulled the sack shut. 'Are you taking those with you, or eating them here?' Wendya asked, pointing her nose to the shellfish.

'I think I will take them with me,' he responded. 'But I must begin the rounds. Do not mind wrapping them, I think a clam sounds nice while I walk. Enjoy your day and tell Kaziago I said hello if I am gone by the time his barge returns.' She nodded and assured him she would, and he turned from the cart.

Gorro took the tanto from under his cloak and began to pry open one of the clams. He then tipped the shell upwards and shook it until the mussel slithered into his mouth. The salty taste was refreshing, and the blandness of the mussel delicious. Throughout that day clouds patched the sky, and the sun peeked her bright face through the openings whenever possible. When the rays were out, the feeling was rather pleasant to Gorro, but when the wind picked up and blew another gray blotch over where the warmth originated,

he began to shiver once more. Boats came to and from the dock endlessly as the day went on, and the old man kept a keen eye on all that took place and ensured that business went smoothly. Taxes were paid to the dockmaster, and coin given to the fishwives who sold whatever scaled or shelled creatures their husbands brought back from the sea. The Lorchèa dock was a quiet place, and no troubles were to be had besides an occasional thief or two, and the guards who also kept watch took care of that. But they did not have the sharp vigilance Gorro possessed, and often he caught sly robbers attempting to make off with pocketsful of crawdads or even the fishwives coin altogether. Gorro had caught one of the scoundrels just three weeks prior. He knew by the bulging of the man's cargo pockets and the floppy hood he wore that he was up to no good. As the thief made from the dock's exit, Gorro was leaned against the fencing upon the outside.

'How goes it, friend?' Gorro had said to the robber. The man kept walking and paid no mind, but Gorro spoke again. 'Not up for talking? Why the rush?'

'Go off somewhere, old man,' the thief told him.

Gorro laughed at that, as there were a hundred other things he would have rather done than deal with petty thieves. 'I will, have no worries. Only return to me what you stole, and we can go our separate ways. I will forget I saw you breaking the law.'

'But you are not the law,' he shot back. 'Get. Lost.'

Gorro sighed. 'You have one last chance.'

Before another word was loosed, the thief pulled a dagger from his coat and began to slash. To his demise, Gorro was not dull, and far quicker than the thief. Before his strike could fall, Gorro had pulled his tanto and cut the man at the wrist, causing the weapon to drop. It took little convincing after that, and the thief ripped his coin filled trousers off his legs and threw them at Gorro before running off into the wooded hills. Since then, there had been no trouble at the docks, and Gorro much preferred it that way.

The day was winding down, and many of the barges were returning to their usual spots along the wooden pier and tying their vessels off. Afternoon had brought warm tides, and the canopy

was clear of clouds. The once blue sky had been overwhelmed with an orange blaze which was the setting sun far across in the west. Glittering beacons ascended in the east as night brought its posse of stars to veil the heavens in a crystal coated ceiling. The dock was slowly emptying, and Wendy's father's barge was the last to arrive. *Seascape* tied its knots to the mooring, and the crew walked down the notched ramp onto the dock. Gorro watched as Kaziago embraced his daughter with sweat soaked arms and she return his affection. He smiled at that, and his heart was set at ease.

Seascape's arrival signaled that all vessels were home, and Gorro turned away to exit the dock, as all that was left were for the carts and men to pack their things until the next day. But as he was sucking the guts out from his last crawdad, he heard a menacing sound, and looking down river, he spied an odd sort of vessel sailing upstream. The thing was longer than any fishing barge seen at the docks of Lorhèa that morning, and the sails were dark purple. What looked like an angel emerged as the ship's prow, and in her hands lay a heart with a dagger stabbed straight through. A deep booming sound echoed from its innards and the churning oars spread along its side made the boat seem like a water-spider as it glided over the river. Gorro slid beside one of the fishwives' shacks and leaned in its shadow while he watched the ship steer equal to the pier. All work paused, and all eyes turned and observed the purple-sails. The dockmaster and a group of guards had also noticed the same disturbance that the rest of the dock saw, and they stood at the water's edge studying the thing. It was not but a minute later when a rowboat was lowered from the ship's side, and a pair of oars began paddling toward the mass of people.

The rowboat made its way across the now moon-lit river to the pier, and a man arose, then stepped onto the wooden planks. He was dressed in a traditional style purple coat that fell below his knees. Its stitching was gold, as well as its buttons and the earrings the man wore. A black hat with a bundle of falcon feathers pinned to its side shaded his eyes and only exposed his lower face. His mustache filled his upper lip and curled into a swirl at its end.

The dockmaster was upon the man before he had gathered himself, and said, 'It troubles me to inform you of this, good man,

but the dock is closing for the night. No business is to be done during this hour, and if you wish to sell or make purchases yourself, return tomorrow at sunrise.'

'And what if I care not what you say?' the voice said back. His teeth were white as pearls, aside from the two which seemed to be cased in gold.

The dockmasters guards stepped equal to their master, but he raised a hand that stayed them. 'Pardon?' he said to the mysterious figure in a smart tone. 'I do not think you understand; the dock is closed. If you will, return to your dingey, and paddle back to your ship. I do not wish to make things difficult.'

'And what if I told you to bring me whatever coin you possess upon this dreary and rotten place?' the golden teeth grinned. 'What then?'

The guards unsheathed their steel at those words and took a firm stance.

'Then things. . .will be difficult,' the dockmaster answered, with his hand resting on his own hilt.

With a deep exhale, the man said, 'Wrong choice,' and rose his pale hand out to his side.

Seconds later, out of the tense silence, arrows began screaming through the sky and falling like fateful rain upon the fishing people who watched from all areas of the dock. Cries went into the night sky, and panic ensued. Bodies fell and people hurdled the lifeless flesh sprawled upon the once peaceful deck.

Gorro had heard the strumming of bows seconds before the shafts fell and had taken shelter behind the shack he was leaned against. He peered out from the shacks corner and saw the violence taking place. Peaceful people he had seen for the past decade were now laying still with pierced bodies. Gorro came from behind his cover when the rain eased up, tanto in hand. He saw what looked to be herds of fireflies flying towards the pier, but the light's reflection revealed those to be more rowboats paddling towards the dock. He began helping people to their feet and firmly commanding that they run, fast and far. His eyes kept darting from the incoming boats to

the people still on the deck. *'They will not all make it,'* he thought, but he would help all he could.

He arrived at Wendya's cart, but neither she nor Kaziago were seen. Gorro then heard faint wailing close to where he stood, and he peered behind the cart to find a terrible scene. Wendya had her father gripped in her bloodied hands and she rocked slowly. Kaziago was pierced by many arrows in his chest and neck. Gorro bit his lip and gritted his teeth, but he knew it was unwise to mourn in that dangerous place.

'We must go,' he told her, as he held out his hand.

Wendya did not move but looked up into Gorro's shaded face. 'And leave him? I will not!' she cried.

Gorro took off his hood so she may see his face in full. The deep green eyes looked into her own helpless brown gaze with pity. A white scar stretched over his nose and veered right under his eye socket, terrible to see. 'Your father would not want you to lose your life as well,' he told her, 'and that will happen if you linger here. He is gone, Wendya, but let his soul be at peace knowing that you live. Please, come.'

She knew Gorro's words to be true, but the pain of departing from her father was searing her heart. Finally, Wendya nodded, and took his hand.

Gorro knelt to Kaziago and shut his eyelids. 'Peace be upon you, friend,' he whispered to the cold face, then threw the hood back onto his head.

'Stay behind me,' he said to Wendya, and they started stepping towards the dock's exit.

The other rowboats were beginning to tie off, and ill-intentioned men were scattering onto the deck. More of the dockmaster's guards had arrived, but they were outmatched by the vandals in number and strength and fell one by one. Gorro kept he and Wendya behind the shacks and in the shadows. He knew it to be folly to try and take on the pirates with his tanto alone, but it was painful for him to see so many fall when he could be of help. Some of the pirates had found the two of them as they pressed through

the shadows, but Gorro made quick work of the bandits and felled them fast as they came.

They slipped past the dock's entrance and Gorro untied Flea. After helping Wendya onto the horse, Gorro stepped into the saddle, and pushed his horse up the hill from once they came. They topped the slope, and Gorro stopped to turn back and see the dock. Screams still echoed, and ships were set on fire and blazing in the darkness. Wendya had her head pressed into his back, weeping. Gorro spat onto the ground, then ordered Flea off.

They distanced themselves far from the scene. The nighttime sky was clear, and the road before them was spotted with pale light seeping through the canopy of trees. The only breeze that blew was that created by Flea as her hooves churned the dirt below them.

As they sped down the path, Wendya gathered herself enough to speak. 'Who. . .who are those vial men?' she asked.

'That, I do not know,' Gorro replied. 'But what is certain is that they seek violence and plunder.'

' . . .you do not think that they will go towards town, do you?'

'I think that is their true purpose,' he regretfully said. 'But I will not let them freely terrorize the people there. Hya!' Flea increased pace at her master's encouragement, and the horse moved like a wraith whose speed is of another world.

They arrived at Gorro's wooded shanty, and he leapt from the saddle. 'I will not be long,' he said back to the two girls, and went into his home. With no hesitation he found his room and knelt at the bed. He then reached under the frame and pulled a long box from the shadows. His heart raced as he looked upon the smooth, dusty, black oak case. As he untied the rope his hands trembled, but Gorro knew this was the only way. As the case creaked open, a leather half-mask sat atop a black cloth. He took off his hood and strapped the mask over his mouth and nose. The leather was dyed black and possessed a mouth like a snarling wolf with golden teeth; terrifying to look upon. Gorro then removed the cloth, and a long blade shimmered in the dark room when revealed. He took it by the handle and held it aloft to a streak of moonlight which crept through a crack in his ceiling. *Twilight's End*, he had named that

blade in days passed. The steel was well smithed and possessed dark gold lettering etched down its middle.

Gorro Yosaki, The Night's Wanderer, Protector of Lorhèa

He kissed the blade, then sheathed it upon his waist. From his closet he also took a black bow and a quiver stuffed with raven feathered shafts, then went from his home.

Wendya squinted her eyes as she stared at the blade and bow to ensure what she saw was true. As Gorro raised his head and hand to her, and she flinched back after seeing his hideous mask. 'What are you doing?' she asked, now looking at his hand.

'You are not going,' he responded, with his palm up. 'This deed is perilous, and my errand is not for one who wishes to keep their life. Where I go, there will be death.'

She took his hand and reluctantly stepped from Flea's back. 'Gorro, there were near a hundred men upon the burning dock when we looked from atop that hill. I fear it may be unwise for you to face them alone. We can ride to the capitol instead, and they will send the militia.'

'It may be folly,' he responded, as he climbed into the saddle. 'But should I run or sit idle while more are slain by merciless arrows and blades? Wendya, I am from an order of people who you do not know, and I was raised through childhood with a single idea: protect those who lack strength, and serve the least of us; I have kept that belief for fifty-three years. If it were half a thousand men I must face, that would not stop me from meeting them, for I have one purpose in my life, and I will not shrink when fate calls my name. The hour may come when I unstring my bow and toss my sword into the sea so it may rust away, but that hour is not upon us. I still draw breath, and long as I do, I am the protector of Lorhèa.' After hooding his head once more, he looked down at Wendya a last time. 'Go inside, and do not leave until the morrow, when the sun reaches the midday sky. Then, you may travel to Lorhèa. Another will have been riding to the capital as we speak, and by midnight the militia will arrive in town. Until then, it is I who must delay death.' He then turned his horse towards the Lorhèa village, but before speeding off, he whispered over his shoulder. 'I . . . am

sorry about Kaziago. He was an honorable man, and his death will not go unavenged, that I promise.' After those words he heeled Flea's ribs and was gone.

Gorro raced north, fast as Flea could carry him. He knew the vandals would be taking the coastal road, as it was the quickest route from the pier to the Lorchèa town. Flea sped upon the high road; that path ran along a raised slope littered by tall oaks and needled pines that sat a quarter mile beyond the coastal road, and gazed over the route which the thieves took. Gorro kept his eyes on the moving mob of torches. They were strung out in small groups for a mile and in a loose formation, a usual blunder of unorganized rascals. He decided the small group of eight which lagged would be first.

Flea eased down the hillside, using the dense autumn foliage and thick pines as cover. Gorro had his black bow in hand and quiver waiting. The moon came shining onto his gold-toothed mask, and he seemed like a hunting wolf prowling the forest. Once thirty yards from the path, Flea matched the pirates slow, drunken pace, and Gorro knocked an arrow.

He loosed a shaft. A bandit fell.

The others saw their comrade pierced and darted their heads, trying to find the source. But while they were in a panic, three more were dropped before realizing the shafts were coming from beyond the eastern tree line. As the remaining four came a few feet from the trees, their torches enflamed a set of golden teeth from the blackness, and they trembled. Gorro then emerged from the dark, sword in hand, and four souls were sent to the Depths before a cry could be released.

Quickly, he mounted Flea and set up the road, for the Lorchèa village was not far ahead. Two more packs of stragglers were slain by Gorro as he weaved from foliage to the dirt path, ever switching between bow and sword. But when he arrived atop a gentle hill which the road carried over, he saw that the head of the pirate pack was only a mile from the village. Knowing there was a single solution, he bid Flea scurry up the hill and ride parallel to the dirt road with all speed she possessed. Never had a horse within the

borders of Kincade shown such haste, and the wind foolishly tried to keep pace, but Flea outrode the gusts upon her heels. After they passed the entire column of thieves, Gorro sent Flea bursting from the brush and steered her fifty yards before the village border. He dismounted the old girl and kissed her snout, then walked up the road some.

There, Gorro Yosaki stood as an old oak whose roots anchor deep in the earth. The moon apexed the sky and its pale light enflamed his steel sword and golden mask. Wind washed over the flat earth where he stood, and his cloak snapped in the breeze behind him. As the pirates came upon the Night's Wanderer, the one in purple began laughing.

'A brave one!' he said aloud to his companions. He then pointed towards Gorro. 'Deal with this foolish *hero*.'

At his command, a band of ten men with hatchets, hooks, and swords walked upon Gorro. He took a deep breath and gripped the hilt that sat patiently waiting within his cloak. Sweat came from his temple, but his nerves were calm as the evening tide when it retreats from shore. The first man came to Gorro with hatched raised. . .and it began.

Like a bolt that summons thunder, Gorro quickly sliced him through the gut, and he fell. There was no time to relish, for the others were quickly upon him, but they were no match. Gorro was as a shadow whose body is void, for every strike aimed upon him missed its mark, yet every move he made found flesh. Long had Twilight's End sat unmoving, and now unsheathed, the blade bit like a bear who awakes after winter; hungry and ravenous. No man could stand before Gorro, and soon, the earth before him was littered with corpses. But as the last bandit fell, an arrow found Gorro's stomach, just below his mail.

He gasped and sank to his knee. But Gorro heard more steps rushing towards him, so with a grit of his bloody teeth he stood. There were more within the second wave, so he wielded Twilight's End in his right hand, and the tanto in his left. Six fools were felled in his fury upon standing, but another arrow came screaming into his thigh, and he stumbled back. Another shaft penetrated the mail

and sank deep into Gorro's ribs.

Darkness crept over his eyes; memories of fallen friends danced in his mind, and he walked to meet them. . . But lo! Gorro stood and fought, for fate had not claimed him yet, and his doom still lingered upon death's door. With the strength of a hundred men he battled, his wolf mask flashing as he devoured foes, and arrows filled his being all the while, until he was upon both knees.

Bandits blanketed the ground where Gorro knelt, like fallen leaves after winter strips the branches. Eleven shafts were embedded within his body when the pirate leader walked upon the scene. 'Though you are valiant,' he said, 'it does not pay to be a hero.' He then took his cutlass and placed it against Gorro's neck. 'I pray they will honor you.' He raised his arm, but out of the depths of night, rumbling hooves were heard echoing from the north, and the pirates held fear in their eyes.

Gorro watched from his knees as they turned and fled towards their ship. Only moments later, the Lorchèa militia came thundering past, and ran the pirates down with spears and bows. He smiled as a cool gust came and whispered upon his face. '*Your deeds here are done,*' it said. '*You will go to see them now.*' Gorro then loosed his last breath, and the Night's Wanderer became only a song.

The Deer of Nightshade

Polaris Storm

Before I was even a thought in the minds of anyone, my father led my mother out to a field where the nightshade outcompeted every single beautiful and native plant that once lived there. My mother, oh, the poor doe, she feasted on the belladonna until she was on the very cusp of life and death. She never remembered what happened in that field, but I always knew that my cowardly buck of a father decided to take advantage of that situation and make me.

And so I was born underneath a willow tree, far from anyone besides my own parents. When I first left her womb, they thought I was already gone at first, as I was still and barely breathing. Eventually, though, I started to stir and walk, slow yet alive. A miracle, as my father would sometimes say.

Yet as I grew, taking root within the world my body had been implanted in, I always knew I was no miracle. The poison from the nightshade lurked in my blood, a curse fit for no fawn to bear. One that brought naught but misery.

I never quite fit in with any other deer. Many of them, from the youngest fawns to the eldest bucks, avoided me because they could smell my poison. The ones who didn't have their sense of smell intact would be warned by my dull-colored coat and sunken eyes. Even the ones who didn't quite mind either would only get the chance to know me for some months before my family had to leave again.

We bounced around herds so many times that the faces and names now blend in with each other within my memories. Some of these herds treated me with kindness before I left, kinder than they would treat anybody unpoisoned. Some were cruel and inhumane beyond what I could even dream to remember outside of a few flashes of blood and pain.

Others still would catch a whiff of the belladonna infused within me and claim I was too sick, too poisoned for help, no matter how badly I would beg.

Especially in my younger years, though, I think they were right. I was miserable and would take it out on everyone who dared venture close to me, poisoning them with my own misery and words. God bless the ones who considered me their friend during that time... if only I could apologize to them, but they are now gone and washed away with the summer storms.

I couldn't even find social solace in my own family, because for as long as I can remember, they were always at each others' throats. My mother and father fought like there wasn't a tomorrow, often over the tiniest little transgressions. Like a broken twig, or who gets a fresh patch to graze in. My little sister would sometimes get in the crosshairs too, the poor fawn. I hated it. I hated their fighting and it always made me miserable.

Yet I was never a target. I would like to say I don't know why, but I know damn well.

My father also had nightshade in his veins, the same dull colors and sunken eyes I had expressing itself on his form. I suppose he saw himself in me because of that, and because of that, he was always kind to me. His kindness was never typical, but instead a sort of cruel kindness. He'd tell me, "Oh, you're so smart. Belladonna floods in your veins, and it's both a curse and a blessing. You're destined for such great things. I could never hurt someone as beautiful and intelligent as you! Just listen to my advice and you'll make your way in life..."

His advice was always horrible and equated to nothing but "put yourself first, others last." I couldn't understand his willingness to hurt people, even those he loved, and I hated his brutality. Not only that, but eventually my mother and sister started to fight each other, too. My family was now a warring pack of coyotes, waiting to rip each other apart from flesh to bone to vital organs.

So I did the only thing I could, and separated myself from them.

I only saw my father once after that, when I was in another herd. He gave me a few words of that false kindness again in hopes I'd

listen to him one last time. I didn't. In fact, I was so terrified of him that I didn't sleep for nights, thinking he'd find and hurt me.

I saw my mother and sister much more often; perhaps by force of habit, our paths kept intersecting. I saw them earlier in the season and from what I understand, they still fought each other tooth and hoof... but they cared for me still. I just wish they'd stop fighting so I could spend true quality time with them without worrying about being dragged into their petty fights. Perhaps then, and only then, I would be able to have a family again.

Without them as heavily in my life, though, I started to get better. Now, I didn't become perfect – I'm not sure that's possible; I still hurt and I still have poison in me – but I was better, and that was what mattered most. I became more social and more friendly. I still bounced around herds, but I fit in more than I used to.

It took me until I was almost full-grown to get to that stage.

Now, I'm an adult. I don't feel like one sometimes, but time doesn't stop to let the mind catch up. My new herd is kind to me. They give me things no other herd would, and for that, I will forever appreciate them. My antlers never grew in – perhaps from the nightshade, perhaps from my biology, most likely both – and when I got sad about it, a doe gifted me new ones. They were made from the most beautiful of oak branches, large and twisting like the grandest buck's antlers, and now I never go anywhere without them on my head.

To tell the truth, though, my life is nowhere near as interesting as it used to be. I prefer it that way. I would rather be a nobody than miserable and unlucky like I was for so very long.

Sometimes still, though, curious things happen. Just last night, I had been away from the herd, looking for some peace and quiet. I found it on the cliffs of a deep canyon, where the sounds of rushing water filled my ears. I rested under a pine close to its edge, where I peered down to its fog-covered bottom. There were stories in the herd of the water in its river being the most refreshing and revitalizing, that it could cure any poison. I suppose that, technically, they're right: if you jumped down there, you wouldn't have to worry much about the poison in your veins any longer.

I heard the crunching of late autumn leaves and turned my head towards the sound. I saw a fawn, just young enough to be molting their spots away, pacing at the very edge. Scratches and wounds, some shaped just like their little hooves, covered their body. Once I smelled the copperhead venom within them, I knew exactly what they were here for. So I called to them, "Come here, young'un. Lie next to me."

The fawn hesitated but slowly made their way to my side. Once they laid down, I placed my foreleg over them so they wouldn't do anything rash.

We were quiet for a long while, then, while they scented my own poison and I cleaned their wounds. Their blood was bitter, but surprisingly, the venom didn't hurt me one bit. We both kept our eyes on the foggy void below.

Finally, after most of their wounds had been cleaned, the fawn asked me, "Sir, don't you ever just want to jump and let the fog swallow you whole?"

I gave them a calm, yet sad smile and looked back down into the canyon. That was a question I had learned was better not to answer, as it caused more problems than it solved... but I could make an exception, just this one time, to satiate the curiosity of an envenomed fawn.

"Sometimes."

The Chipped Beak of Birds

Anonymous

Everything is subject to change, and this year has proven to be no different. Laurent's hair is a bit longer, his face is a bit fuller. The wind is colder and the summer fades too soon.

Today, Laurent is nineteen. His hair is still a deep brown and his eyes are still a shade of caramel, and he is still taller than his mother but not his father. He has to look down on her when she talks down to him.

A piece of hair falls in front of his face. He looks over to the mirror at himself and huffs. It needs to be trimmed soon; it has been annoying like this for the better half of a month. He can't remember when the last time he cut his hair was.

He can't remember a lot of things about himself. He hasn't listened to music in two days and he's starting to believe he never will again. He hasn't even prayed independently since Sunday; he did not offer to pray for their meal yesterday. He saw the way his mother looked at him, but she never spoke up, and his father prayed instead.

She is really a wimp, and the older he gets, the more he notices. Her strength comes from tearing other people down, it comes from molding them into perfect versions of what she knows she will never have the chance to be. Laurent is not surprised, but he disappoints himself every passing year by learning that adulthood means nothing akin to parenthood. Parents do not know better just because they have been alive longer than their children.

Maybe he will try to sleep early later. It is only the afternoon, but Laurent has no plans. He was supposed to spend it with Ezi, but that would not work out anymore, and he would rather cast a demonic entity into his home than spend his birthday with his mother. If he gets tired in

an hour, perhaps he will just sleep. Dreaming about life sounds far more enticing than actually living.

His plan flies out the window when his mom calls for him from downstairs.

He sighs, leaning his forehead against the wall. His eyes close in a mix of frustration and anxiety. He hasn't been able to muster up the courage to eat dinner yet and he's hungry. He's exhausted, too. The nineteen that seemed so distant ran up behind him within the span of ten seconds. It stomps at his shoes and taunts him to go faster now. He wants to sleep it away, maybe he could pretend to be in bed, maybe he could slide underneath his covers and try to hide, but he can't because his mother is calling for him again. Her voice is loud and curt and strained as if she's forcing herself just to sound out the letters that make up his name.

His muscles ache when he moves down the steps. He looks at his feet against the wood and thinks of Eric. Speaking of Eric, Laurent wonders if he knows it is his birthday today. He wonders if nineteen would make any sort of difference, if maybe it would deter Eric from him entirely because he is old now, if maybe he would go back to Orange and Laurent could fight for himself again.

Laurent steps onto the first floor. He looks up to find his mother and a boy talking in the kitchen. His right foot wavers on the board but before he can push his left foot back up, his mother turns.

Speaking of Eric, he is standing in Laurent's kitchen. His black hair shines underneath the lights and his deep brown eyes sparkle when they make contact with Laurent's. Eric is an incredible human being. He does not give up easily like Laurent. He is not weak like Laurent.

"Laurent, someone's here to see you," his mother says, like he cannot see the beautiful boy in his kitchen for himself. He looks over at her briefly and thinks about all of the things he would like to say to her. He doesn't bother today.

"What are you doing here?" Laurent asks plainly, turning to Eric. Eric looks at him with the same eyes from that evening by the creek. It reminds him of Eric's words and how beautiful they sounded, and he feels guilty now.

Eric shrugs. His hands slip between his pockets. "Wishing you a happy birthday."

Laurent tenses. "We need to talk outside, please."

Eric nods curtly and turns in the direction of the door while Laurent turns to his mother. "Did you tell him it was my birthday?"

"He knew beforehand," she replies. Her hands are already gravitating to an uncut vegetable. Laurent hums and walks out of the house.

Laurent likes his porch. It is small, but pretty. Two rose bushes stand proudly on each side of the squared-in railing, with exception to a two-foot hole where steps cascade down into the ground. The awning itself is white, and so is the railing. Every part of the outside of his house is drenched in religious innocence. Laurent vaguely, rudely wonders if Eric's breathing constricted when he walked in. Sometimes he does that too.

Eric is standing at the bottom step, looking out towards the vastness that coats the rest of their land. Laurent is not sure how much of it they actually own, but the large field that spans out on the opposite side of their home still gets loved by Laurent as if it were all his.

He comes to stand beside Eric. The taller boy shifts his weight onto one leg so he can face Laurent openly.

"How did you know?" Laurent asks. He looks up into Eric's eyes.

Eric smiles sweetly. It hurts Laurent a little because he knows he does not deserve him. "Jake told me a little while ago."

"Jake? When did you talk to Jake?"

"A little while ago, I said. But I had a feeling beforehand. I feel like I know you better than I know myself."

"Why do you like me so much? I am not worth it, really. I am not worth you," Laurent cuts him off. He is tired and confused, and Eric is really too good for him.

The taller boy just sighs and shrugs in place. "Love is like that, Laurent. I do not know except for the fact that I know I love you."

Love is such a callous word to Laurent. When he was nine, his

mother told him she loved him every day. He was small and feeble and impressionable. But now that he is older, now that he is smarter, she no longer says it. Laurent knows it is because she knows that he knows she does not mean it. Ezi has told him he loves him, too. Of course, it always only happened in small, emotion-wrung spurts, like times when they would almost get trampled by herds of wild goats, or when their parents were fighting the night before. Ezi says it to soothe them both so Laurent knows that he is not alone.

Now, Ezi probably does not love him. Or maybe he does, but he is just scared. Fear can do a lot of things to a person. Laurent has been scared before, so he knows and he understands. But that does not mean he is not hurting.

Laurent squares his shoulders and looks out toward the field. He doesn't know what Eric means when he says love, yet, so he will just ask. "What do you mean by love?"

"I think to love, is to write. Maybe to sing, or think, too. But I think to love *someone*, is to care for them even when they do not care for you. When things go wrong, and I can still think fondly upon a person, I know that I love them," Eric states. He faces the field as he says it.

Laurent hums. "What if things keep going wrong and then you change your mind?"

"I don't know yet. But why wouldn't I try to love as much as I can until, or if, even, it does?"

"I am too scared to live like that," Laurent leans against the railing, "I'm quite a wimp, right?"

"Not in the least," Eric shakes his head, grabbing Laurent's shoulder. Laurent looks over to him. "You've just been taught that fear is the worst emotion to have. But that is okay, Laurent. I can help. I told you I just want to help."

"You love me?"

"I love you."

"Okay," Laurent nods. Eric is swimming in his vision. The world

around him is blurred; all that Laurent can see for sure is Eric. “Can we walk somewhere? I want to show you something.”

Eric nods enthusiastically. They leave without telling his mother. He is nineteen, and she doesn’t need to know.



“Sorry,” Laurent whispers when he accidentally kicks a rock in Eric’s direction. The tall boy just laughs, swinging his head around to stretch it briefly. Laurent usually prefers looking at the ground when he walks, but walking with Eric feels mature. When he is around Eric, he wants to be mature.

They’re walking along the gravel path that leads to church, and although his body feels inclined to go there out of habit, that is not what he wants to do today. He’s going to take Eric back to the place they first met; down the shortcut Laurent used to take to beat Ezi when they raced. Even racing seems childish now; he doesn’t want to race with Eric. He wants to walk along the path with him like an adult.

It’s only after the church comes into view that Eric starts speaking. He must be confused, which is natural. Laurent is not upset or mad at him for being curious; it is the nature of a human to wonder.

“Are we going to church?” Eric asks softly, nudging his head in the direction of the sun-stricken building. It really looks too hot up there on the hill, where no trees or shrubs can block the sun from hitting the boards. It reminds Laurent of Ezi.

“No,” Laurent replies, “we’re going to the path I met you at.”

Eric nods and follows Laurent as they turn down into the trees. Laurent is a little excited about this. He wants to meet Eric for the first time over and over and over again.

The clearing is no bigger than Laurent’s porch. Two large oak trees stand on either side, creating a hole that gradually gets darker the farther it caves in. Laurent knows that in reality

there is plenty of light, but they have to find it, first. There is always light where darkness overshadows. It is just hidden this time.

Laurent ducks underneath the branches of the trees. They aren't in the way, and he is not that tall, but he is always worried he will run into them one day. It will never come, but the fear is enough to propel him to shift down when he walks under.

As if fear is taunting him, he hears a thump from behind and spins around almost immediately.

"Ouch," Eric laughs. His hand is grasping at his forehead.

Laurent's eyes widen. He gasps, coming over to Eric to make sure he is alright.

"I am quite dull, huh," Eric grimaces, patting at his forehead, "I saw you duck, and still, I ran into the branch."

"You are not dull, just blind," Laurent giggles. He brings his own hand up to remove Eric's. There is no welt on his forehead yet, but there is a guarantee there will be one later.

He fluffs Eric's black hair around until it covers the quickly-budding red spot. "At least you can cover it up,"

"I'm glad I didn't cut my hair this morning," Eric chuckles, looking down to the ground as Laurent still tustles with his hair.

Laurent hums, finishing his work. "Oh, did you think about that too?"

Eric nods. He looks at Laurent tenderly. Laurent knows it is irrational to feel the difference in gazes but Eric always makes him feel a distinct way. It's primary, and raw. Not something he's ever felt when Ezi looks at him.

"Let's go," Laurent whispers. He bravely grabs ahold of Eric's hand and pulls lightly, and they set off into the greenery. They are not running, not even jogging, but the speed in which they walk is fast-paced. It makes up for the tremendous way Laurent's heart is thumping in his chest. Their hands are still intertwined, and it comes to no surprise that Eric is warmer than him.

He laughs to himself while they walk. Eric hums curiously from behind.

"What are you giggling about, hm?"

“Just how I feel so many different things around you and yet they continue to feel the same every time,” Laurent sighs.

It is the biggest compliment he could ever give someone. Nothing about him changes when he is with Eric. He feels stuck, and that is all he has ever wanted to be with someone. Eric might not understand what he is saying but it does not matter because either way he will feel the same about him.

Eric just laughs from behind him, and they continue to walk.



The birds are gone today; their once sweet, melodic song ceases to exist, or maybe it falls silent on deaf ears. The only sound Laurent can hear is the rustling of the leaves on the trees surrounding him.

He breathes out slowly, wanting to shut his eyes so he can properly harness his auditory senses, but he hears something else before his eyelids can close. It's a clean, loud noise; a familiar noise he knows he has heard before. The laughter of a boy cuts through the mildly tame air, and Laurent perks up out of habit. It sounds just like Ezi.

He looks behind him quickly, curious. A piece of his hair falls in front of his face because of the sudden motion, so he brings his finger up to brush it away.

A boy and a girl are standing there when he regains his vision, at the entrance to the church on the second step above the dirt. The boy is definitely Ezi; his head bobbles in joy for a moment and it causes the slightly-grown out undercut from months ago to peek through the longer part of his hair. He's talking to Renée, who has her hand up. Her mouth is pressed against Ezi's ear and Laurent just manages to catch the moment she brings it to cover over them, as if she is telling him something privately. Ezi is smiling, mouth wide and eyes scrunched together. He looks like he does when they are playing together happily.

Ezi looks over at Laurent for a split second, and they make eye contact. The brunette's eyes widen and his face seems to glitch, his smile faltering immediately. Laurent watches as his entire face drops. The clear song of his laughter stops abruptly. He blinks

nervously one last time, and then he averts his eyes from Laurent entirely, as if Laurent is blinding to look at.

The silence that follows is more deafening than anything Laurent has ever witnessed before. He tries to follow Ezi's eyes to see if they will meet each other again, but the taller boy has now set himself to make circles in the dirt in front of him. Laurent thinks he almost looks sad, but he doesn't get to see for himself.

Renée must have felt the atmospheric change, too, because when Laurent gives up on Ezi, he finds her eyes instead. She is still smiling, the seal of her lips broken only a little bit as she stares back at Laurent. He has never seen her look so mean, but that is how she looks now. Her head tilts and her eyebrow raises in sync. She is judging him.

It takes no more than a second for Renée to elbow Ezi lightly. She says something to him, but Laurent cannot read lips so he can't make it out. It was never meant for him anyway. Ezi rubs his palm against his other arm before turning his back to Laurent, and the pair walk into church without another glance.

Laurent wishes he would have never turned around. He's never been judged before, ever, not by Ezi especially. It hurts like Hell; his eyes are stuck open and the wind is burning them dry and his clothes are sticking to his skin from what he realizes is sweat. He can't be here.

It is an irrational decision, to run away from a church service, but there is a first for everything, and if he was ever going to do it, now is the right time. His feet pick up before his brain, scuffing his heels against the ground as he sprints away from the church building. Dust forms in a cloud beneath his feet. It travels up into his eyes and nose, and he coughs and cries, but he keeps running.

His feet are taking him somewhere on their own accord. His pace slows down and steadies at a jog. He has no idea where he's going, but his path is coordinated, it's familiar, like it's been walked before. The trees start to mold into shapes his eyes have investigated over and over before today.

It becomes apparent when he meets with a tree branch that hangs overhead a couple of inches above his head. He sniffs in acknowledgment, and gradually, things piece together in his brain. It should come to no surprise that he'd find refuge during panic in a place of serenity. But if he hadn't been here with Eric before this happened, would he have come? Before Eric he would have walked back in the church, probably. It was the only place he'd felt love, even if it had been toxic.

Eric changes everything. Eric was so sweet to him, kissed him so gently in the grass just a mile or so ahead, squeezed at his waist and loved him right. Eric warmed him, under the sun, when Laurent thought he couldn't have been warmer.

— An excerpt from *Sprinting down the road at our own pace* (*unfinished*).

The Goddess of Magnolia Valley

Emma Sheedlo

They say the fifth floor of the library of Magnolia Valley University is haunted.

You hear the rumor for the first time in the food court, as two girls start to pass by where you're waiting in line in the middle of rush hour; you aren't really listening to them, not at first, too occupied with the realization that you're inching closer to the fifteen-minute mark until your next class to pay much mind to anything else. At this point, you really may as well duck out of line and make your way to the building your next class is held in, may as well opt to skip another meal in favor of preserving that pristine attendance record, but as soon as you slip beneath the barrier that gates off the line, you nearly bump into the two of them, nearly charge into their path without meaning to.

The girls barely notice you— one of them briefly casts a glance your way, hazel eyes flickering with sunlit amusement, the corners of her lips lifting just so as your own part around a *sorry*, but they give you no acknowledgement otherwise, content to keep walking, to carry on their conversation in their own little bubble. You're content to roll your eyes and make for the exit, to carry on with your life uninvolved as you always do, but just as you start to turn to walk toward the rightmost door, you manage to catch some of the words they're saying, tiny fragments of that bubble floating your way.

“Did you hear?” the girl with the hazel eyes begins, her voice low, hushed, as if all the secrets of the world lie in her very palms. “More books keep going missing on the fifth floor! No one knows where they've gone, or who took them— word is that there's a ghost.”

“Really?” the other’s eyes are wide with intrigue, absorbed in the promise of a story, though that light dims just so after a moment passes. “Um, what if it’s just a normal thief stealing them, though?”

“Pfft– come on. Who would want to steal *books*, of all things?”

“I don’t know, textbooks can get pretty expensive...”

“They’re *not* textbooks. Not according to what I heard,” Hazel Eyes says matter-of-factly, her voice sharp, confident. “Besides, it’d be pretty easy to notice someone smuggling a bunch of old books down five floors, don’t you think?”

“I guess...” her companion says, lips pursed in quiet doubt. “I don’t know, a thief still makes a bit more sense than a ghost...”

“Well, *I* think it’s a ghost– really, all sorts of weird things keep happening up there...”

Their voices fade, then, indiscernible amidst the countless others that compose the thrum of noise that keeps the student center alive, shining hazel eyes and whispers of ghost stories dissipating into the crowds. It’s only when they’re out of your earshot that you realize you’ve frozen in place completely, so oddly entranced by the pieces of a story a stranger you’ve never met and will not meet again was weaving, entwined in the winding threads of a loom you’ve never cared to learn to handle. You pride yourself on being tethered to the earth, tethered to reality; few things can intercept your path once you’ve decided it, and fewer still can shake your faith in the things you know to be true. It’s hard to understand why something as simple and commonplace as a passing conversation seized your attention so; you’ve never put much stock in the supernatural, never cared for talk of spirits, never spared a moment of belief for things that should stay buried clawing their way out from the grave, and yet something about that girl’s stalwart belief and sparkling eyes and refusal to accept any other explanation brings you pause.

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Every college campus in the world develops its own folklore, over time, as any community does– it is an inevitability when history festers in the crevices of old buildings and older fixtures, when decades of change and buried sins still linger in archives and

memory. Students have their rituals for good and bad fortune, their rumors and their ghosts; you are distantly aware of them, but you're not one for tall tales. It's ironic, really, considering your studies are built on the shattered foundations of ancient civilizations, on the rotted bones of people who constructed gods and myths and heroes for the most minuscule of things, but that irony means little to you.

Even so, you cannot help but feel all too aware of it now as you stumble through the doors of the Selkirk Library, slipping past the first-floor computer lab to make your way to the winding staircase. It is not as though the library is typically a loud place, but it is inevitable that some sound carries in a space like it— the turning of pages, the click of fingertips against keyboards, the quieted chatter of old friends crossing paths—, and with each flight of stairs you ascend, the sound dwindles, fading to nothing more than a distant echo resonating down from the lower floors by the time you reach the fabled fifth. Someone more superstitious than you might find pause at that. Someone more superstitious than you might tense up and retreat back into the warmth and comfort of distant voices, slipping back into the ambience from floors below. But superstition has never been your friend, and you certainly are not afraid.

No, fear is the furthest thing from your mind as you step past shelves laden in dust and blank spaces, rows of hardback teeth missing from wooden maws, as you process just how quiet it is, quiet as the grave, process the way the bitter chill creeps past the windows and nips at what patches of skin you leave bared, as if it cares little for the insulation's attempts to stop it. It is strange, yes, but fear is not the right word for how you feel about any of it.

You cannot help but wander a little bit, but after enough cycles of staring at dusty shelves and forgotten notes from students who left in a hurry, you come to settle at a table by one of the windows, sequestered behind a few of the shelves. It isn't the wisest choice, perhaps, considering the persistent chill, but it lets you cling to the last vestiges of natural light seeping in through frost-kissed glass, so you settle anyway, leaving your bookbag at your feet as you pull your readings for your mythology course out and lay them on the table, resting your cheek against your palm as you fall into another story about another man bringing himself to brilliant ruin.

It is always ruin in the end with these heroes— it's the commonality that ties them all together, across every myth in every culture. There is the brilliance that comes with triumph, the brilliance of defying fate and molding it to their whims, the glory of seizing the threads divinity spun and forging them into reins to guide themselves forward— and then there is the fall, the small cruelty or misstep or moment of love so deep it becomes blasphemous, and the ruin that comes after. You have read the same story a thousand times, followed the same man in different masks through countless accomplishments, and each time, you have watched him burn. You will always watch him burn, will always watch him go down in fire or watch the world go up in flames around him, and the story is set in stone and you can never change it and you will never have the power to because you are an ant in the eyes of the stars—

“What are you reading?”

The voice that scatters your thoughts startles you far more than it really should.

It's gentle, sweet, the kind of saccharine, singsong-y voice you expect to come pouring out of a princess in an animated fairy tale, sonorous as a bell and light as a feather, and yet the suddenness of it makes you jump, makes you nearly tear the page you did not realize you were gripping so tightly apart. You swivel around, craning your neck back to get a look at whoever thought it would be funny to startle you, mouth open to give them a piece of your mind—

And you come face to face with a ghost.

She is nothing like the ghosts they speak of in storybooks and plays, those translucent specters all in tatters and chains; no, this strange woman is eerily opaque, too tangible to be a real ghost, and yet, she is phantasmal all the same. She is a shadow all in blinding white, a silhouette carved from starlight, her skin and eyes and delicate waves of hair devoid of any kind of pigment, the lines of her body barely distinguishable. A serene smile sits comfortably on her face, eyelids low and heavy, her head tilted in a show of what might be curiosity. It's strange to see, all of these painfully human nuances on such an ethereal figure, a paradox spun into the frame of something that might have once been a person. Merely

looking at her is enough to steal the breath from your lungs, to kill the words you would have spoken before they can step off of your tongue.

To her credit, her smile does not fracture, no matter how long the silence between you stretches. She merely keeps her hands folded politely behind her back, her colorless face placid as she waits for an answer.

A *textbook* is the answer you manage after too many moments slip by. It is a pitiful answer, indistinct and imprecise, nothing like the sort you would ordinarily give, but this woman's visage has stolen the words from your lips and the oxygen from your lungs, and it takes every ounce of focus you possess to steal them back.

"A... textbook? May I ask what about?"

Curiosity— honest, sincere curiosity— flashes in the blankness of her eyes, pale lashes fluttering as she perches on the edge of the table, her gaze never once wandering from you.. You hesitate for only a moment longer, piecing words together in your mind in some patchwork assembly for an answer, before you tell her— this is a book of stories of a time long gone, the myths of a people who no longer exist but have left their mark on the world all the same. It is a book of heroes and monsters and the gods that watch over them, and it is a book of grand adventures and cruel endings, and you are reading it for a class even though you know each and every myth contained in its pages, even though you've read them countless times and will read them countless more.

You expect her interest to wane with each word you speak, expect her polite smile to tighten at the edges, expect her to disappear as suddenly as she manifested. You do not expect her to lean in, gaze unwavering from where you still sit— you do not expect her to, of all things, want to know more.

"Will you tell me one of them?" she asks, too-white eyes as light as they can be, lips parted just slightly in muted excitement. "Those stories, I mean? I don't believe I've heard anything quite like them."

And so you do.

You tell her of a man who was unjustly imprisoned in a tower

with his father, one that overlooked the ocean— both yearned for freedom so deeply that they defied gravity, crafting wings from borrowed feathers and beeswax and taking to the skies to make their escape. The father, the craftsman, old and wise and well-versed in the folly of man, knew to stay alert and awake as they flew, knew not to brush the sea or be tempted by the warmth of the sun as he flew beneath, but his son was not so wise. No, his son fell in love with the sun he'd been denied for so long, swept up by its gentle arms, and he flew up to greet it, to know the kiss of molten gold, to know the love of the light that brought the day.

“How lovely,” the woman says.

You can hardly hold back your grimace as you explain that the son's ascent brought him closer to light and warmth, and that was what melted the wax holding his wings together, unraveling the very thing that would bring him to safety. He loved, yes, and he loved fiercely, but that love was what undid him in the end. That love was what brought him to ruin.

“Oh,” she whispers, her voice softer, some illegible feeling touching the edges of her expression, settling into those moon-pale features. “I see.”

Silence falls over you both like a discarded blanket, though it brings no comfort with it. The woman does not budge from where she perches on the edge of the table, her legs swinging back and forth in too-quick motions, fingertips silently drumming against the wooden tabletop as you shift in your seat. You do not speak, and neither does she, and you are starting to realize that if you want this to go anywhere you may have to brave this untraversable land and lead the conversation yourself, though words are not your strong suit and they never have been, and you hardly know where to begin.

The best you can do is ask her her name.

“I do not have a name,” she says after a moment of thought. “Not one that I remember, at least. But I do know that I was... once a god.”

You are not sure what you expected to find when you came to the fifth floor of the Selkirk Library, chasing after signs of a ghost

you did not believe in. Above all, you expected nothing— at most, you expected what that girl had whispered of, traces of a thief, someone and something mortal and tangible and present in this world and this moment. You did not expect to find divinity. You did not expect... this.

And yet, for once, your expectations do not matter. They do not match up with reality, and you cannot change this; you can only embrace the truth before you, no matter how unbelievable it is.

So you tell her your name, and you ask her what exactly she is or was the god of, and she smiles again and this one is different, somehow, but you cannot place how or why it is, only that it is.

“That’s a lovely name,” she says. “As for what I am... I do not know anymore. I do not remember.”

That, too, is strange— how could she be aware of her own divinity and yet not her domain? It’s hardly different from knowing you’re a manager at a company and not knowing which department you oversee: strange, improbable, and illogical.

She must notice your skepticism, though, because that smile grows sheepish, a forced, halfhearted laugh falling from her lips as she continues to speak.

“Well... I suppose we both could say that I am the Goddess of Nothing, if that pleases you,” she says. “And if it is not too much trouble, I would like for you to visit me again.”

—

You fall into a pattern.

You visit the Goddess of Nothing twice a week. It is cyclical; every Tuesday and Thursday, after your last class has wrapped up, you march five minutes across campus to Selkirk Library and make your way up to the fifth floor, where you wait by the window until that woman all in white appears out of thin air and perches on the edge of the table, and after a few words of greeting, she will ask you to tell her a story.

You tell her of Adonis, of Hyacinthus, of Achilles, of every mortal contained within the pages of your book, of every crime of

love and tragedy burned into the records of myth. She wears her emotions plainly on her eerily blank face— the lack of color does little to hide her sorrow for these men who likely never existed, the drop of her eyelids and the tightness of her lips telling a story all their own. You are familiar with how these stories end, with the crash that follows glory, with ruin, but you become achingly aware of the fact that she is not, that no matter how many stories you lay at her feet, no matter how persistent the pattern becomes, she will always continue hoping that the next sun-touched hero you build before her eyes will not come crashing down.

You don't know how to tell her that you do not know any other kind of ending.

The pattern breaks the day you tell her the story of a man who committed a great crime— he stole flame from the hands of gods and brought it down to earth, placed it into the palms of mortal men after it was stolen from them. Inevitably, he was sentenced to eternal punishment— to wake each morning to the agony of an eagle's beak cleaving through his skin, made to watch it tear his liver from his body and feast on the viscera, bleeding out over the rocks in undying stillness as his body sews itself back together, as his organs bloom back into place like wildflowers in springtime, only for the first rays of morning light to bring the eagle forth all over again, the cycle neverending. It is eternal, his greatest agony found in immortality, in a body that will not allow him the respite of death.

“All for the crime of theft?” the Goddess asks slowly, thoughtfully, her brow furrowed.

For theft and for love, you tell her, because it is true, because love is the greatest sin of all in the eyes of these old myths. It is what led Orpheus to look back, led Achilles to the rage that made him vulnerable to death, led Icarus to his feather-bound downfall in the unforgiving sea. It is the undoing of mortal men, a palatably-packaged death sentence, and you have read of it more times than you care to. Love and death go hand in wizened hand.

The Goddess purses her lips.

“Love is a sad thing to consider a crime.”

But it is true. You do not write these myths, you merely relay them to her, and this is the thread that ties them all together, the thread that places a bard like Orpheus on the same level ground as a divinely-touched hero like Achilles.

“Just because something is punished does not make it wrong,” she says, her voice a little firmer than usual. “Love is a wonderful thing. Is love for life not what rouses mortals from their beds in the morning? Is love not the very foundation of joy? How could it ever be wrong, if it is the very essence of human happiness?”

The Goddess folds her arms, then, her chin perked up in indignation, suddenly more the image of a petulant child than a spectral god, and it takes all your willpower to be respectful and hold back a laugh. You do not find her words amusing—no, if anything, they are... optimistic in a way you do not often consider—, but you certainly find her demeanor amusing. But the tension in the air feels thick, and you know better than to deliberately offend the only person who gives you the time of day, and so you say nothing. Not immediately.

You let a moment pass between you before you speak again, though you speak no more of love and tragedy—no, this time you turn the conversation toward her. For the first time in the several weeks you have known each other, you think to ask her why she is so drawn to your stories and myths, why she insists on hearing them every time you meet, and that makes her indignation crumble into something softer.

“...To tell you the truth, a part of it is mere... curiosity,” she admits almost sheepishly. “The other part is... a bit more selfish. You see, when I first came upon this library, I... found that coming into contact with certain books would very briefly restore old memories of mine, or even... bring color back to my skin. And yet, I... have not been able to hold onto many of those memories for very long. I know that I was a god, and that I am now what remains of one, but beyond that, I... well, I could not help but wonder if... some of your stories might bring me some insights about who I might have been, once.”

As if to demonstrate, she turns her attention to one of the books

left on the corner of the table where you both meet, brushing her fingertips across its spine— for a brief moment and a moment only, you can see color flood into her spectral fingers, shadows springing to life, nestling in the creases of her skin as her eyes sparkle. And yet, as quickly as it appears, it fades away, taking her smile with it.

You cannot resist the temptation to ask her if any of your stories have done this for her, to which she merely laughs, the sound soft and light as the rest of her.

“Oh, well, not any memories,” she says. “But they have certainly given me insights.”

You elect not to ask her to elaborate on that one— instead, you catch a glimpse of the time peering up at you from the screen of your phone, signaling that the sun isn’t too far off from setting and that you should probably start heading back to your dorm, and you start to gather your materials and texts and shove them into your bag as you always do, slinging it over your shoulder as you rise to your feet.

“Wait,” she calls.

You turn to look at her, drinking in the sight of wide milk-white eyes, at pale lips parted around unspoken words, at hesitation etched into every indiscernible crease of a face you cannot properly see. A tempest rages in her mind, a storm brewing behind her eyes, and you do not know why or what might be causing it, but you know better than to ask.

“...keep visiting me here. Please.”

It’s a silly request, really— it isn’t as if you ever planned to change anything about this routine that you’ve shaped, isn’t as if you have any reason to want to stop visiting her up here— but you nod anyway.

It’s worth it just to see the smile that lights her face up like a star.

—

As the sunsets start to come later, you stay at the library later into the evening.

Soon it becomes difficult to find the willpower to leave, and you become all-too-aware of the fact that you might be making a mistake.



The Goddess of Nothing's presence waxes and wanes like the moon she resembles.

There are days when she is so close to being alive and alight and sun-touched gold that it's like she's merely a human woman keeping you company instead of the ghost of a dead god, days when her fingertips brush over more old books and the faintest traces of color briefly splash across her skin, across her hair, and you can feel this distant hope kindle somewhere within you, this hope that you can drag answers to her like a cat drags rats to its owner, as if you and you alone are capable of seizing the scattered memories and knowledge of something divine and stitching them back together with your scarred human hands.

And then there are days when not even shadows touch her skin, when she is so moon-white and devoid of color that she resembles a walking beam of light, when she is silent and pensive and says nothing through the stories you tell her even though you can tell she has things she wants to say, and it is on those days when you feel this strange desperation to hear her voice, this strange desperation to go searching for traces of a past she does not know in the hopes that it can buy her another day, in the hopes that you can bring her another story.

As leaves bud and blossom on the barren winter trees, as a gentle warmth seeps into the once-bitter coldness of the air, the moon-white days outnumber the gold.

You know you will lose her, and you know it will be soon.



You know this will be the last visit before you make it all the way up the stairs.

You cannot explain why or how you know, only that you do, only that dread throttles your heart as it beats in your chest, your breath short through the weight of trepidation by the time you

make it to the fifth floor. You cannot remember the last time you truly dreaded anything. You have never struggled with sleep before, and yet the dread of this and the desperation it ushered in with it has refused to let you sleep, every waking moment you're given dedicated to research on lost gods, on a name that might belong to the Goddess of Nothing. Deadlines and exams and all the typical fixtures of university have hardly ever fazed you, hardly ever mined down past your ribs to the core of a heart you didn't know still beat as it does, but the knowledge of an impending goodbye sets your circulatory system into overdrive.

She is already waiting, for once, perched on the tabletop as she always is, as if she has never heard of a chair before or simply does not care to learn, though she does not look at you immediately— she stares out the window, looking at some indiscernible thing outside, her legs gently swaying back and forth. It is only when you take a few steps closer that she turns to face you, a mirthful twinkle glistening in her eyes as she looks you up and down, as if you are the greatest sight she could ever ask to see.

“Hello,” she greets, her voice as wistful as her smile, a smile that only widens as you greet her back, even if that soft sadness never truly fades. “It is good to see you, as always.”

You nod and slide into the chair you've claimed as yours twice a week every week for the past four months, and as she turns to look out the window, you look with her. You do not know what has enraptured her so, cannot tell if it is the tiny forms of people walking below or the remnants of flowers clinging to the branches of the trees, and you do not ask, either. You merely let silence settle between you and her and watch the world beyond this place you both have carved out for yourselves, and you savor this moment, this period of time where you have nothing to tell her of the follies of men and gods and she has nothing to say in turn, and for a moment you can pretend you are two ordinary people watching the world go by in an ordinary corner of Selkirk Library.

All good things must come to an end, though, and you are the one to break the silence. You are the one to turn and speak and whisper a broken apology for not managing to find anything that could remind her of who she used to be, a name or a legacy or a

domain she once watched over, and you have never sounded so weak in all your life.

And even so, she smiles and shakes her head.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she says, and she says it so earnestly that you know this is no mere platitude, no falsehood she’s spun to spare you the guilt. “I have been told stories I never could have known and been granted company I never could have kept. More than anything, I am happy.”

And *that* is what confuses you— the fact that she can smile in the face of her own erasure, smile knowing that there is no record of her, that not even she can remember herself, and you do not hesitate to say as much, because how can she be happy knowing that this is the end, that there is no one to remember her?

“That is a silly question,” she giggles, sonorous as a bell and light as a feather, an echo of a time that feels like yesterday and a year ago all at once. “I have you to remember me, and that is all I need.”

You falter, then, lips parted around an unspoken word, but she does not stop talking.

“One person is enough to make someone else immortal,” she says softly. “Think of your Icarus— his father was the only person to witness his demise, and yet, the story has lasted all the way to now. He must have told others, and now, neither of their memories will ever die. They will live forever.”

The Goddess of Nothing offers one more smile before turning to face the window once more, her moon-white hand settling against the table, closer and closer to yours.

“Look at the trees with me, now; aren’t the flowers lovely?”

There are a thousand things you could say, a thousand rebuttals you could conjure up to keep the conversation going, a thousand stories you could tell to keep this moment alive forever. But instead, you nod and move your hand to settle on top of hers, your fingers intertwining, and you turn to face the rain-brushed window and watch the petals fall.

You watch until the hand in yours grows cold, and you are left

holding onto nothing.

Judges' Biographies

Heather M. Hoover—Drama

Heather M. Hoover holds a doctorate in English from the University of Tennessee and teaches 20th Century American Literature and Humanities at Milligan College in East Tennessee. She holds the George and Janet Arnold Endowed Chair of the Humanities and directs the Master of Arts in Humanities program, as well as the undergraduate composition program. She lives in Johnson City, TN, with her family.

Darius Stewart—Nonfiction

Darius is the author of *Intimacies in Borrowed Light* (East-Over Press 2022) and *Be Not Afraid of My Body: A Lyrical Memoir* (Belt Publishing 2024). His poetry and creative nonfiction essays appear or are forthcoming in *Arkansas International*, *Brink*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Callaloo*, *Cimarron Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Gargoyle*, *Meridian*, *The Potomac Review*, *Salamander*, *storySouth*, *Verse Daily* and others. Darius received an MFA in poetry from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin (2007) and an MFA from the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa (2020). In 2021, the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame honored him with the inaugural Emerging Writer Award. He is currently a Lulu “Merle” Johnson Doctoral Fellow in English at the University of Iowa.

Melissa Range—Poetry

Melissa Range was born and raised in East Tennessee. She received a BA from the University of Tennessee–Knoxville in 1995, an MFA from Old Dominion University in 1998, and an MTS from Emory University in 2005.

Range is the author of *Scriptorium* (Beacon Press, 2016), selected for the National Poetry Series by Tracy K. Smith, and *Horse and Rider* (Texas Tech University Press, 2010). She has received awards and fellowships from the American Antiquarian Society, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rona Jaffe Foundation, among others.

Julia Watts—Fiction

A lifelong Appalachian, Julia Watts is the author of fourteen novels for young adults and adults, the most recent of which is *Lovesick Blossoms*, available from Three Rooms Press and Penguin Random House Audio. She lives in Knoxville with her family and many pets.

