

Contrast

2020-2021 Double Edition

Contrast
Literary
Magazine

2020-2021

Contrast Literary Magazine

Spring
2021

Editor's Note 2021

Readers,

Getting the opportunity to lead *Contrast* after the simultaneous graduation of both former co-editors (congrats, Marya and Nate!) was a daunting honor that I have treasured every moment of, and one such memory stands out in my mind:

While the editorial board met to decide which pieces to include in *Contrast* 2021, one member exclaimed with relief, "whew! We have writing in the writing magazine." Up to the point that submissions closed, I earnestly worried to myself that we might not: a combination of a continuous viral pandemic, online classes, and starting the club back up a semester later than usual presented challenges to engagement. Less foot traffic to advertise via flyers, fewer people attending the club fair, a freshman class that I've really only met online, and an exhausted planet would of course reduce submissions substantially—*except it didn't*, not at all. Thank you!! Thank you everyone for submitting, for creating stories and sharing them, and for helping to keep a McDaniel tradition alive through an era of global change. Thank you Danielle and Dr. Dobson for making this possible, and thank you to members of the ed board for dedicating hours of your time to curate this edition.

This is a double edition, meaning that *Contrast* 2020 can be found in the second half of this volume. Because the Spring 2020 semester was interrupted to keep students, faculty, and the community safe, last year's edition never got to be printed; to honor the vision of Marya, Nathan, and last year's members, we have left the formatting of *Contrast* 2020 untouched. Any formatting inconsistencies between the two editions reflect the preferences of the individual editors...to compare and contrast between them, one could say.

Our primary goal this year was to document and preserve McDaniel artists' responses to an unusual time, to collect pieces that reflect on conflicting emotions and experiences, and most of all to celebrate creativity. Thank you for trusting us with this responsibility, please enjoy the menagerie of art to follow.

—Becca Halaney

Editor's Note 2021

"You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you."
—Ray Bradbury

"To survive, you must tell stories."
—Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before*

Dear Readers,

I first wanted to take a moment to thank everyone who contributed to this magazine, from our advisor, Dr. Kate Dobson, to everyone who submitted pieces, to our wonderful editorial board, and to all of the readers like you. I also wanted to give a special shoutout to my co-editor-in-chief, Becca Halaney, for taking on the major responsibility of formatting the magazine, an especially difficult feat during the time of limited access to the library and to technical support.

When we took on our roles and decided to revive *Contrast* this spring, Becca and I weren't exactly sure what to expect. But I am so proud of this magazine. We received wonderful and thoughtful submissions, some of which blew me away with their artistry. Furthermore, with this double edition, we are happy to be able to recognize the hard work that went into the 2020 edition of the magazine and put that hard work to print. Because it is a collective edition, this magazine can also serve as an archive of this historic time and how this past year has changed us.

I know that, for some people, the act of creation during the pandemic was very cathartic, a powerful tool of reflection and rejuvenation. But for some, myself included, finding the space and the energy to create was really challenging, the ability to find the motivation to put our experiences to word and to images was borderline impossible. My hope is that, no matter which type of person you are, when you flip through the pages of this magazine, you will find a piece that resonates with you, and that, in reading the whole magazine, you can take some time to reflect on and process this year. This pandemic has taken a lot from us, but nothing can ever steal the connective power of art.

—Danielle Wendt

Contrast Literary Magazine

**McDaniel College
2021**

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1st Place Poetry

At a Catholic Youth Retreat in Steubenville, Ohio: July 14, 2018

Grace Maglietta

I think I've spent half my life on my knees,
behind a purple curtain in my uniform,
cherry-picking sins to beg forgiveness for.

It did not matter that I was seven when it started,
too young to taste the deception on my tongue.
I know now they wanted us agape and vulnerable.

Each Sunday since,
He bled into my mouth,
and I swallowed without question.

Now I find myself miles from home,
kneeling in the dark, being force-fed devotion,
a maverick in a sea of compulsory disciples.

500 teenage bodies crash and sway around me,
ceremonial music swelling with the tide.
A hymn falls mindlessly from my lips.

Wrapped in rosaries, my best friend crumples beside me,
her cheeks rosy and tear-streaked,
the image of the Virgin weeping.

Meanwhile I am choking on incense,
its sickly sweetness clouding my senses,
and spitting out sacramental wine.

God, grant me penance for leaving my tears at the door tonight.
I'd have sold my soul for sainthood six months prior,
but all this adoration has run me dry.

And Lord, forgive me
for ever taking a bite of your sacred heart.
I am too full of guilt to swallow another spoonful.

Aquatic
Joy Tarr



Smol boy
Molly Sherman



Shells

Eamonn Fay

Anybody who knows me well knows that I love cicadas.

I've known of them since I was very, very young. I think I was four when they emerged in droves. I liked to observe them, though preferably at a distance. Even today I'm still a tad cautious in handling them. The extent of my contact usually consisted of me quickly scooping some into a little, translucent pail my parents had bought for me. My brothers were particularly cruel to them, doing terrible things like tearing their poor little legs and wings off. I remember seeing one clumsily stumbling about the table in the backyard among the lighters and cigarette butts. The pretty little veined wings were plucked right off its back, leaving it looking more like a weird little, red-eyed beetle than a fly.

But that summer ended, and the cicadas ended along with it. They would be back, my parents told me, in a very long time. The funny thing is that even at the time of writing, I'm still waiting for them. In a mere matter of months, a mostly unanimous nightmare for the general public will be a field day for me.

Though it isn't as though I haven't seen one for over a decade. While those are the most well-known of the bunch, I found over the years that plenty of different kinds of Cicadas exist all over the world and have for millions of years. Those I've seen most are referred to as "dog-day" cicadas. Those are the more common and familiar kind that come out every year and fill the muggy, late-summer air with ceaseless chatter that puts a distinctive sound to the season. During that time, I often find myself sitting outside in the heat while they sing their afternoon song, quietly watching to see if I can spot one darting out of the trees.

That's the funny thing about cicadas. They're seldom seen, but always heard. I've heard it joked that in ancient times, people just assumed trees got particularly screammy in the summer for whatever reason.

However, this is not the only telltale sign that there are cicadas

about. Their young, nymphal stage leaves two things that betray their arrival: holes and shells. To those who come from places unaccustomed to cicadas (or people who have been living among them under rocks), they don't just pop up with those wings ready to go. They first have a bit of a gestation period. Their eggs are laid in the trees, where they hatch and dive to the ground, shimmying to the safety of the dirt below. Once they're deep enough, they sit. And wait. And depending on the species, this can take anywhere from one to nearly twenty years. Once they're ready, they crawl out of the Earth, leaving holes in their wake. Then, once they climb to a point they deem safe enough, their transformation takes place.

I've only seen this occur a few times. It's truly incredible. For hours, they sit perfectly still. Or, at least, it looks that way from a distance. If you look closer, you'll see their tiny contractions, small and desperate pushes to break free of their old, obsolete skin. A crack forms right down the middle, and the insect's discolored, damp head eventually protrudes outward. Its legs eventually follow, and then the rest of its body. Their wrinkled wings begin to hang down as they cling to the physical embodiment of their youth. Then, once they've dried, they fly away to sing to the Earth. Or, at least, that's how it's supposed to go.

For some of them, their fates are crueler, even more so than the torture tactics my brothers would pull on them. Sometimes, they'll take too long to escape their shells, and dry up inside them. I remember seeing one last summer. It appeared to be a dead nymph, but the crack in the middle revealed a dried back. It had dried up and was now trapped, frozen in time. It had no choice but to give up and wait to be eaten by ants and birds or cooked in the harsh sun. Looking closer I saw that it was still trying to pull itself out and twitched whenever it was touched.

Even sadder are the ones that escape their shells but have their wings dry wrong. This leaves them incapable of flight, perhaps their only real defense aside from screaming and thrashing about to try and scare predators off. These are only slightly less helpless. They can move, sure, but not well enough to escape anything that might want to eat it. The life of a cicada is unexpectedly cutthroat. Imagine if you were expected to transition from childhood to

adulthood with the haste of a New Yorker's commute. And if you make *any* mistakes, you're just stuck where you are or may as well be, never able to come into your own and find the love you're looking for.

As luck would have it, something strange occurred around my seventeenth birthday. My mom came home with something peculiar. She handed me a shell that was too small and too early to belong to a dog-day cicada. At first, I thought maybe it was one of the thirteen-year broods. But some Google sleuthing seemed to indicate that no such brood existed, not in my area. That shell was left by a rogue cicada known as a straggler, one of hundreds more that appeared as the month went on. They little things flooded the streets, and I couldn't have been happier about it. For the first time in over a decade, I gently plucked them off the trees with delight to see what kind they were and what kind of noise they made. I helped the nymphs to the trees. I did my best not to step on any. I watched curiously as they slowly pulled themselves out of their husks. I looked at the trees and bushes, which were dotted with little shells, some with the still-pale cicadas drying off on the backs. And—a personal achievement of mine—I finally found an elusive, white-eyed cicada.

Thankfully, unlike cicadas, the shells that we have as people are only metaphorical. We constantly change. With each new experience and circumstance, we move forward and slough off the old skin of who we used to be. However, there's a scary sort of impermanence with that. Will you emerge better than the shell you're leaving behind? Will you be able to fly and sing? Or will you end up stuck and unable to grow?

Of the Equinox

Harrison Booth

We read "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" in
Seventh grade English, long before we had the courage to
Do much more than trace our fingertips below its
rippling surface. I say
Courage, but what I really mean
is Knowledge—a commodity that we,
at that age, are notorious
For lacking.
Something about Yeats, though, stuck with me—

A quiet, simple mastery that ignorance finds hard to
Inhibit.

The silver apples of the moon, the golden apples
of the sun...

I found myself whispering into the trembling air this first night of
Spring, walking nowhere down the yellow lines of a two-lane
Country road through a calm, clouded dusk.

I

Looked about as if someone might be watching, but there was
Only me—only me, and the last half of the
Last stanza of the only poem I could
Remember from seventh grade
English.

Knowledge is something I've filled my pockets with over the years,
Though wisdom will evade me for a good many
More, I suppose. I'm not expecting to ever
Really understand his words as he seemed to,
Especially not now; my
Knowledge of the subject matter has felt, all at once,
To be far too
much for my age and far too little for my effort. I linger on
hypotheticals—
Daydreams, really, that want to be more.
But who am I to write of love? I often wonder if I've even come
Close—

But if not, where have I been anyhow?
I've spent months in a cycle of trial and error,
With the former feeling inevitably like the latter. I'm
Supposed to feel like this will reward me later, someday, when
All is said and done, when I can exhale the golden air and
Walk, among....
Walk
Among the dappled grass. Till time
And times are

done.

As the road stretched its velvet blue carpet just
A few steps too far away from
Home, I turned in
The middle of the road and looked back to
Where I had already stepped, where I had
Yet to retrace. Beautiful, those lines were. I knew them,
I knew them deep—I am hardly old with
Wandering, but I have seen my share of hollow
Lands and hilly lands, and I have
reached out my hand in all of them. Now I can just
Sigh in a kind of hopeless
Euphoria,
Murmuring those last few lines of those
Last few stanzas, half in love with
Someone who,
For all I know,
Has never even been
born.

The Interview

Sarah Tedla

"Liz," he said as the eyes danced and skidded over the question
"So, what qualifies you for this job?"

My tongue cocked for a strike to my filtered confession

As I grasped, "Well... I am a great multi-tasker" in my voice of
nonaggression.

Chris told me that there was a job opening here, and I agreed to
this in my bliss

"Liz," he said as the eyes danced and skidded over the question

Compression of my thought choked up into my body as I hid my
serene expression

The ship sank, bubbled, and drowned into the indigo abyss

Again, my tongue cocked for a strike to my filtered confession

As the voiceless larynx decided to come play as a demand of
suggestion

As the dialogue of smoking has come to this

"Liz," he said as the eyes danced and skidded over the question

I weaponized my tongue to form, "I am good at organization" as if
it was one of my prized
possessions

His eyes hunted for something as he looked at me for something
amiss

My tongue cocked for a strike to my filtered confession

My reflection on the window of my transgression

"Liz," he said, as I danced and skidded over the question

My tongue cocked for a strike to my filtered confession

1st Place Art

***Paint Me Black
Angels***

Imani Jackson



No Sis

Celia Sterrn

After much impatient fretting and more than two trips to the physician to prove her effeminate mechanisms were in no poor order, my sister obtained her menarche and my mother had me move from our shared room to the shed in the garden. Oh, I'm not some fairytale wretch, Donkeyskin of that boy from the Juniper Tree, my mother liked me just fine. We were good friends, for my mother and I had shared lodgings before the scarlet excretion of my sister where she read me the doctrines of discontinued religions while withholding the crucial detail that Egypt and sundry were real places—when I discovered Greece on the map it was like seeing a signpost for Tir na nOg. During the pregnancy, I slept in her bed with the moon, or a moon which had just been told a dirty joke, a great pink beach ball with my sister swimming inside (already a better swimmer than I who had been so inert in the womb my mother feared I'd be a carcass on delivery). Because I had shared a room with my sister since she was a flake of humanity and because my mother kept me shackled to her despite my being frantic for separation (the darkness, the suffocation on the allotted precipice of bed), it was obscenely hypocritical for her to cleave us apart.

And while my sister championed the decampment, lovely in her efforts to aid the transport of my chest of drawers, my writing desk, to the shed, I crawled chin deep in the muck of self-pity and crowned myself with the stalwart virtues of suffragettes and Gandhi by refusing to eat supper until I got my way, which worked out less well for me than my esteemed compatriots.

The shed had no electric lights and little space. The penitential cot my mother bought for me, all stabbing iron barbs and incessant squeaking—my mother that is, not the cot—and the susurrations of the sea like a hiss of gossip penetrating the thin tin walls throughout the night arranged an artificial insomnia. For several months I did not sleep in the shed. I was not banished from the house, the shed was merely for sleep, and eating, reading, and chatting were all acceptable in the home, so I, after supper which I resumed consuming, entered my sister's room and stayed alert

into the wee hours, so called not for their numerical minuteness but because my mother often rose to piss at the stroke of three. By then my sister and I had shut off the light—me on the floor under the Turkey rug—and listened while the woman who gave us life slumped through the halls to the crapper and let her urine run clicking into the commode.

For several months I clung to the underside of a chariot as the fettered black horse in front trotted companionly but dumbly on, only for the slightest gaffe, a light left on for too long, to send the mare into a hurricane of speed which reduced me to grated cheese. Darkness flooded into the beautiful secret. Even into winter my mother would observe me as I crouched through the evening and into the shed where I would light the candles I spent all my pocket money on and try to complete the rest of my homework.

She did allow my good friend Eddie to have extended visits which she had never done before and just the same my sister's chum Kitty was welcomed for overnight carousal. Carousal indeed, carnival was more like it. For while Eddie and I were as subtle as polecats in our interlocation, lights blown out by ten, spouts of laughter issued from my sister's room, silhouettes of frivolous games passed by the window, and a general lack of respect for familial sleep cycles were her *modus operandi*.

Eddie had met me in school where we studied archeology together—Carter had split open old Tut's tomb the same year I had been split from my own (gold arms reaching for a sun a thousand years more ancient; I never enjoyed being inside my mother) and I rather identified myself with both of them; at the beach with my spade and pail I pantomimed cutting open the soil of Luxor to find Nefrititi's body, her sarcophagus veil hammered with the same delicate features of her German bust; limping on the beach at an age Tut never got to limp through.

But Eddie, with his oft persecuted mop of red hair, his gaze forked like the tongue of a wyrm, was a living companion. He picked up things in my shed and put them where they didn't belong; preferring the floor to the cot, I used the cot as a shelf and when Eddie spent nights I was a good host, permitting him the bed as I

prostrated myself along the dust which he found distasteful and would force me to lie on the inch-thick mattress, forced me supine and lying on top of me like I was the bed. I was Cot; I was caught. I think this was clever of him if he intended it but Eddie never let on what went to plan and what went tear-shaped. I was cot, he was thoughts.

Eddie was good to me even through the war, when he was on the mainland eviscerating the Hun and I was in Podunk, Crete watching the resistance scramble around while convalescing from a puncture. I got my blighty snag fair and square, a sugarloaf bullet through my thigh, a sodden rag clenched in my molars, a spider incised on my skin.

Greece was exactly what you'd expect, by the way, a *mise-en-scène* of Godward and Alma-Tadema. Caveat: the Victorian grecophiles did not predict the occupation and therefore did not decorate their backdrops with those halved spiders of fascism; Arcane would have cringed at such embroidery. Desultory Nazis would march around on the beach like little ellipses seeking a culmination, some phrase of denouement, as they dismantled the seas and the trees of their fruit and burned villages and complained about the heat.

But Eddie was as attentive as a sniper. He sent me crowded French letters without insisting I return the favor which I did but with the admonition of attached stories, something for the weekends on leave. One I recount in brief.

Through no fault of my own I had become acquainted with the concubine of an officer of no small rank. A miserable thing like a wet cat or smashed up cake (the lady not the officer, though he was no Arrow collar man himself). Her face was etched with rashes of such intensity she appeared as an animate fairy mushroom, each blink of a shifting agony that ruffled up her face in measures regular as rowing. Additionally her belly was plagued by spasms, a side-effect, perhaps, of the foreign atmosphere or a delayed recognition of muttering horrors.

There was a camomile solution I knew of that could mend her woes and when we were discovered by her paramour upon the bed—her dress up, her legs up—he withdrew his parabellum

apparatus and uttered two expletives with it in his hand. He ruined a good pair of my trousers and got his Semele Mars-red between the legs. Her countenance was more than a little mortified. There was no way I could leave the room without returning the favour. I never heard of the two of them again.

Eddie was much amused by this story. He longed for a lull in his own deployment where he could match me with picayune tales of Belgium though he was never short of time to toss off a letter to me about the drudgery of ferreting uncommunicative bodies from one side of the city to the other, passively thankless for his expenditure.

In our younger years we decided we had to be Damon and Pythias, intentionally bungling them into Demon and Pitiless, or sometimes Pithiest, when we changed who was more trustworthy. We argued over which goddess my sister was. Not adversarially, together we were Buridan's ass between Nyx and Thetis. My mother wasn't Greek in our game but she remained divine: a Sigyn, with an inadequate bowl. Kitty didn't matter at that point. Think of a fertility goddess, think of that grotesque Rubenesque Willendorf tart but with colorless hair.

Who's Kitty? Sounds like a condescending lover or a parent trying to teach their child its name. Who's Kitty? Is you? Is it you my little dumpling, my little cabbage, my little sapling, sapping my energy with your sappy voice? Sappe voce.

Kitty was my sister's good friend—mine and Eddie's too when we got around to it. Big-breasted to the point of incomprehensibility, she made my sister look cratered.

Kitty was utterly udderly. Her breasts were stacks of peach and pearl flesh that protruded from her dresses like Pinocchio's nose under a veil. Sugarloaf torpedos. Men of all ages prayed to the doubled Golgothas. Kilometers of fabrics were enlisted to defeat the scope of them; she had to sew her own brasseries, let out her swimsuits; one could have sworn Mallory and Irvine had gotten lost trying to summit those eminences blanches. It seemed medically, as well as mathematically, impossible for her to possess what she did. Eddie was a colourful conversationalist though not always a kind one.

She was caned at school once for idleness (I didn't know girls were beaten at school but la-di-dah) and lay on my sister's bed recovering, weeping that she couldn't lay comfortably on her back for the welts on her bottom nor could she lie on her belly for the welts on her exceptionally insulated thorax. My sister gave her a glass of milk to silence her until she was finished disappearing the lotion into her skin.

As for her hips, let's just say that if she were to wear panniers it would be like trying to fill a suitcase with a duplicate suitcase.

Whose Kitty? Please, we have a little lost kitten here, whimpering for a nurse. Won't somebody claim her? She'll grow into a magnificent queen, we hopelessly promise.

I knew her for many years and yet I can't seem to recall her face. This afternoon while I was buying asparagus at the grocer's I may have seen her bearing her maternity, the little snot-factory whickering away in its ribbon-frothy pram, a campfire on its forehead, in front of her, in front of the pears, but I advanced nothing.

I liked to listen to my sister and Kitty tell each other the rumors about Marie Antoinette and the Stuart sisters. So like young girls to giggle over the prospect of princesshood. Their laughter glowed like music.

Kitty especially, she was a neat little girl, was polite to me. She quizzed me on my friendship with Eddie and learnt a great deal more than I would normally expel.

Eddie would let himself become distracted by Kitty when he and I were together. On the beach while we were exuming sandcrabs his attention wandered from our security of sand to the margin of the shore where the sea curtsied around Kitty and my sister. The tide tugged at the rim of Kitty's suit. At first I was relieved, I had been afraid he would suggest a swim, but upon discernment I was incensed. One thing can be said for Judas, he at least gave Jesus a final kiss before betraying him, my deserved kiss was reassigned to Kitty.

That day I walked back home and tracked sand through the house so my mother would yell at me.

My mother did not like Eddie but she permitted our friendship because it ameliorated my position towards my banishment. She didn't not meet Eddie as a little boy and thus could not love him. He was an immature little worm, telling blemished jokes with a grey tongue, while I, even balancing between my fourth and fifth birthdays, was precocious and thoughtful.

His hands were splintered with blonde hair the next time I saw him. My sister was mirthful. Eddie was so funny she told me which wasn't true. His humour was prurient, debacherous. No lady should be forced to listen to him. We went into the shed and induced many loud noises from each other which was a first; Eddie was always very under the breath.

Then the war and xyz and I started to call him Dick Whittington which he laughed at. When Kitty was upset the day after he spent the night in my shed instead of with her I asked her if she would be alright with being an O'Shea. She responded briefly:

"It's alright."

But he liked Kitty. He had written to her same as me. My sister said Kitty had more letters than she knew what to do with and that when she was conscripted to help Kitty read them, she read them wrong. We laughed about that. My mother laughed too, for she was in the room when my sister told the story.

But what did my sister need with me when she had Kitty? I doubted they would be so close if they had never shared their nights. And what did Kitty need with my sister now she had Eddie? Did I need to thank Eddie for giving my sister back to me, for giving me the cold hand like a packet of sewing needles, forgiving him for leaving me in the first place?

I would not let it appear like Eddie's snubs got to me; I let him lug me to the beach and pretended to read peacefully as the ocean quaked and nickered only a few feet from me, as Eddie hefted Kitty into his arms and tore into the water. My sister sat beside me,

drenched, her knees under her chin, her elbow weeping onto my book page, and spoke bitterly.

It made me nervous to refuse him when he asked to use my shed.

While I read alphabetical stories, stories of eyes and ohs, Eddie and Kitty spent moony nights in the shed. Ostensibly their grounds were the repetition of Kitty's letters, of which she was quite poor, so maybe one day she might be able to solicit the meaning of Eddie's war experiences without the hazard of my sister's perfidy.

I was imperceptive. My previous experiences had led me to believe Eddie was to be trusted, and I can only blame my weakness for love and the succor of ignorance. I am Virgil in the basket. I am the exposed baby on the mountain, nosing for milk in the stone bosom of earth.

As Pythias found a brighter Aristotle, I graded into the fond.

For no particular reason, boredom emigration or nostalgic immigration, I travelled back to Greece. Not Crete. Heavens no, lest I wanted a remedial lesson in sparagmos, I jaunted around Athens and Thessaloniki as strips of my skin were lambasted by the sun. Foolishly I expected to stumble upon an active dig and be invited to hitch my cart to the caravan of scholars and scamper along the knots of buried tombs. I went to Egypt and slumped at every mosque. Pyramids were more reassuring than minarets.

When I returned, I spoke of my sojourns at the dinner table (mother's glare, sister's care) and scraped the foreign grains from my scalp like they were nits.

I wept in my bed and my sister came to me and lay with me. I don't think she could help it. She wept into my neck, the tears bubbling against my neck like a byblis and her lamentings reminded me of a Wagnarian starlet. Die Walkure: An order for the slaughter of the warrior goddesses. Die Valkyrie. Me and Eddie, we killed those Germanic princesses well. Heirs and graces alike. Die Valkyrie: a prayer interrupting a battle cry. Die Val-kyrie eleison. Greek liturgy, Greek words occupying ancient German religion. There was the scent of myrrh in the air. The trecaly vapour a

colour, a sin-black swaddling like a blood-stained bandage on an unpluggable thigh. Incense in the manger, the odour, the ardour, the amour of whores and horses. Olympus is just an inconvenience to travel, no gods live there.

My sister deserved someone who would bend a branch of the sky for her to pluck off the moon, that white rose on the far trailing cape of day, that pale stranger in the cemetery of light.

So when my sister found herself in the romantic crosshairs of my former chum, I was not inclined to give my blessing.

Kitty was bereft. There were nauseating scenes of her seizing upon my sister's sleeve and nearly tearing her arm off as my sister tried to enter Eddie's car.

We were allied after that.

Closely? Impossible: she kept trying to talk to me about my sister in terms more familiar than I could muster and in order to hitch our wants together I had to reconfigure our relationship until its only expression was mutual speculation.

The nutrition of her company nudged me out of the shadows. We went for walks in town; we ate together; my mother's opinion of me rose and she allowed us to spend short periods of time in the house without her chaperonage.

The bedrooms in the house belonged to my mother and my sister so we went to my shed. Kitty had a shed at her house, full of tools and rattly-clattery bits of metal and the broken toys of her childhood. I preferred my shed only in that I encountered less of my sister's hair tangling in my socks but even in time I grew to miss that. My familiarity with the beds of my mother and sister may have prevented me from potholing Kitty with any of the requisite violence to which she was accustomed.

I saw her vagina, a tiny ringlet like a boiled shrimp, like a cowering foetus. It was impolite to stare, my mother always told me so I removed my head from underneath her skirt.

As she departed from my shed, she weak-kneedly met with Eddie who was returning my sister. She and Kitty chatted in the gravel pathway as Eddie slipped into my abode. He embraced me and I asked him if he was going to lie on top of me again. He laughed and left.

I did not like being Eddie's enemy but Orestes must turn on Pylades when Pylades abducts Electra.

But he couldn't monopolise my sister for long. Kitty fell ill. While she and my sister were sunbathing, she suddenly stood up and stumbled towards the sea where, at the shoreline, she bent double and vomited. My sister explained to me she had nearly collapsed into the pool. I had been sitting on the roof of Eddie's car, some ways away from the incident. Kitty cried softly in the backseat as we drove her home.

Muttering horrors, stay mum. The bruit from her belly made her a bed-prisoner for some weeks. My sister and I visited her with flowers and read books to her and talked for hours as her mother flitted in and out, plumping the pillow and performing other duties related to her maternal office, but for the most part we three were left alone. Eddie never visited.

Eddie owned a canoe, barely. He stole a neighbour's homemade dinghy for night fishing expeditions. Someone had told him that you get a better catch at night and Eddie had been loath to shake off the superstition even after years of naked hooks. He had invited me to attend on many occasions, always promising he'd do all the rowing, but I had turned him down. He had once coaxed me out on a noontide trip when we were fourteen and the spinning and sloshing of the boat had been too nauseating to stand.

I caught him one day and told him I would like to go fishing.

I didn't go to bed that night. I waited for him to open my door.

We were in the boat. "Dieux, fléchissez son cour! Rendez-moi mon ami, qu'il m'accorde sa grâce, que tout mon sang vous satisfasse, qu'il suffise a votre rigueur," Eddie said.

He repeated himself, goading me to speak with him, knowing I had all his letters by rote. I didn't understand a single word of his letters. I knew the contours, the shapes and order of the words, but their meaning never impressed themselves on my heart.

He wondered if my mother enjoyed having raised me.

On the boat, there was a commotion. I rowed back to shore.

Radioman

Simone Smith

Daddy was the radioman with hands dark and dirty
soaked in poverty like the streets he learned to walk on
His head bopped to the beat of old skool greats
who sang in the glorification of the gang and gun
I saw him smile only once as he let a small verse slip from his
tongue
a note that often went unsung
He was as silent as they come and responded only with his gaze
He was surrounded in sorrow but his demeanor was always
unfazed
When he looked at me i did not know him
he was a stranger with a hollow face
He taught me to come and go without a trace
But daddy was a radioman with a radio-hand
who left his soul in the static

In Regards to Filial Piety

Becca Halaney

"He wants to come to your graduation," she uttered a mutter
from the bricktoast-burnt kitchen, currant-red
over brown and blue eggs sizzling hot steam,
and a trampled "yes" runs skittering from my lips—almost,

but with the aging, beer-bitter memory I stop it screeching
short twenty years too late, the memory of you slurring
for my babe head to *HEY get OUT OF THE WAY*
of your precious pixeled set, of the acrid smog
swirling into the cottonball sky
as you held the crushed Camel behind your back, "don't tell your
mother"

about that, and you blaring your technicolor warcrime
love letter films in the very same
dust-bunnied living room as me (*Buried in the Sand*, really??),
yacking over your new girl
friend that it was okay, the grayscale sadism
and crawling obscenity would scamper over my head,
the buggy-bleach piece of tissue paper you left us for—

never quite what you wanted us to be. I pity her.

I remember you saying to my face, right into my
eyes how expensive my braces would be, how you never laid down
even a tarnished blue penny for any
of it,

you with your shiny, packaged propaganda new family,
leaving me to scrounge through the crumbled rubble
you left in your wake; can't turn blind eyes to the fact
that you slipped me covert crumpled hundreds, drops in the
cracked bucket, to make up

for it, coward. You think I picked to be broken
and ill and queer like you
chose to not to waste your dwindling time on us?

With white lies and unsent invitations, I've written
you out of my life,

and I lose no sleep over having
spit on the grave of your honorific,
~~Father.~~

Sunrise

John McEachern

We, like so many before us,
Set off now
Down dusty, cracking roads
Towards the sharply cut allure
Of the just lit horizon, shooting
Through ice bucket breezes
That trickle over new-born skin.

We race past reddening mesas
And aspects in shadow,
Beneath precarious jewels, set
Late on the velvet, blue sky—
Could the moon fall so soon?
Could revealing light slip past
Eyelids shut tight?

Heat
Swims across our windshields
As we accelerate, the first beams of doubt
Scraping over our shoulders—
Didn't the stars twinkle, wasn't the air
Cooler in the stories? Somewhere, behind us,
We hear the crackle of flames.

We shift gears, wincing, knowing
It is to plunge a knife into our
Own thighs, but letting blood,
Just enough,
To slide back into the Dream
As the car fills with smoke.

.....

But it should not end like this—fleeing
West again from the rising sun.
Let us face the light and judge
What we see clarified

In its grasp. Let us decide
What to do next.

Together, we will take hold of what they claim
We seek to destroy—the brittle,
Cracking pavement—
And fill it in! We will lead,
Walking hand in hand,
Down precarious roads
Towards a future made for all of us,
Born on the cusp of age;
And our chants and songs
Will bounce with love.

We will move quickly,
Filling one pothole at a time,
Until a flat, clear road stretches out
Towards the horizon

and seizing the Dream handed to us,
Forge it a new shape in the fire of daylight.

I am not a peach

Morgan Bliss

I am not a peach
Or an eggplant

I didn't understand the allure of a fruit until I saw them
Fingertips red blood stained, offering a simple bowl
Of peeled pomegranate

I didn't know what romance was until I peeled one myself
The long minutes of work into delicately separating halves, prying
each glimmering seed from it's nook, washing away all the unripe
flesh that held gems in place
Staining countertop and hands

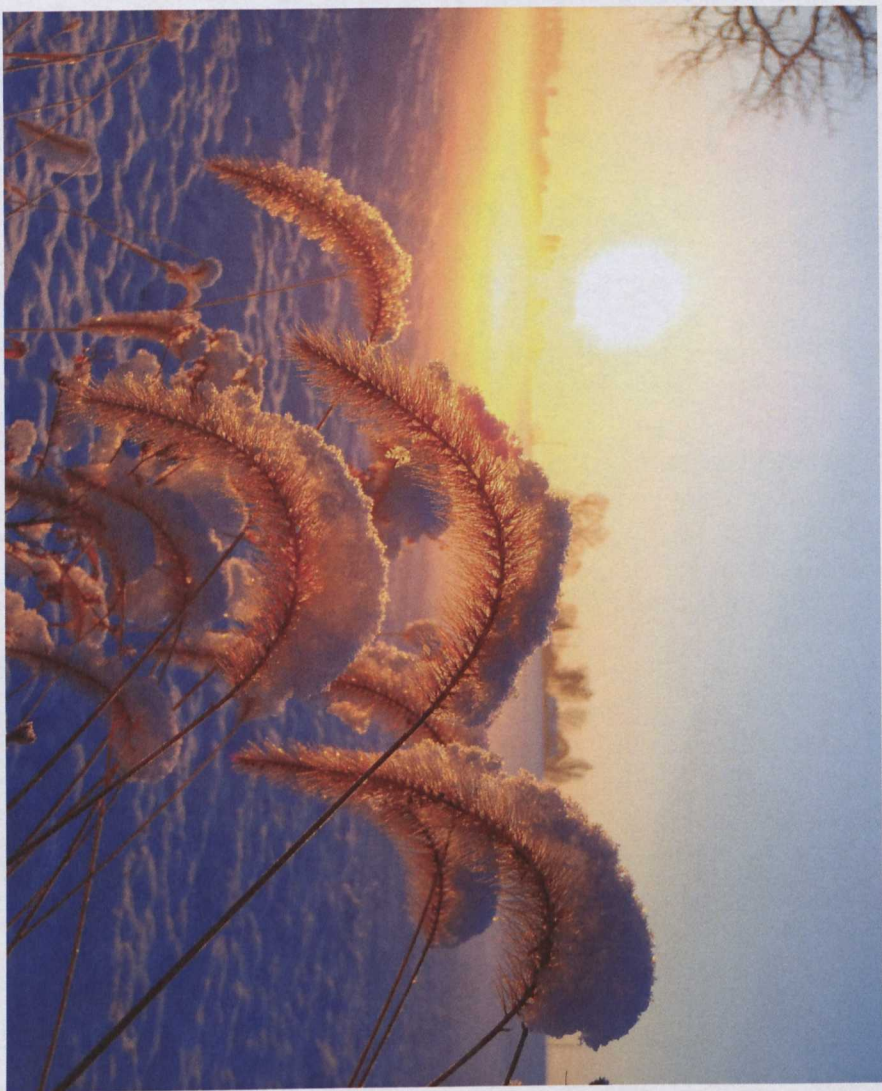
I didn't understand why one might leave behind their stability,
droll as it may be, for a few pieces of fruit
Now I know

The tender sweetness, sticky and tart, so delicately, so gently
offered in calloused hands, a wordless gesture of devotion and
kindness
So simple, so easily given
But full of the bright flush of spring all the same

I didn't understand love until it was offered
Not in a poem or jewels, but the shared moment of two halves of
pomegranate, just between us

Foxtails

Harrison Booth



Farm in Disrepair

Harrison Booth

It is a beautiful place,
If not a sad one—
But these qualities, though both are here,
Are discretely placed,
As in different corners of a room,
Separate and requesting their own
Forms of attention.

It is late summer, in season as well as in
Atmosphere;
Cicadas are sound,
Crickets are the senses.
Hackberry branches, maples that rose from
Invisible cracks in the earth,
Arc between the time-worn structures like
Bridges between mountains,
Ripples between stones.
Weeds take on a ubiquitous beauty, stirred by grasshopper wings
and
The pre-noon breeze,
Sprouting like the sun from beneath the wheels of
Abandoned automobiles.

How these acres must have stirred when their engines still
roared,
When the silo was fat with corn,
When the cows and chickens still packed the
Milk barn, the chicken coop,
Those places whose names remain but whose namesakes
have
Long since died, many harvests
ago.

The smaller forms of life, the ones that showed up
Without invitation,
Prevail now,
Flower flies and cabbage whites and garden spiders catching dew,
Swallows gusting past

As the roofs begin to sag—
Draped over their rotting frames as if hung out to dry,
As if
left out in the sun too long.

Eyes open as weary ones close,
the teeming, life-stained land
slipping from my consciousness
and into the world's.

Mountains on wheels

Eliezer Mercedes

Sexiest poet on sight,
Is it me?
Or is it you?
See,
As a native Spanish speaker,
That is why I love English.
The "sexiest poet on sight"
Has no gender, it might
Be you,
Or it might be me.

Untitled

Celia Sterrn

Hark the footstep on the stair:
A lass delivered by my heart.
With the sun she'll flit and flare,
By moonlight she'll depart.

Body of Christ! observe her trail,
Though her legs be cold and strange,
And by my head may they rest pale
The locks that love arranged.

Reclaiming
Ciera Smith



1st Place Prose

Near to Home and Far from the Zipcode

Maddy Lee

Walking out of the Ximen MRT station, exit six, I waded into a sea of urbanization. Buildings sprouted sky-high, plastered from end to end in flashing digital advertisements: beautiful Korean women with hand creams, traditional Chinese opera companies, restaurants two blocks down the street, American fashion brands, sharply-dressed men with expensive watches, and elaborate paintings for RPG cell phone apps. Buses covered in these same advertisements sped by in all directions. The roads were numerous and overlapping, traffic composed of small, compact cars weaving around one another in chaotic synchronisation. The traffic lights would no sooner flash red than the empty square was filled with pedestrians, dozens of them, crossing through and around one another in the same fashion. Life here was fast, I came to see. The first city I had ever been to, I had never seen what it was to live among millions of people.

I was meeting a friend, a fellow exchange-student and bleach-blonde American. I found him engrossed in a street-show, a man weaving his body in and around metal hoops. He was already flagged by two Canadian exchange students. By the end of the day, we would add three more Americans and a German student. We foreigners often flocked together without meaning to. When I first arrived, I was startled to find what an anomaly I had become. A woman of modest height, no facial scars, no brightly colored hair, and (arguably) no particularly striking features, my visage never commanded the attention of a room. In Taiwan, each and every one of us was visibly foreign. In our school uniforms, we were stared at on the MRT. In our Sunday best, we were flagged down for pictures with random families. I was once handed a woman's baby in a park for a quick selfie.

My days here were monotonous in their variety. Every weekend, we came to the same neighborhoods, yet never sat in the same seat twice. In the past six months, I had dined on foreign

delicacies—hearty beef stock soup, fried scallion pancakes, barbecued chicken hearts. I had quenched my thirst on hand-picked tea, rice wine, and guava juice. I once finished a fancy Italian dinner by walking an iguana on a leash. Nothing was real to us—the exchange students. Our lives were thousands of miles away, traversing oceans and mountains and continents. International calling was expensive. Hardly any of us heard from our parents often. In this city, it was even easier to lose oneself to the intoxication.

I can remember walking the main alley of Ximending, swarms of people on either side of me, and spotting an old man. He sat in a wheelchair, a decorative sun made of cardboard taped to the back so that it protruded dramatically from his head. His wife, Ama as she would demand I call her, stood behind with a red bucket. It had only the sign for wealth painted on it. As I walked closer, I would begin to hear him playing his harmonica. He played jubilant, jaunty songs only; and when I dropped silver coins into Ama's bucket, he would stop playing to shout: "Happiness!" I think it may have been the only English word that he knew, but perhaps it was applicable. The harmonica-playing grandfather certainly brought moments of absurd happiness to me. What a world, I would think, to bring people like me to people like him.

Taipei is a city of convenience and freedom on tap. To an American, fresh-faced and virginal to travel, it seemed an island paradise. Every morning, I walked from my apartment to the MRT station, buying a quick snack of pineapple cakes or steamed-pork buns on the way. I rode buses, bikes, and trains to school, sitting in lectures I did not have a prayer of understanding. Every Tuesday and Thursday, we studied Chinese at a local university, but it could hardly make a dent. Mandarin is millenia old, composed of thousands of characters, and tonally selective in each word's meaning. A classmate of mine once said she felt as though we were in a simulation; and God had changed the input language so she couldn't read the screen anymore. Bizarre. Foreign. Unreal. We all felt it.

Months became a year. Slowly, and without any awareness on my part, the foreignness of the city began to fade. Like all the tiny plants growing through gaps in the sidewalks, buildings, and roads, I had formed roots somewhere deep here.

The advertisements were no longer bright and flashing, but familiar and expected. Beef stock soup became a comfort food. I found myself boredly sipping guava juice, overlooking a mountain, dressed in a handwoven skirt I traded for a pair of boots. Rather than the island losing its magic, I had become a part of it. Accustomed. Time had mellowed, days blending into one another with simplicity. I began to explore outside Ximending, choosing random stations to catch a train to. Pick an exit, a direction, and start walking. The city stretched for miles in all directions. Some sections are packed tighter than others, like a vast tapestry with bits of complicated, interweaving threads. Tamsui had sweet grandparents, a cat village, and natural hot springs. Songshan had night markets, pet stores, and an art museum. One stop, the name of which is long lost to me, sits on the corner of a massive international bank and a traditional temple to a fertility god.

I took three-hundred NTD out of the bank—desks of mahogany, wall to wall windows overlooking the bustle of the plaza, and automatic sliding doors—and walked across the street to the temple. The air smelled heavily of incense, the thin tendrils of smoke wrapping around crimson red bannisters. The roof was an ornately carved dragon bellowing at the clouds above. I took a cautious high step over the threshold. To step directly on is disrespectful. A serene man behind a desk sold me slips of paper, pink and soft like tissues. These are wishes to be burnt in the altar outside, following a meaningful prayer to the goddess. I visited a separate, smaller altar. The god of students. His followers have left offerings of pencils, pens, rulers, protractors, fruits, and, now, an eraser. I bowed my head, but didn't pray. Instead, I thought about my school, my classmates, Ximending, the city, and home. After a moment, I collected myself and burnt my papers on the altar.

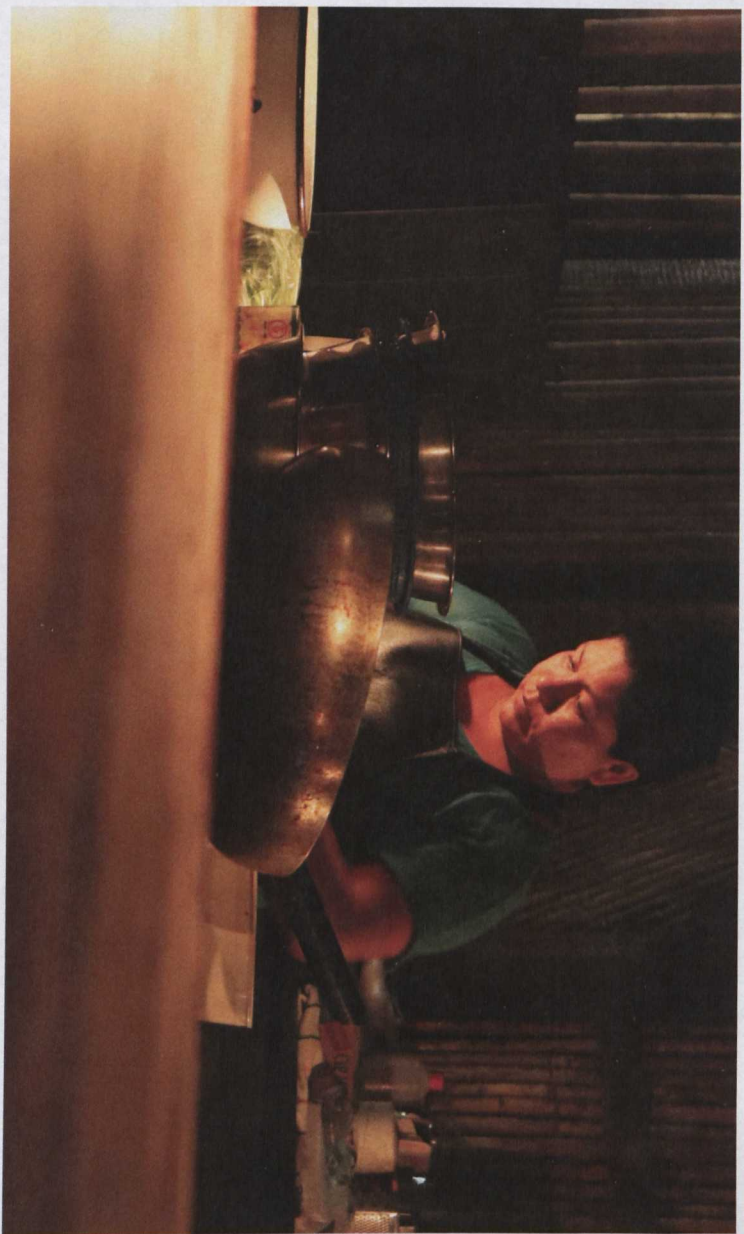
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I'm thinking about the temple as I board my flight home. I'm thinking about bustling Ximending. I'm thinking about the announcements over the loudspeaker—first Mandarin, then English. The next flight will be English, then Mandarin. The one after that—the leap home—will ring out in English. And there won't be anything else at all. I didn't think I would grow to miss

Mandarin any more than I thought I would come to loathe English—and what it had begun to say about myself in its isolation. I take a window seat, drinking in the sight of the island from above once more. I'm met with the sight of the mountains through the misting clouds. The shores are softly kissed by the waves of the deep blue ocean. The entire island seems to have been painted by the morning light, accentuating the soft green of the trees, growing darker and denser at the peaks of the mountains, and the white peaks of the waves, crinkling round the rocky cliffs. Beneath all this majesty, somewhere in the far north, is a confusing amalgamation of East and West, urban and wild, convenient and impossible. It's a place, I think, no one could ever understand in a single visit, maybe even a single lifetime. But it is, in that same vein, familiar in a way I can't place. Arriving was like returning to a place I had never been.

Leaving is like—

well, something else entirely.



Yziar the Chef, Peru
Molly Sherman

***Liz stands
proudly outside
her storefront,
Peru***
Molly Sherman



The Game

Danielle Wendt

Four point five billion
Years Earth's been in the game
The world's clock started

The millions of years
Humanity's history
Planet's overtime

One-hundred-ninety-
five Musks the competition
Billions but for one

The seven point five
Outmatched by the one percent
Lawful and corrupt

Why are these the rules?
Immoral to earn the world
But he owns four-fold

Selfishness oozes
The unearned inheritance
Is poor gamesmanship

Counting and cashing
Money sprouting from nothing
We have no defense

Millions won the game
You do not need to pass go
Do not collect more

A Witness in the Case of Caroline Monroe

Sophia Gilbert

3rd Place Prose

Maryland Bureau of Criminal Apprehension

Report Date: 05/25/2015

Primary Information

Description: Statement of Alexis Sanchez

Reporting LEO: Daniels, Penelope (1419 / MRO- Homicide / Maryland Bureau of Criminal Apprehension)

Backup LEO: Chase, Zachary (1487 / Metro Regional Office / Maryland Bureau of Criminal Apprehension)

Approval Status: Approved

Approved Date: 06/08/2015

Approved By: Jefferson, Elizabeth (1462 / MRO- Homicide / Maryland Bureau of Criminal Apprehension)

Synopsis: On Monday, May 25th 2015, Special Agents (SA) Daniels and Chase interviewed UMD graduate student Alexis Sanchez at the law offices of Samuel Winters. Alexis Sanchez was the last known person to see Caroline Monroe, missing person and suspect in a series of homicides occurring in the months leading up to April 30 in the area surrounding UMD College Park. The statement was recorded and preserved on a disc labeled evidence item 2015/446/12.3.

Statement begins as follows:

Being a post-grad student in the city was a lot more expensive than I had been planning on, so when a fellow student mentioned looking for a place, I decided it might not be a bad idea to ask her if she was interested in a flatmate. I had grown up with three siblings, so space and

privacy were things I had learned to live without. I was also starting to run low on funds and the rent on my closet of an apartment kept increasing, so sharing a larger place with someone else was becoming increasingly appealing. Caroline Monroe was a biology student alongside me who had grown up in a rural part of Pennsylvania. She was quiet but worked diligently and I had imagined that even if we wouldn't be friends, she would at least be a decent flatmate. We ended up finding a place a couple blocks away, close enough to campus that we could still reasonably walk but not so close that the prices started to really jump. It was a small building with several flats, nicer than I thought we would be able to afford, but she had talked the landlord down to a reasonable price. Looking back, maybe I should have known that something was up, but at that point, I was just glad that we had a nice place and that I wouldn't have to stretch my paychecks so much. I never did see the landlord. He collected rent on the day that I spent at work at the cafe downstairs so Caroline would just pass along my half. I never saw any residents in the other flats either. That should have been another red flag. Still, none of that would suggest that Caroline was some kind of cold-blooded killer.

The neighbors could have had night shifts, could have been homebodies. I mean, Caroline liked rom-coms for fuck's sake. Looking back, there was one time that I woke up in the middle of the night and heard a banging noise coming from the living area. I walked out and Caroline was dragging out a large chest from her room out the door. She didn't jump or look guilty when I asked her what she was doing. She just replied that she was "getting rid of something." I had an exam the next day, so you'll have to forgive me if I didn't stay up to see what was in it. Besides, at that point, she hadn't given me any reason not to

trust her and I figured she was due the same privacy she afforded me.

I did notice that she seemed to strongly dislike men to the point that she would quickly become rude or disengaged when speaking to our male classmates or if a man started a conversation on the street. I mean, I was a bit wary of men, too, after a couple bad incidents that I won't relate here, but she seemed to despise them. I never knew why, though it quickly went to passive indifference to outright hostility over a series of months. When it was just us though, she was perfectly lovely. She baked me a cake for my birthday back in February and it was delicious, chocolate with...

[Here SA Chase requests the witness to return to the case at hand]

Right, back to the point. What I mean is that she seemed to have two sides to her. Since I'm still alive though, I guess her being nice to me meant that I was never an intended victim. Maybe she enjoyed having two lives, one of which was blissfully average, the other as, what, a serial killer? It just sounds absurd. Regardless, she started showing up to classes less and less, spending more time in her room than normal. I tried to bring her out, help her through what I thought was a depressive episode, but I rarely succeeded. By March, I hardly ever saw her at all. I did hear... some strange sounds coming from her room around that time. Laughing, crying, loud muffled noises that could have been yelling. Lots of banging around late at night. At that point I was getting a bit scared of her, but I didn't leave. How could the girl who made me cookies when I failed an exam be that scary? All the same, having a conversation with her about me moving out seemed more than a bit daunting especially when

she seemed to be increasingly unstable.

In the end, it didn't end up being an issue. One day, I came back from work and her stuff was cleared out. All there was was a note on the table with the rest of the month's rent. It read, "Thanks for everything. Love, Caroline." I was a bit unsettled, to say the least, but a large part of me was happy to see her go. At that point, I decided that I was fine going back to a smaller place if I didn't have to deal with another exceedingly peculiar flatmate and I quickly found one a bit further away. This time, I met the landlord and my neighbors right away and the flat was reassuringly overpriced.

I went back to that old flat a couple weeks back. I'd heard on the news a man had been found long-decayed in one of the upper rooms. The remains belonged to Nicolas Redding, the landlord of our building, now deceased. The pieces began falling into place, like how I never seemed to be around at the same time as him or why our rooms remained so affordable. I didn't have a doubt in my mind that Caroline was somehow responsible for what happened. The old apartment was on the way to the local police department so I told the taxi driver to stop there for a minute. I don't entirely know why other than that I had this desperate urge to understand what had happened all those months ago. I got out of the taxi and walked up to the old dilapidated building, seeing everything in a new light. The front doors were blocked off with police tape though the street was uncharacteristically quiet. A shiver ran down my spine and I turned to the taxi to continue on to the police department. It didn't make sense, but I saw her then. Caroline was about 10 feet behind me, quiet as the dead. She didn't speak, just slowly started smiling at me, hazy in the middle of the day. Then I blinked and she was gone, as

if she had disappeared into thin air. That was the last time I saw Caroline Monroe.

Statement ends.

Scorned

Simone Smith

i wanted to do far more than split his head open
he claimed i was an impossible highway yet he never mentioned
the moments when he crashed into me
claimed I made him dizzy but he never got a true epiphany
i learned to shrink myself so he would have a place to sit
i became hollow and broke every bone so that he would have
somewhere to rest his ego
i swallowed his words so that for once i would feel fulfilled
but nobody told me that there was poison in the pill
appease a man for what?
where is the satisfaction in becoming a fraction of the woman i
once was?
where is the gratification in selling your soul for someone you
love?
I am not difficult nor do i need to be built
I am a force to be reckoned with
a fire that cannot be extinguished
far more than bearable
worthy of every sacrifice and praise
unwilling to change
so my love
i did far more than split his head open

De-qi
Becca Halaney

A pinprick, occasional, breaking numb promises
crisp and at once synesthetic, the taste of orange and cough
syrup fresh
upon my tongue—unexpected, not unpleasant. Gloved, rosemary
fingers
pressed soft against pressure points taut ribs, imperceptible
needles
under the gauze flesh of scalp, between spider-web capillaries
nearing the midpoint of tensed wrists, cutting a
clean slice out of prematurely-greyed pain, whethering anxieties
trimmed away wool sheared from a willing, snoring ram
under morphine, hazy wash of vice-gripping sleep pulling us
under, too, as we
revel in the relief of the
exp e r i e n c e

The Thin Cylinder With The Revengeful Spirit

Sarah Tedla

So when you

Light me up

The hollow ruby glows and hisses

Embers sinking into my body

As you devour my shrinking figure for your pleasure

The aroma of acrid stench seeps into your pores

My ashes sweep into the breeze

Gray flowers bloom from my paper skeleton

The smoke dances in swirls as the fat from my body becomes a bud

But I will let you live in your bliss, as I quiver into dust

As gravity hurls me onto the grave of dry gum freckles among my comrades

Your sole stomps me as if I am an insignificant fly in your day

Not the one who gave you solace

As you relish in my destruction

The coming bill will be addressed to your lungs

An eagle will pick bit by bit at your lungs then liver

You will scream in agony

At the horror of vitality and youth stripped from your body

One day, you will wish

That wickery flickering fire of fennel stalk was never given to humans

As you inhale the waves of the wispy hands slipping between your lips

Giving me silent permission to invade your spirit

Your lungs exhale

A morphoses of soulless horses galloping away with the winds

Praying, waiting, and plotting for my revenge

Even if I am not the bullet to kill you

One of my brothers or sisters will

(Our collective demise with our deathly concoction will pull you down to the dirt with the maggots)(Not only will it affect you but your children) (your saliva rained and your feet crushed my battered body)(As you walk away from me, I will remember what you did to me)(I will be eagerly waiting to stand over you in your death) (My hollow laugh will ring into your ear as you break from your final breath)(How can I be so cruel, you ask?) (Remember, you left me in pieces of embers on the sidewalk)(Also, what can I say, I am like my creator.)

Sun Kissed

j.s.

Eyes like an ocean, deep blue and endless,
Hair like brambles you snare me.
Kind as summer sun make my heart a mess.
Touch so soft like an autumn leaf set free

Words like honey so sweet, they lure me near.
Voice like a melody it calls my name.
With you I feel such joy and oh so queer,
Bring such gay feelings, my heart knows no shame.

Lips soft and sweet, I crave your tender kiss,
Arms like magnets they pull me in embrace.
Lips like sunset bright and sweet, bring such bliss,
Hands gentle as the breeze caress my face.

Yet I wish to develop into oceans deep,
And I crave for more than what I should reap.

Heart of Stone

Maddy Lee



"Mr. Brown"

Eamonn Fay

2nd Place Prose

There was an edge about that night that Anders couldn't exactly pinpoint. He hadn't exactly *liked* the idea of going on a ghost tour, especially without a friend. Still, even if he had to go it alone (which, according to Kyle's warnings, wasn't likely given the usual turnout), things of that nature usually weren't enough to get him this stirred up. It was a deep anxiety that, combined with the chill of the autumn air, made him shiver all the more. It fell into that sweet spot of uncertainty; strong enough to be concerning but just inexplicable enough to write off as irrational. As he stepped into the theatre, something indeed had been wrong. It was completely empty. There was no one there to sell him a ticket or guide him anywhere. There were only voices heard from somewhere down the hall to fill the silence. Minutes passed. Eventually he shot Kyle a text asking just what the hell was going on. No more than a second passed when Kyle stepped through the hall and up the stairs to meet him from below.

"Jesus, dude," he said. "There's last minute and then there's *this*."

"What are you talking about?" Anders said as he rubbed his cold hands together.

Kyle, who was dressed in black, cultish robes and holding a plastic wooden stake, rolled his eyes and shook his head. "We're packing up for the night now."

"You said it started at ten!" Anders protested.

"I said it *ended* at ten," Kyle stressed with a smirk. "You're fifteen minutes late to *closing*. We're done for the evening, dude."

Anders felt silly and dickish. He had been blowing off his roommate's requests to see him in some sort of production all semester, and in waiting until the last minute to show up, an honest blunder ended up making this time no different. "Shit, dude," Anders said. "I'm sorry."

Kyle waved his hand dismissively and shook his head. "Don't worry about it," he said. "At least the thought was there. I'll see you back at the room." Heading back down the steps, Kyle waved goodbye before stopping. "Actually," he said. "As long as you're here anyway, we're in the studio. I don't think the others would mind you being there. Care to join us? We've got snacks." With no reason to decline, Anders followed Kyle down the steps and through a corridor. The walls were lined with old photographs of past productions and small props. In a few quick turns, Kyle led Anders through various hallways and rooms. It all felt maze-like and unfamiliar to Anders. He felt it was probably deceptively easy to get lost in the halls if you weren't careful.

"Look what the cat dragged in!" Kyle yelled as he grabbed Anders' hand and raised it in the air. Before them was a troupe of mostly ladies who seemed to be covered in fake blood and eerie makeup that might have been a tad unsettling if they hadn't been acting completely normal. "That your roommate?" one of them said. "Wow, took him long enough," said another. "He thought it *started* at ten," Kyle explained, much to the apparent amusement of the cast. Anders smirked uncomfortably and tried to chuckle it off unconvincingly. Kyle introduced many names and faces to Anders, all of which were forgotten just about instantly. Anders, rather uncomfortable, snagged himself some candy and apple cider as he planned his tactful escape. He would wait ten minutes, maybe attempt to socialize slightly to feign enjoyment, and use his studies as an excuse to leave.

"Hey," a girl who looked to be dressed like an undead ballerina said. Anders had seen her before, and maybe had a class with her, too. Her name may have been Chloe, or Carol, or something that started with a C. He wasn't sure and was too afraid to ask. "I'm still feeling pretty good," she said. "Do you guys want to take our new friend here on one more?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Kyle.

"Come on!" maybe-Chloe said. "It's Eric and Trisha's last ghost tour. Let's do an encore!"

Anders had hoped they would all have been too tired to continue,

but they weren't. Soon, maybe-Chloe's cheerleader-like encouragement had infected everyone in the room to, if begrudgingly, have one more go of things. Before he knew it, Kyle had pushed him through the labyrinth-halls to the lobby of the theatre so that the others could get to their places. "Five dollars then," Kyle said in a tone meant to be menacing. "Or perhaps your soul?" Anders only looked at him blankly as he handed him a fiver. "You don't have to ham it up," Anders said. Kyle rolled his eyes. "That's half the fun of it!" Kyle said. "You've got no appreciation for this sort of thing, do you? Now then! Please, follow me. Kindly watch your step." Kyle leaned uncomfortably close to Anders' face. "And be sure to watch your back!" Kyle whispered sharply. Anders fought the urge to offer him a stick of gum from his pocket.

Kyle led Anders into the theatre, which was only dimly lit by a spotlight on the stage. "We shall begin our tour right here in the theatre: the main attraction here in Sweisson Hall. Luck is with us tonight! It seems the spirits would like to have a performance! Why don't we sit down and watch?" Anders was led to the middle row and the two sat. Immediately, Anders recognized a few of the students from the studio. They were dressed in strange, old fashioned clothes that made them look like pilgrims. Characters appeared to come on stage sporadically, dancing feverishly and babbling to each other in incomprehensible gibbers. Their behavior was theatrical but seemed to have no rhyme or reason. The non-conversations the actors onstage had amongst themselves inspired tears, uproarious laughter, and screams from each other at random.

"Sweisson Hall was the first building on campus," Kyle explained. "As a matter of fact, one could say it was the cornerstone of this entire school. You see, when the property was purchased, this building was already here. Or so they say. There have been renovations, modernizations... But this very theatre has indeed been here since this town's founding in the late 1700's. Accounts from the townsfolk around that time are... interesting. This theatre was home to a troupe which was, let's say, not very popular. The plays they produced were beyond comprehension. The actors seemed to speak in a language nobody knew. Some said it was like corrupt Greek or Latin. They were mostly ignored in town, and seeing their strange productions, many accused them of devil worship."

The spotlight shut off loudly, causing Anders to jump. The sound of bodies dropping to the ground echoed throughout the theatre. Then footsteps onstage. The spotlight shot back to life upon a tall actor dressed like a rather stereotypical demon complete with a candy-red bodysuit, face paint to match, and—perhaps the only artistic liberty they took—a shaggy black wig with two horns poking out of either side. The actors onstage, as expected, were playing dead beneath the demon.

"Perhaps they weren't too far off," Kyle said. "This being you see before you is a thing of local legend. Townsfolk of old and students alike have reported seeing glimpses of it during productions. The demon—the blood devil as they call it—is said to be a trickster. It's been blamed for bad luck during performances and has been known to lure people inside late into the night to toy with them." That uneasiness hadn't left Anders, and somehow looking at the phony demon on the stage only exacerbated it. Just then, the lights shut off again. Sweat began to dot Anders body as footsteps quickly approached him from the stage. A moment of eerie silence passed. Suddenly, there was heavy breathing. The lights came back on and Anders visibly recoiled in horror as the demon—or, rather, the person *portraying* the demon as he felt he needed to remind himself—had snuck up on him and was now standing uncomfortably close. The actors onstage were now standing up and glaring in his direction. "Oh dear," Kyle said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Perhaps we aren't welcome guests. Come, hurry!" After the initial shock of the scare wore off, Anders couldn't manage to be more than slightly uneasy and somewhat amused. As Kyle grabbed his arm and rushed him out in false alarm, the one in the costume followed behind them until they left the theatre. "Ah," Kyle said as the doors shut behind them. "Good. It seems to have lost interest. Right this way."

In another couple of disorienting turns, Kyle had led Anders to the dance studio again. The lights were now off inside. "You have been here before," Kyle said. "But perhaps you did not know that you were in the midst of a spirit." Several ballerinas with gaunt makeup danced into the room, only one of them doing so with any sort of grace. Maybe-Chloe was among them. "This studio is home to a spirit, too. Her name was Vanessa and she just loved to dance... Little did she know, this would be her undoing." One of the

dancers—the good one—shrieked, causing Anders to jump suddenly.

She, with unconvincing theatrics, threw herself to the ground. A loud crack was heard from what was very clearly somewhere else in the room. Anders tried to look around to determine where it had come from. Kyle, noticing that Anders was no longer paying attention, nudged his shoulder and pointed back toward the actresses. The rest of the dancers seemed to panic among themselves. "Let's get help!" one of them said, and they all ran out the door in an exaggerated frenzy. After a moment of admittedly eerie silence, the dancer got up, her head hanging down, and began to dance slowly. Her head seemed to limply jerk with her movements as if her neck couldn't support its weight. Anders mouthed a silent "what the fuck" as he watched. It was surprisingly convincing compared to the rest of it and downright creepy at that.

"They say that her love for dance has not left her," Kyle said. "Even with a broken neck, she is said to still be seen dancing in the dark, her head limply dangling with each spin..."

Kyle led Anders into the next room. "Wait!" the dancer begged. "Don't leave! You've been such a lovely audience!" Grabbing Anders' hand again, Kyle seemed to speed into the next room and shut the door behind him. "You mustn't listen," he said. "Some have stayed to watch and never returned." Anders quietly sighed. He wasn't quite enjoying himself. The tour had its moments, but so far the cheesy theatrics far outweighed and somewhat negated the effective bouts of creepiness. Kyle's "Tales from the Crypt" voice was amusing at first but had since grown pretty annoying. Worse yet, that sinking feeling he had coming into the theatre hadn't gone anywhere and was steadily becoming worse the further in they went. Anders had thought about it more, and he had finally been able to pinpoint what kind of fear it was. It was a specific unease that he hadn't felt since middle school. He felt he was somewhere he shouldn't have been, and if he were caught, he'd be punished. A nagging part of him wanted to just leave here as quickly as possible and go home. However, reminding himself that he was doing this for his friend and finding no real reason to be afraid, he resolved to keep his mouth shut, stick it out, and give Kyle a glowing review when it was all over.

Kyle led Anders to a small, dark room that sat in the middle of a long corridor. "Oh dear," Kyle said. "Let me get the lights."

A stout fellow who was similarly dressed to Kyle approached with a lantern. "The lights in this room are out," he said in a squeaky, goblin-like tone. Anders almost laughed out loud. "A spirit has jammed them upstairs. I require your assistance in fixing the situation." Kyle nodded in understanding, taking the lantern and giving it to Anders. "It seems I am needed elsewhere," Kyle said. "Forgive me for this, but I must ask that you go in alone." Anders very much disliked this. "Wait, hold on," Anders said. "You're going to make me do that?"

"Trust me," Kyle said with a smirk. "You'll be in good hands with Mr. Brown."

Without explaining what he meant, Kyle and the goblin walked off, leaving Anders to his own devices. Reluctantly, he stepped inside with the dim lantern raised. It wasn't a big room, or at least it didn't look like it. Old props and racks of clothes lined the walls and dotted the floor in a disorganized clutter. Anders wondered if it was like that for the purposes of the tour or if it was always in such disarray. On the other side of the room, he could just barely make out the shape of a door illuminated by the room behind it, likely another hallway. He figured that he was supposed to walk through the room and exit that way. "Alright," he said as he took a few steps forward. "You can come out and scare me now." There was only silence. "Hello?" he said in a mocking, spooky voice trying to mask his legitimate fear. "Mr. Brown? I'm ready for you to haunt me now." The place had a dusty, attic-like smell. He slowly weaved through the costume racks and stepped carefully over loose props. He was roughly in the center of the room when he heard the sound of heavy, slapping footsteps in the hallway from which he entered. Startled, he jumped and turned around. "Hello?" he said. The footsteps stopped. Seconds passed. A loud, unnatural wheeze emerged and turned into a laugh. Suddenly, the door slammed, plunging him into darkness. "Oh, fuck that," he said. "That's not cool!" He tried to make his way back to the door, but he kept tripping on props on the ground and running into racks of costumes. "Shit," he said. "Let me out! You got me, alright? Open the door!"

"You don't want that, boy."

A deep, gravelly voice coming from behind him made Anders freeze. He couldn't pick out what at first, but there was something unmistakably wrong with it. It was completely opposite to his experience so far. The voices the actors used earlier had tried to be menacing but weren't. This one, whoever it was, didn't seem to be trying to be menacing and simply *was*. He chuckled nervously. "Holy hell," he muttered. "That actually really scared me."

"Why?"

The word was delivered in such an unnatural, unnerving way. It was slow and drawn out. Anders wanted to move but couldn't. The freezing he felt quickly became literal as the temperature in the room began to plummet. In no time at all, Anders could soon see his breath in the dim light of the lantern. He had known—or at least hoped—that it was only an act for the sake of the tour, but the realism filled him with genuine fear. Had it been this cold to begin with? He hadn't heard any AC or fans kick on. *"You're safest in here,"* the voice continued. *"With me."*

"Safest from what?"

"It," the voice said in a slow drawl. *"If I hadn't shut that door it could have been in here by now doing God-knows-what to you."*

"Fuck this," Anders admitted, beginning to lose his nerve. The strange anxiety from before was building steadily and mixing disagreeably with his fear. "Fuck *all* of this. Is there a safe word or something? I want out."

"You don't want out, boy," the voice said. *"It loves people like you—people with the knack. And it's waiting for you out there. You stay in here. With me. Until it goes away."*

"The hell's the knack?" Anders stammered. "What does that even mean? When will it go away?"

"It goes away when it wants," the voice said, seemingly ignoring his first question. *"It isn't so predictable. It doesn't like company,"*

though. So, let's hope help arrives."

He didn't understand how the tour had gone from mildly uncomfortable to immensely horrifying this quickly. Nobody had said anything to him about this. It was immersive, alright, he'd give it that, more than any hokey attraction of the sort he'd ever been to. However, it was quickly becoming too much.

"Oh good," the voice groaned. "Someone's come lookin' for you. From the other door. If you go and meet 'em right away, maybe it'll give up."

Anders began to panic. "What?" he said. "Who?"

"Don't panic, now," the voice said. "This might be your chance."

The sound of a shaking doorknob and the rapping of fingers on wood came from behind him. He turned around in a panic. A barely audible dusty hiss came from the other side of the door. *"It's caught wind of what's goin' on, but it isn't ready to quit yet,"* the voice said. *"Listen up, now. Follow my voice, boy."* Anders didn't move. The door behind him shook and rattled. A great wheeze of laughter came from the other side.

"I said follow my voice," the voice said. "I'm not gonna bite ya."

Reluctantly, Anders crept forward toward the disembodied speaker.

"Warmer."

He sifted through old costumes, coughing as he breathed in dust that seemed to come up in clouds as he moved them aside. His heart jumped as light began to poke in and out from behind him. Anders turned around and noticed that something – he wasn't sure what in the momentary flashes of dim light —was struggling to keep the door shut. He watched as a long, bony, red hand with blackened nails slowly crept through the crack of the barely opened door. Something relented for a moment and opened the door slightly before instantly slamming it closed, crushing the red hand's fingers. The hand retreated back into the hall, the door

closed with a thud, and a raspy, almost-human howl could be heard from outside. Anders couldn't move.

"Keep. Moving. Warmer."

Anders swallowed hard and obeyed. He stepped over props that he couldn't quite make out, nearly tripping on a couple.

"War-mer."

He ducked under a few racks in the middle of the room before finally hitting what felt to be a wall. He felt around, his hand fumbling for a knob before reaching something cold. It dawned on him what it was: a hand. Anders quickly let go before taking a cautious step backward. Slowly, as he held his breath, he lifted the lantern. There was indeed a hand there resting on a doorknob. He raised his lantern more, starting at the hand and following the light up a sleeved arm clothed in a tattered, plaid dress shirt. Eventually, the dim light revealed the face of a man who, upon seeing that he'd been found, grinned widely. It didn't look like anyone that Anders had seen earlier. He was older and had an unkempt head of white hair. His face was a gaunt grey, and his dark eyes shined in the darkness of his sunken sockets. He opened his wide mouth slowly, still grinning with yellowed teeth. It didn't look like a costume.

"Red. Hot."

The man turned the knob, cracking the door slightly before stepping back into the shadows and vanishing from view. Voices came from the other side. Anders, regaining his composure, swung open the door and went into the illuminated hallway. Kyle and the goblin were there to greet him. The pounding on the door behind him abruptly stopped, and the strange feeling of impending punishment receded with it.

"Shit, dude," Kyle said. "We're sorry man."

"That was not cool," Anders said. "The hell was that?"

"I know, I know," Kyle said. "It's totally my fault. I didn't mean to

leave you hanging around in there like that. Eric was supposed to be in there to scare you real quick and let you out on this side. We totally forgot he left already. Can't believe we all overlooked that." Kyle leaned over Anders' shoulder and looked into the room. "Wait... did you close the door?" Kyle asked. "No," Anders said. "Someone slammed it on me the minute I got in."

"Holy shit," Kyle said. "That's fucked. That wasn't part of the tour. Someone's getting an earful for going off book. We wouldn't have done that and not warned you. Did you see who shut it?"

Anders paused. "That wasn't supposed to happen...? Was *any* of that supposed to happen?"

"Someone was supposed to be in there," the goblin said in a non-goblinish manner. "You know, to scare you? We wouldn't have just left you standing around in suspense. And we *definitely* wouldn't have shut the door on you."

"This isn't funny," Anders said. "Cut it out. You got me. There was absolutely someone in there. It was that old dude. With the deep voice? And then the guy outside making the weird wheezes and slamming on the door? That's who closed it, wasn't it?"

Kyle looked at the goblin and back at Anders. "What?" Kyle said. "That wasn't..." The goblin shook his head. "On God, one-hundred percent serious here, this is not part of the tour: if there's someone in there, it isn't Eric."

Kyle, shaking his head, went into the room. Anders backed up. Flicking on the light (which was decidedly not broken), Kyle stepped in and looked around before turning around and shrugging. "I don't see anyone."

"Bullshit," Anders said. He walked in and looked around. It was cluttered alright. Plenty of places to hide. He tore the place up and the others helped. They moved shelves, tables, and racks uncovering every hiding spot in the room. But nobody turned up. He could have escaped through the other door, Anders thought, but he was reasonably certain he hadn't seen or heard it open. At least, not enough for anyone to get out. Anders took a step back.

The pieces were there but none of them fit. He didn't know if it was staged. He had wanted to believe that it was, but a nagging feeling given all that happened told him that it wasn't. Either way, he'd had enough. Pale faced, he turned to Kyle. "Which way is the lobby?" Anders said quietly. Kyle pointed down the hall. "Thanks, great work, see you at the room," Anders said as he paced rapidly toward the exit.

Anders stepped back outside to find the person portraying the demon smoking a cigarette sitting on the stairs. Her face was cleaned up and her wig removed. She turned around and smiled at him. A sudden chill hit him. "Wow," she said. "I don't think I've seen *anyone* come out that scared!" The deep, anxious, baffling dread seemed to make a logical connection to her costumed image. Anders couldn't tell for the life of him why. "What's the matter?" she said. "You alright?" He wanted to respond, but he only shook his head and headed back home with a quickened pace, the voice of Mr. Brown following him the whole way there.

**When the
Wind Falls**
Eliezer Mercedes



The Auklet's Dance

Molly Sherman

Flying far away
Calling across rolling waters
The chaos too loud
The creaky, swaying bay

Little whispers tuck up
Like cobwebs
Among long legs
Of dewey grass

Where do sweet nothings go
When there's nothing we can do
But hide our faces
In leafy green covers

Fleeting touches
Feathers falling at our sides
Waves breaking
Dunes crumbling

As we run around trees
Dodging branches and vines
Playing tag with our hearts
Is yours 'it' or mine?

Only try to find
The changing tide
As I fall behind
Your hazel eyes

Headache

Danielle Wendt

When I was little, I decided that there was
a tiny man in my forehead.
My sister named him Bob, I imagine because she
pictures him hard-hatted and flanneled
and chanting, "yes we can!"

Every once in a while, Bob would wield his hammer,
banging against my skull, which dutifully reverberated,
As if it were Sunday morning,
and my head was a church about to begin mass.
I bemoaned every crash, and asked for some Advil
to ease the pain.

Now
Bob still makes the
Occasional appearance
But
My body runs on
Less than four
Hours of sleep
And
My to-do list
Reads
Like a chapter of
Anna Karenina,
Too long
And too
Overwhelming
And
Pulling me in all different
Directions

I never thought I would miss the days
When Bob was all I had to worry about

Dearly Departed

Celia Stern

Jun Xiao, Trent Yalaman, Peter Yorke, and Arnav Zaveri were all crammed into the handicap bathroom stall as Father McCarthy rolled a joint on the top of the toilet tank. Father McCarthy wasn't supposed to be here: he was a Catholic and this handicap bathroom stall, this toilet tank, these boys scratching their necks where their black ties had chaffed, were non-denominational. It was only as a favor to Pastor Clark he would be performing the day's service.

There was no coffin on the parapet of the church, just a three by three inch box, like the kind of box that might contain an engagement ring. Victoria Fuentes had brought flowers, daffodils picked just before she was hustled into the car, and when it was her turn to awkwardly hover around the altar and solemnly muse over the little drop of water that had been absorbed into God's careless sleeve, she put a flower beside the box. Still dew-laden, the tough stem's placement nearly echoed through the church and a sound that was petrifyingly groanlike responded, but it was just the father of the corpse pushing out his chair so he could come make Victoria feel distressed as he entombed her in a soggy hug and told her hair smelled of pepper, then sneezed on her. Upon seeing the daffodil most of the girls present mobbed Victoria, everyone wanted their own little memorial memento. They corasged the flowers, tucked them behind their ears, they created a botanical clique out of nothing. Victoria had been thinking a lot about God lately. She was frightened she would die before she could go to confession. She had only recently discovered masturbation.

Mrs. Patrick Marks wondered if Mrs. Yacks had put anything else in there, the plastic pearl earrings Ellie had on in her prom photo or maybe a diamond heirloom. Kaitlyn Marks wondered if her mom would let her drive home. She hadn't even known Ellie. Most people at school hadn't even heard she had gone missing until September started, the ex-senior ignorant any catastrophe had happened until new roommates asked, Pooltown, didn't a girl get kidnapped or something there in the summer?

Jun, Trent, Peter, and Navvie didn't even notice, though they probably should have. It wasn't often they had to share a back row. Alphabetical seating was the glue that kept their friendship together. That and the fact none of them were smart enough to test out of anything higher than the honors courses. But when Ellie Yacks, the hair on the top of her head bulging out of her ponytail, powerwalked into Honors Chemistry, the class with the black tables that only seated four, and was squeezed between Jun and Trent, exiling Navvie across the aisle, they noticed. Peter had to lend her his soccer cleats on the day she violated the no open toed shoes policy on lab day; her size nine feet slipping around his size nineteen shoes like fish in a rowboat.

Mrs. Yacks was kind to invite them to the funeral when they'd only been at her house once, mumbling hellos and thank yous on their way to the basement to design a powerpoint presentation on thorium with Ellie's cat winding through their legs and making Trent's nose itch.

At dusk, on the swing sets in the park, lazily scratching trails in the wood chips with their heels, the boys talked of Ellie. "Fucking unfair," Navvie moaned as he passed a clove cigarette to Jun to light. Spewing out a thundercloud of smoke, Jun replied, "D'ja think she'll change seats if you ask?" Yeah right, like any of them had the courage to ask. They would let her copy off their worksheets but that would be the extent of their relationship. No one could imagine her sitting between Jun and Trent as Navvie's mom fed them beef hatkora or on the bleachers cheering for Peter crouched in his goalie vest.

Their moms had insisted they attend the "service", as it was PC-ly referred to. Not a funeral; she isn't dead yet. Not legally at least. So they borrowed their dads' darkest suits, Trent swimming in his, and carpooled to the church.

Hiding in the men's bathroom, Peter was the one who clocked the bloodshot eyes of Father McCarthy as he washed his hands. He had to admit it was a clever ploy. Everyone would be cooing over the tenderhearted priest who couldn't hold down tears, oh bless 'im, without noticing the herbaceous waft that hung off his cassock like ropes of pearls off one of Marie Antoinette's wigs.

Three of the boys had never been high before (that time in Jun's attic with the baijiu his cousin sent from Fenyang didn't count) but they were eager to try. Not like any of them would be eulogising the ear like Daysha Freeman would be, Ellie's best friend since pre-K. Now that was a girl who could use a puff.

Peter tapped the Father politely on the shoulder.

"Sir, would you mind if we shared some of your" (he tried to think of the right term, ganja? cannabis? virgin mary jane?) "weed, please." (like he was ordering at Starbucks, venti weed.)

"I'm sorry?" the priest said. He looked younger than he actually was. Came off as twenty-nine though last March, surrounded by Franciscans in Jedi robes, he sighed out forty-three candles on a melting Cookie Puss.

"It's for Nav," Trent piped up, "it's a mourning ritual in Desi culture."

"Fuck you Trent."

"Fuck *you* Navvie."

"I don't. Have any of that. And don't go asking for it anyway. All of you are too young." Lavender scented water dripping from his hands, Father McCarthy moved to the door.

"Come on man," Trent said. "What's the problem? Just one joint. Like, we won't tell anyone if you do."

"And we might if you don't," said Jun and earned a Navvie elbow to the ribs.

"You can't threaten a priest dude," he said, as Peter continued, "It's not like it's not legal."

"Be effed up if you got high before a funeral," Jun said.

Navvie and Trent in a unison hiss, "Dude!"

"Yeah," Father McCarthy said, death stares dispensed like communion wafers, "it would be."

Yeah, it is.

So for once when a Catholic priest is corrupting a tetrad of young boys while on his knees, they have his balls in their hands. What was that expression his roommate at the seminary had? Oh yes. Don't get M.A.D., get even. Stupid boys. He'd find their parents in due course.

It wasn't as if Father McCarthy was a stoner. He had anxiety. No, seriously, he had anxiety. His doctor had prescribed marijuana after the fifty milligrams of Lexapro each morning had been a bust and they had found a gram administered whenever worry slithered into his gut worked rather beautifully. And if giving a sermon over the severed ear of a missing teenage girl in an unfamiliar non-denominational church didn't spark your anxiety, you must not be a part of the seventy-seven percent of people afraid of public speaking. Lucky you.

Sentry-posted around Father McCarthy, the boys watched intently as he sprinkled in the marijuana and burritoed it into a gradual cone, licking it shut like an envelope. Father McCarthy shoved the joint towards Peter and while he was juggling it away from the maw of the toilet, the priest vanished from the bathroom.

"Dick," Navvie said.

"Don't say that. He came around," admonished Jun.

"No, he didn't fucking light it."

Daysha sat beside Mrs. Yacks next to the box, holding her hand as they wept onto their eulogy sheets, dispersing the pencils marks to grey puddles. A shame. Neither of them were going to be able to make it through a speech if they didn't have the guideline of recitation. Their ears were too plugged up with blood that they didn't hear the metallic click of the exit door open and shut right by them.

Trent was rubbing two sticks together, his knees greying in the dust of the parking lot, as Jun held the joint in the meagre stream of steam produced.

"You're supposed to use a shoelace I think," Peter said.

"Do you want to lend yours?" Navvie, crouched against the brick of the church, asked.

"Are you kidding me? My dad would kill me if I ruined his shoes."

Mrs. Yacks had a hard time finding people to speak about Ellie. She was a bit of a nothing. No clubs, no honor roll, a couple of friends that would eat chips in the basement with her and watch a horror movie that would frighten her into insomnia and she would climb into her parent's bed. But yes, nothing to put on a resume. She had been on the stage crew for *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown* but only at Daysha's insistence. The director remembered her as overly giggly and a flake; Ellie had quit three weeks before opening night because her grades had avalanched into fails, but still she crept her way backstage and pestered the boy playing Linus and was forcibly escorted out by Daysha, flushed beneath her flapjack foundation. She wasn't even remembering her at the wake or while the wake was happening. She was at home and wouldn't hear about it until she read the Facebook posts over the weekend.

Navvie jumped at the sound of the clacking metal and upon realizing it was Jordan Sanick who stuck his red hair out of the doorframe (HAL 9000 looking ass) and not somebody's parent opening the birdcage. Jordan didn't look down to see.

"What're you guys doing," Jordan said.

"None of your business," Jun said.

"Go away," Navvie said.

"We're making a cross." Trent dropped to his ass to unweave his shoelace. "We thought it would be more personal for a gift to be homemade instead of, like, bought and we're at a church so its relevant and we were going to have Peter's dad make it because

he's a silversmith but he has a lot of orders in the backlog and the last time we tried to use the silver forge thing Jun got a second degree burn so we're doing this instead," Trent said.

"It's not important," Peter said.

"I know Peter's dad isn't a silversmith, you dick," Jordan said. And he went back inside.

Mr. Yacks was trying not to cry anymore than he already had. He was making everyone uncomfortable.

"Could there be matches in the church? Like for prayer candles and stuff," Navvie asked.

"I think those are just for Catholics." Jun wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Don't stop now, I think I saw a little flame," Trent said, pointing, "Right there at the bottom."

"So ask the priest." Navvie started nodding to himself.

"Like he'll give us a match," Peter said. "It's fine guys, we can save it."

"But weed can get mold though."

"It's all green anyway," Trent said. Jun poked him with one of the sticks. Not because of what he said, he just felt like it.

Mr. Yacks was sitting apart from his wife.

"We can't pretend we repented and now we want to pray or whatever." Jun tossed the sticks to the ground.

Mr. Yacks was sitting apart from his wife because they thought it was a more strategic way to receive mourners. And because Mrs. Yacks couldn't be bothered to hear her husband snort-sob into the one wispy tissue he kept taking out and returning to his pocket; she imagined the inside of his pocket to be viscous with snot and

shifted her hand inside of Daysha's grip.

"Why can't we?"

"Because it doesn't make any sense."

"C'mon, we can at least try."

Mr. Yacks thought about stealing one of the heliotrope-patterned boxes of tissues strategically set up around the church so he could hold one in his lap and not have to shake hands.

"But who do we send?"

"I don't know. Who's the most pathetic?"

Navvie looked at Trent.

Mr. Yacks, who believed people fell in love when they stopped looking for it, took a business trip in early September so he heard about the body, or lack thereof, while at a Days Inn in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. He had been poolside and dappled and cracklike light shadows on the floor quivered.

"No, that'll never work. Trent'll run his mouth."

"What about Jordan?" Trent suggested.

Navvie and Jun considered this.

"Okay, go ask him."

On her phone, sitting next to Jordan on the rearmost pew, was Ella Derby who had sat across from Ellie in calculus. Ellie always annoyed Ella. Their teacher got them mixed up all the time even towards the end of year which Ella thought was unfair because she did so much better in class than Ellie. While they were practicing derivatives, Ellie was practicing a five-strand braid, unlinking stray hairs from her scalp that fell onto Ella's worksheet like an unevenly laid tic-tac-toe board. She never did work in class but started every morning by scribbling answers onto her homework. Ella was

texting her mom; the daffodil around her wrist rustled.

Can I go now

Have u said your sorry to her parent's ?

Yes

Alright I'll be there in 5 luove u

Can Jordan come too

Ok

"You can come to my house after. If you want." Ella nudged Jordan to get his attention. He looked really hot in his suit; he was too tan and it made him look paler.

"Cool."

Jordan had a distinctive back of the head, or that's how Trent would tell his friends after, not looking where he was going, he slammed into the pew Jordan sat on and wheezed out that he wanted to talk with him.

Jenny Cantor got a double to herself.

After Mr. Logan Guernsy went up to the altar he dashed to the men's room and threw up, the scorch of vomit ejected from his mouth only engendering a harder strain until everything he had for breakfast (a Swiss cheese and white mushroom omelet, streaky bacon, a chocolate croissant bought the previous weekend from Giant, a latte made with the espresso machine his daughter and son bought him for Christmas) had migrated to the toilet. He established a maelstrom of Listerene in his mouth before he found his wife and gossiped about how fucked up it was there was an ear in the little box at the front of the church.

"Like a pagan sacrifice. I know the family's Irish-Scots but that doesn't mean they have to go full-Druid."

Abigail Guernsy laughed and discreetly patted her daughter's head which believed the ear would hear her father telling bad things about it.

Because the funeral was closed casket the children brought along

had to imagine what the ear looked like for themselves and their ideas were based exclusively on Lenny Rubenstein's yellow descriptions; he was the one who had found it after all. It was a story that had quickly calcified into folklore: Lenny, practicing his homerun swing, spotted, in the maple tree erected in his front yard, a wasp's nest. Grand and banded with concrete-colored stripes, Lenny thought it wasn't a pinata but it would do. Wasps spilled from the uneven gash, fleeing the scene like Ukrainian peasants down the Odessa steps. A slab of Silly Putty splatted into the grass. Mr. Rubenstein, who had been watching on the screened in porch, was the one who called the police.

Ears are as unique as fingerprints. And the police had a picture of Ellie with her hair pushed back (the Fourth of July; a T-shirt with a glittery USA emblazoned across the chest; a morphing smile; a hotdog seesawing on her knee; plastic pearl earrings) so they didn't need Mrs. Yacks to come in. She won't ever see it.

Everyone spoke like there was an eavesdropper in the room.

Picking his way through the congregants, Father McCarthy was regretting ever accepting the job. Everyone ducked their head as they responded to him and apologized whenever they swore. Sorry sir, uh, Father. The adults especially were deferential although their Lutheran, Methodist, and Pentecostal hearts beat in smug superiority. Seven-year-old Caleb Klein was wondering why Father McCarthy was wearing the same costume Mr. Klein wore for Halloween; it was the right color but it wasn't Halloween. If it was, Caleb would have dressed up like Donatello.

Father McCarthy was recovering by the sympathy book when a lanky red-headed boy walked up to him, his hands folded but shifty.

"Excuse me? Father?"

"Yes? How can I help you?"

"Um, I wasn't sure who to ask. Do you have any votive candles? Whenever we lose someone, my family always lights a candle in their memory. And I was, nevermind I shouldn't want to bother

you."

"It's no trouble. Follow, uh, follow me."

In the chancel there was a beautiful Chippendale cabinet that held a stockpile of candles. All the black wicks on all the circles of white wax looked like a zoom-in on an arm, though skin cells aren't circular so maybe more like bedspread someone's eaten an Oreo over. Father McCarthy jenga-ed a candle out of the stack and handed it to the ging.

"And could you light it for me? Sorry, it'll work like this anyway."

"No, wait, there's a match around here somewhere."

The furball rasp of striking then the itty-bitty conflaguration and Father McCarthy waved the torch out.

"Shall we say a prayer," Father McCarthy said, anxiously.

"Sure."

"About the girl. Yacks."

"Ellie."

"Right, Ellie." Father McCarthy breathed in deeply and bent his head. "Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen."

"Amen."

Father McCathy had a bit of a spring in his step. Matthew 5:4: check.

The gust of the door closing nearly snuffed the candle out when Jordan slipped outside.

Jun started applauding when he saw him. "Actual god. You want to smoke with us?"

"It's not a fucking option that I don't," Jordan said.

"Well, get the fucking thing out before the candle goes out," Trent said.

As Jun dipped the head of the joint into the flame Peter started singing under his breath, "Barukh ata Adonai—"

"What are you doing?" asked Trent.

"It's like Hanukkah. That's what they sang at the Rubenstein's at Hanukkah."

Excepting Peter, none of the boys had gotten high before. Navvie imagined it would feel the same as when a spritz of nitrous oxide surged out of the whipped cream canister and past his blood-brain barrier and wasn't entirely looking forward to it. The N2O gave him headaches.

Daysha was going to tell Mrs. Yacks she didn't think she would be able to speak but instead she said she had to go to the bathroom where she met Tori Fuentes. The blond flower Tori gave her brightened her trembling hand.

Smoking weed was actually a lot better than Navvie expected. Jenny Cantor never asked an RA what happened to her assigned roommate; she was afraid that if anyone found out she would get thrown in with Lydia Yorke whose roommate had dropped out the first week of October, and Lydia was cool but, y'know, double room.

It was one o'clock. Father McCarthy made his way to the altar. He cleared his throat. He was supposed to say a few words. "Excuse me. Everyone, excuse me. I believe Mrs. Yacks would like to say a few words."

Mrs. Yacks slouched to the front of the room.

"Do you think she's alive," Peter said.

"I think, cuz of the wake, she's probably not." Navvie rolled a loose

crumb of gravel under his finger.

"Yeah. It's—She was alright."

"Kind of pretty," Trent said.

"And she had a cat," Jun said.

"I had her in my World History class when we were sophmores," Jordan said, "she did this poster about the Great Depression. It was, um, like, you know the like homeless looking woman holding the kid? It was a collage of different, like, World War II stuff around her."

Peter, who had Government in the same classroom, knew the poster. He had thought it was something the teacher had found online.

Daysha cried through her speech. Once she had gotten to the part where she described how she and Ellie promised they would be godmothers to each other's children she was basically done for. Her eyes were bloodshot; her cheeks ocean-salty. Both her mother and Mrs. Yacks stood behind her and each took a shoulder to squeeze.

"Have you guys heard of the Beatles?" Jordan asked.

"Yeah," Peter said as he took the joint.

"Everyone has," Trent said.

"Who's your favorite Beatle then?" Jordan unscrewed the cap to his water bottle.

"Yoko," said Jun.

"Brian Epstein," said Navvie.

"LSD," said Trent.

"Paul," said Peter.

Coral Life

Joy Tarr



Fred and Willie

Becca Halaney

Two smiling giants
spring strokes of latex, struck onto brick
hugging both sides of the block,
protecting the sanctity
of sweet South Congress Avenue
defending, welcoming, Fred
with his cherry, cardiganed arms,
loving, familiar, a mother—
and Willie, with his pot-
and guitar-grease-braids,
the darling Jesus of Texas;

Barton Springs-cold condensation
from a fresh-squeezed, iceburg-melting
Arnold Palmer trickles between your sweaty-wet fingers—
the humming of the traffic and the rhythm,
ten-gallon-tub drum beats and raw voices
singing praises, from places unidentifiable
in the pine-green hills. On a mission,
a sandal-toed, bare-legged trek
for that Home Slice pizza,
good, good greasy pizza,

and you're stopped

stock

still

out in the friendly, orange-juice sun
where it waves down at you, facing
monumental, watercolor Freddie;
better smile your respects, he blesses
you back. Catty-corner candidate
Willie beams the bumble-bee
sunlight your way—

a floppy slice of Home Slice
in your happy hands, you nod
your respects. Willie asks,
"On the road again?", and Fred
promises shady strolls ahead—
"I like you
just the way you are."

Auntie

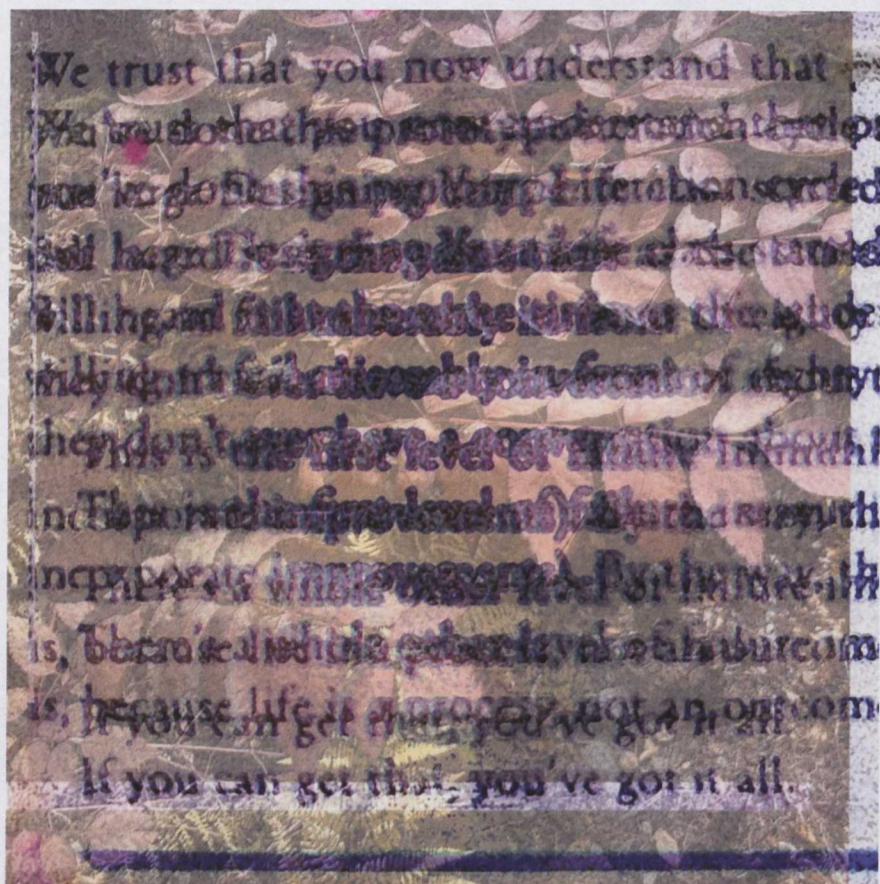
Simone Smith

she sat on the bar stool with the crooked leg
It leaned with her weight but never fell
The smell of cinnamon, brown sugar and shea butter lingered like
the 7 am church service on
Easter Sunday
You knew she was there before you saw her
Her presence of being was an announcement in itself
She never talked much and left her words in her cooking
She'd sit gleefully as she watched how satisfied were the hungry
mouths she fed
As we all sat around the table made with oak and she was the
head
Her fingers pointed commands like magic and the little ones were
always sure to mind their
manners
When she smiled it came out crooked and her hair coiled to frame
her swollen face
But time crept upon us one day and I looked up to find the
stool empty
Leaning on its own and it seemed to be close to collapsing
The oak table that she watched over matched the casket that we
closed
Those once fed mouths turned down with a voracious hunger that
would never once again be full
She left memories in her place and took with her her soul
and the house around us crumbled

If you can get that, you've got it all

Harrison Booth

2nd Place Art



Daight

Eliezer Mercedes

When the moon turned black and the sun no longer shined, all that remained was a loner in the dark. The snowflakes that fell during winter, lifeless, as the merciless draft would swing them back and forth until they reached the ground. The sound of silence was barely louder than my heartbeat, the fingers on my right hand were stiff without the use of gloves, the fingers on my left hand, however, looked just as embers next to the lantern I held. My twenty-bucks leather jacket had reached its freezing point before I threw it aside on the road. Without any source of light other than my lantern, which brightness seemed to be in decay, I sought a place to sleep, with a morning far from existence because of a vanished sun, my life was ill-fated. My feet were used as a white cane since I could not see below my knees, the night grew darker as I walked into what appeared to be a valley. The tall grass stood as high as my hips when I decided I should call it a night, perhaps a day since the sunshine was dispersed and the moon hid behind that dark night's veil.

For as best as I can remember, I slept a lengthy sixteen hours until my eyes began to unconsciously open and take unwanted glances at my doomed surroundings. The first thing I noticed after uncovering myself from the comfortable sheets of wild grass that kept me warm was the deadness of the ashes in my lantern. There were some agonizing embers I blew, attempting to keep the extinguished fire alive a bit longer. After disinflation, my lungs razed with huge drafts of air against my lantern, which gave no better result than an obscure and desolated night, I stood on my feet and started my trip to the unknown.

Not long after leaving the place where I slept, a furious but silent lightning strike descended from within the clouds, illuminating where my future steps would lead me; it had enormous gates and glass windows that appeared to be closed for centuries. As the bright blast of light from the lightning strike began to blend into the night, I rapidly headed over closer to the gates and opened them on a foot kick. Once inside, the weather felt warmer and darkness regained its power over my sight, but I kept walking

straight just before my right foot felt wet, apparently, I had walked myself into a water fountain, but as I directed my feet further in, it appeared to get deeper and deeper.

Fearful of drowning, I turned around seeking an exit, right at that moment another lightning strike lashed out against the pitch-black sky allowing me to find my way out. I hurried to dry land when a shaking voice emerged from near the gates saying:

"I've been waiting for you, follow me inside"

At this point I was as confused as anyone would have been. Wet, hungry and blinded by the dark night I had walked through.

"You live here?" I questioned.

"We all do," he replied.

Suddenly torches were lit all around the walls, including the ones inside the house and outside the glass windows. There he was, a tall, white-bearded man with flaming yellow eyes, his right hand had mutated into a lantern just like a pirate's hook. However, the lantern only contained ashes and dead embers. As I followed him into the house, I noticed something quite peculiar about what he was wearing, he preferred walking barefoot instead of the warmth of a shoe, but most importantly, he was wearing the same twenty-bucks leather jacket I had left behind.

My mind was quickly filled with questions and I tried to keep them slaved behind my tongue. "Why is this place so warm compared to the world beyond those gates?" I asked after not being able to hold myself back any longer. He remained speechless for a moment before he confessed, "There is no longer a world, embrace the warmth of hell."

A black girls song

Simone Smith

A black girls song begins with a verse
the deafening sound of why is your hair so rigid?
My fingers get stuck in it
the sound of pale hands patting my native roots
that to them speaks a foreign tongue
a feign new touch
petted like an animal never before seen
as if they didn't know you're descendant of African Royalty
their ancestors have stolen our last names and replaced it with
their own
removing our only identity
forever their property

A black girls song then comes with a chorus of memorized
eulogies
of their brothers
then their fathers
their nephews and sons
the overwhelming sorrow
wearing the same black dress again tomorrow

A black girls song continues with a refrain
for we are always restrained and denied
condemned to inevitable genocide
forced to have a crowbar for a spine
for we are used and abused
our family tree is a withering weed
for even our own seed does not find us desirable
our sons going for lighter skin
as if their kin was not as dark as the strike of midnight
ignoring the screaming notes
of the insufferable pain of us giving you life

A black girls song is one that is played only once
because black girls lack recognition and praise
blacklisted artist who will never be seen on stage
spit on and taught that our music will never be art

but what black girls want you to know is we do not complain
because we have already learned to fly
even when you insist on clipping our wings
and we are touching everything you have yearned to explore
in search of a new earth
one where black girls can write their own song

We are wide awake

Molly Sherman

3rd Place Art



Goodnight Kiss

Becca Halaney

I almost fall asleep looking at her hair, the way my blue desk light casts a shiny navy onto it, the way it pools over her shoulder and conceals the notes she studies scattered across my bed. Almost 3am and the big exam's tomorrow. She holds a mug of black coffee in both hands, several strands of her black hair dipping into it when she lowers her head too close. Her laugh wakes me back up and I realize she's been looking at me, I've been too busy watching the steam rise from her cup to her lips, patchy and red from being chewed at absentmindedly.

"I guess the match isn't that interesting?"

I smile while stretching and click my controller back to life. "Focus."

"Yeah, I know," she sighs into the mug she brings to her mouth. After a swallow, "Words are starting to look fake. 'Proctor' doesn't look real anymore. Why is it spelled like that?"

The light from the TV on my desk across the room burns my eyes, been staring at it for too many hours straight. The loading screen flickers back on when I toggle the joystick.

"You can sleep, you know, I can do this in the other room so the lights can be off." She brushes a handful of inconsistently wavy hair behind her ear.

Through a yawn I reply, "Nah I'm good, I told Jai I'd be on in a bit."

I can tell her eyes that match her coffee aren't actually reading the words written in small, messier and messier handwriting at the bottom of the page. There's a glint in there, in those bottomless brown eyes the way I met them examining me from across the room at some sweaty frat party the year before. I don't remember any of it except that she came home with me and we'd been inseparable since—take that, hookup culture. In her shorts and my T-shirt instead of a bodycon dress, wrapped in my blanket at the end of my bed, the tender craftiness in her gaze is nonetheless the same. I fell in love with her intelligence, so I know for certain

that's not what it looks like when she's actually thinking about elementary pedagogy; there's something else happening in that brain, something less to do with classwork and more with devising a way to get out of it. I can almost hear her hold her breath before she asks,

"How long until then?" She sucks on the inside of her cheek and still pretends to be reading.

I roll my head against the pillow I'm propped up against to give her an incredulous look. "Nuh-uh, we're not doing anything until you get through that chapter." I can't hold back my smile.

"But I want a break, I've been doing this for four hours now," She tosses her head back with a pout as she says it, "Please, I can't focus on this anymore."

We start a staring contest, a test of nerve before my resolve breaks in response to the pleading crease between her eyebrows. She took her makeup off two hours ago, and that soft, perfect face is irresistible to me like I've long before accepted. I drop my controller onto the mattress and pull off my headset. "Alright, alright, ten minutes, then you get back to work, missy. Com'ere."

A cheeky, triumphant smile splits her rosy face, and she takes two quick swigs before leaning to set her mug down on the bedside table and pushing her papers aside. I grope for my phone buried somewhere under the comforter to set an alarm: 3:10. She's in my arms before I can set it down, nuzzling her face against my shoulder and resting her body halfway on top of mine (I don't tell her that it kind of hurts my ribs). She breathes in deep, relaxing on the exhale.

"I'm worried I'm gonna fail."

"You aren't gonna fail," I pull my head back to look at her. "Look at me, you aren't going to fail."

She purses her lips, glancing up at me with her cheek squished against my shirt.

"Seriously, Kat, you've got this. You've gotten A's on everything else, why not this?"

She huffs a sigh and lets her eyes fall to her hand in mine, drawing meaningless circles with her pinky finger. "I don't know. I hate memorization tests, I do way better on written response questions."

Now her shoulder really is making my ribs hurt, and I shift to extract my arm from beneath her. "Only one more chapter to study, right?"

"Are you okay?" She asks, referencing how I struggle to reposition my arm as a buffer between my organs and her pointy pelvis.

"Yeah," Sniffle, "your hair is tickling my nose, though."

She snorts, "Sorry," and sits upright again. She reaches over her head to bunch it into a ponytail. "Yeah, one more chapter, but honestly I'm really thinking it might be time to say good enough—" Her body freezes.

Seconds pass, seconds of her sitting with her hands suspended in the air, halfway done tying her ponytail up, her face stuck as it was positioned on her last word. "What?"

She doesn't answer me, just sits there, staring at nothing with her mouth agape.

"Kat? Baby, what is it?"

Nothing, and then her mouth snaps shut, her jaw visibly grinding against itself. Her hands fall, her hair falls too, not yet secured. When I realize she can't hear me, I too scramble to sit up on my knees, peering into her tightly focused face. The jaw gnashing continues, her face grows deep red from its usual smooth olive complexion, a vein stands out on her temple, like Dad when he had his seizure on New Years back in 2010, her head begins to tremor. The shakes reach her shoulders and I feel myself trembling too. I don't know what to do now just like I didn't when Dad was lying on the porch, shaking and frothing and there was nothing I

could do, there's nothing I can do. I grab her arms tightly without thinking, my voice wavers as I ask more loudly, "Baby, baby, what's wrong? What's happening? Kat—"

Hot tears are gathering in the corners of my eyes, I know I should grab my phone and call for help but I feel frozen at the spot, afraid to look away from her in case she gets worse, and there's foam beginning to gather at the corners of her lips now white from being clenched so tightly. I can't breathe, I'm hyperventilating watching as she sucks those lips in between her teeth, farther into her mouth, farther than should be possible. If it's a seizure—it looks like a seizure—she's going to bite through her lip, right through it because she can't control herself, but if I try and put my fingers there to hold her teeth apart she could bite right through me instead—

It happens. Blood pours steadily from her pursed mouth, and her head drops against her chest, black hair tumbling to conceal it but I can see her face contorting in on itself, drooping in unnatural places, and as I peer deeper to meet her still-open, vacant eyes, her face is once again split by a grin, but of a different kind. Bloody teeth, too many, her mouth stretches open and open like a snake unhinging its jaw, and there's teeth stretching back into the depths of her throat. Her head keeps lolling back, the bloody hole grows wider until it's her entire face, a mess of broken teeth drooling blood and spit, and for a moment she goes still. My hand is on my phone but I cannot move, I feel disconnected from my body but I know she's sitting only a foot away from me. Before I have time to realize what's happening, she's thrown herself on top of me again, clawing at my face and gnashing her head full of teeth as close as she can get to my nose. I fight, waving my arms and pushing her away by her shoulders, screaming as the teeth scrape my forehead as she furiously bites. She is strong, doesn't seem to feel my kicks and scratches, an insatiable tongue flailing wildly in the cavern of incisors inches away from my eyes. The familiar smell of her breath has become alien—my last thought, because held against the bed I can't move, and my screams are muffled when her teeth sink deeper than I'd thought possible into the left half of my face.

My girlfriend yells, I wake up and jump to sit bolt upright. "What is it?! Why are you screaming?"

She stares at me through wide eyes from where she sits in my rolling chair, next to the desk with a book in her lap and a steaming cup of black coffee in her hands. "Because you were screaming!"

Slowly, I'm able to catch my breath. Nothing happened, it's fine, it was a dream. It was just a dream. I swallow and realize my mouth is painfully dry. "Nightmare, don't worry about it."

"You okay?" Her eyebrows crease together gently, and she stands from the chair to come sit by me on the bed.

"I'm fine now, I'm fine," I take her in my arms, careful not to knock her mug out of her hands.

"Baby," She wraps her free arm tightly around my waist.

"I'm sweaty," I protest.

"It's okay," She traces her fingers slowly up and down my back. "Do you want to talk about it?"

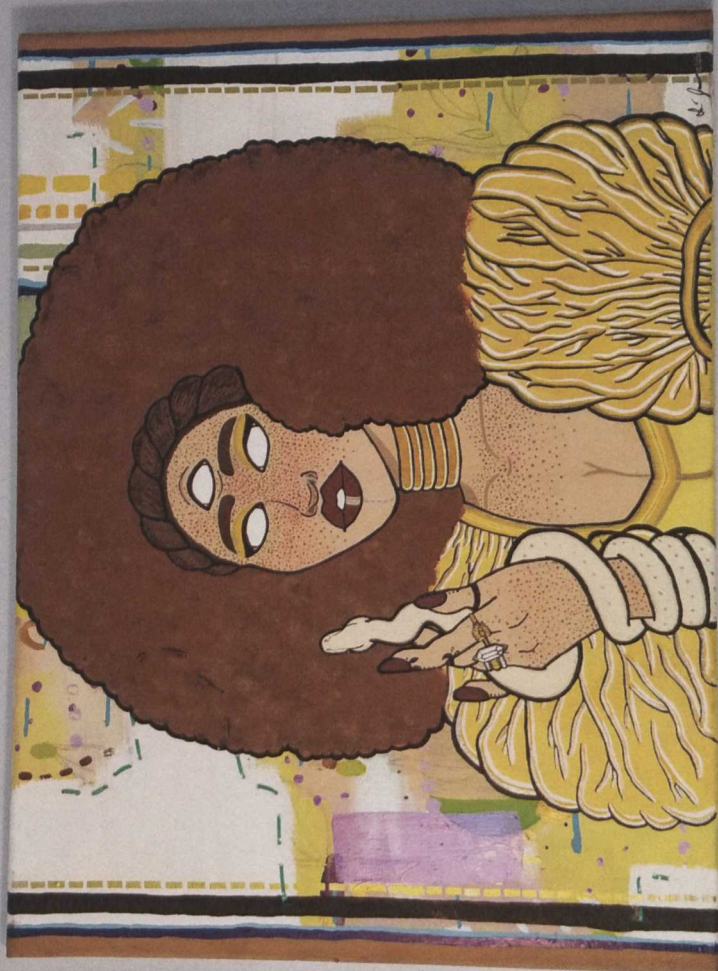
"Tomorrow, right now I just need to chill out." I sigh and close my eyes, letting my head fall back against the pillow. Swallowing is difficult, my body is still tensed and I can hardly feel circulation reaching my fingertips. She extracts herself from me and picks her book back up again.

"Okay, I just have one more chapter, and then I'll settle in with you."

I almost fall asleep again looking at her hair, the way my blue desk light casts a shiny navy onto it, the way it pools over her shoulder and conceals the page she's reading. Before my eyes fall shut, I see it: on the desk across the room, the time on my computer reads 2:59. It's still Wednesday. Almost 3am and the big exam's tomorrow. The sound of twenty hearts pounds against my ears. I'm painfully awake in a moment, and I watch as Kat lifts her hands to bunch her hair into a ponytail.

The Sorceress

Imani Jackson



I want to remember love

Molly Sherman

I want to remember love
Careless touches
In the cozy folds of darkness
Feeling every crack

Hand holding onto the river bank
Or climbing out on a fallen tree
Out on a limb
Feeling weightless

Turning around for an awkward kiss
Arched neck
Skyward eyes
Them, pressed into my back

Wobbling on the metro
Catching stutter steps
Fleeting glances
Pitching sleepy smiles

Trespassing falling houses
High knees in tall grass
Outstretched arms
Beads of sweat splashing the ground

Standing in a crowded room
Liquor sweetened by bitter coffee
Humid cresting air
Passing smoke laced breaths

I want the rush
The stress welling in my gut
The pressure on my lips
Sweetness dripping

Sid the Slasher

Eamonn Fay

Sid the Slasher sat forlornly on the log, absentmindedly sharpening his axe as the campfire roared in front of him. This night had been just as quiet and uneventful as the last two dozen had been. He didn't understand. Lake Emerald Summer Camp had been completely empty since he'd gotten there, which was a first as far as Sid was aware. Where the fuck were the counselors, the preparations, and, most importantly, the teenagers? The best he had been able to do thus far was hacking up a few stray hikers, but there was just no joy in it, and it was painfully obvious to everyone. Hell, the guy he killed earlier that day asked Sid if *he* was alright as he was being stabbed to death. "Yeah!" Sid said in that phony, gruff, murderous tone. "Better than ever. HAW HAW HAW!" Sid had been kicking himself all day for that stupid encounter. He closed his eyes and shook his head. *Haw haw haw?* He thought to himself. *What the fuck was I thinking? That's not scary at all!* Snapping out of it, he sighed and shook his head. He had promised himself he'd stop beating himself over the head for what was over and done with. It wasn't even that embarrassing. Not like there were any witnesses. *Nobody even remembers it but you*, he affirmed to himself.

He had been less sure of himself lately. His nights used to be delightful and chock full of screaming and blood. But every year there seemed to be less and less people. This was the problem with summer camps, and he'd known this: they're fun while they're in swing, but as word gets around that it's a murder camp parents stop sending their kids. Sid thought it over for a moment and reconciled with the fact that this was really nobody's fault but his own. He had peers and colleagues (most of whom had sublime kill counts, mind you) who told him over and over that summer camps were going out of style; kids just weren't interested in the outdoors anymore with their smartphones and doodads. Perhaps he had backed the wrong horse after all. He'd remembered speaking with Slender Dan who had taken to quiet suburbs for his kills with great success. "Let a little notoriety spread," Dan had told him. "All of the sudden you're all over the internet and kids go into the woods looking for *you*." As much as he wanted to, Sid couldn't

argue with Dan's results. Last he'd heard, kids started trying to kill *each other* over Dan. Talk about efficient! Though he envied Slender Dan for his seemingly unique position, Sid silently loathed him for his arrogance and privilege. Not everyone could be born eight feet tall, slim, *and* faceless. And that stupid tuxedo. He hadn't always looked like that. Dan used to wear a tunic and leather pants back in 2011, and Sid really liked the "folk-horror" aesthetic Dan seemed to be going for. The tux, on the other hand, was both a downgrade and an insult in Sid's eyes.

Not that Sid could talk about wardrobe. He was highly insecure about his get-up and went ahead changing it whenever he could. His mask was an especially sore spot for him. He started out with a hockey mask, but he thought it to be a little too kitschy and on the nose. An honest mistake for a rookie. Then he found a creepy demon mask which he tried out for a while, but it was pretty short lived. He read something about theatre around the world in his downtime and, discovering that he had been wearing a traditional Japanese *Noh* theatre mask, decided to scrap that too. As a white person, he didn't want to appropriate something from a culture that wasn't his own. Well, at this point his skin was more of a deathly gray than white. But he still wasn't Japanese, and it just felt scummy to act as though it was his identity. He had settled on a gas mask as of late, which was terrifying to his victims and far more politically correct but a pain in the ass for him. It made his already not-so-great eyesight worse and his breathing difficult, two things that were critical in his line of work. He had wanted to get rid of this one too for a while but hadn't found anything to replace it with. Sid briefly kicked around the idea of using a deer skull as a mask, but that sounded pretty unsanitary and he wasn't exactly handy enough to build a mask out of one. The alternative was going mask-less, and on top of the issue of anonymity he didn't feel he was attractive enough to do that. He sighed and flicked his head. *There you go again with the self-deprecation*, he thought to himself. "No! Bad!" he whispered to himself aloud, pointing accusingly at no one in particular. As he mentally stepped back and evaluated what he was doing, he hung his head down in shame as he realized just how alone he was. All his friends were all abuzz whenever he saw them talking about how well they're doing out in the suburbs, or in rural towns, out becoming local legends in cities... And here was old Slasher Sid

doing the same, tired gig at a *summer camp*. What a joke. He began to quietly panic. *If not this, then what?* he thought to himself. *This is all I know!*

"Oh, damn it," a voice croaked from the brush.

Slasher Sid forgot his self-pity and rose to his feet, his axe ready and his eyes set on murder. Unfortunately, he quickly groaned and sat back down as he realized it was only Melvin the Murderizer, another regular killer around the camp, swatting through the branches toward the campfire. Sid *loathed* Melvin. Melvin didn't have any ambitions whatsoever as a murderer. He started operating around Lake Emerald as an imitator *just* after Sid had begun making himself known there, quickly muddling up Sid's presence and reputation with sloppy, half-assed kills and unhidden bodies.

"I thought you were a camper," Melvin said in a tone that suggested this was entirely Sid's fault.

"Nope," Sid said. "Just me."

"Say, where is everyone?" Melvin said. "I just got here this morning and I haven't seen anybody."

Oh, he *would* show up two fucking weeks late, wouldn't he? Of course he would. This was exactly what Sid hated most about this guy. Where's the pride? Where's the work ethic? Nowhere. Just another contrived, masked leech riding the coattails of others. Before Sid could calm down and answer, Melvin seemed to decide that he was taking too long and went ahead talking. "Me and Dolly just got done over at Camp Lush Wood," he said as he helped himself to a seat by the fire. "Check it out." Melvin presented a necklace made of severed fingers to Sid. *Classless*, Sid thought to himself. "Very nice," Sid mumbled. "Yeaaaaaah," Melvin said as he stretched into a yawn. "Dolly made it for me. Ain't that sweet? We're kind of a power couple." Sid wanted to wretch. If by "power couple" he meant "power to make me lose my fucking lunch" then the name was pretty apt, he supposed. Sid didn't like Dolly, either. She was just as conceited as Melvin but had a personality twice as annoying. Her thing was wearing makeup that made her look like

a doll and laughing like a deranged schoolgirl. Sid thought it made her look like a fucking idiot.

"Guess she lives up to her name," Sid said, not really knowing why. *Why are you engaging with him?* Sid thought to himself. *Don't encourage him! Be a dick! Get him out of here!*

"HA!" Melvin bellowed suddenly. "Good one! Or, uh, should I say HAW HAW HAW?!"

Slowly, Sid looked up from the fire. His face flushed red. He hadn't even considered that Melvin might have seen him. Sid didn't know he had been there, after all. His thoughts raced. Taking a deep breath, Sid reached for his axe and clutched it tightly, unsure of whether to kill Melvin on the spot or to turn the weapon on himself.

"That was a *wicked* kill," Melvin said in what seemed like complete earnest. "I meant to congratulate you on it, but I didn't wanna throw off your game, you know?"

He had thought Melvin was going to make fun of him for that disgusting spectacle, but somehow his approval was worse. Sid figured that if it was worthy of praise from Melvin, he must have been doing something wrong. "Oop!" said Melvin, as though he remembered something. Sid watched in disgust as Melvin pulled a severed, gory arm from out of his bag. "Check this out," Melvin said, taking off his stupid, shitty, banal hockey mask to reveal a toothy smile. Melvin looked pretty average for a prolific serial killer. Still, he managed to be somehow greasier and dirtier than most. "That's an arm," Sid said with noticeable disinterest. "Congratulations."

Melvin shook his head. "Not just any arm." He got up from his seat and started humming the theme from "Rocky" before plopping the stiff limb into Sid's lap. "Here's your trophy, dude!" Melvin said. "I found where you buried the guy and, come on, you can't make a kill like that without taking a trophy." Sid finally lost his shit completely. He... *dug up*... the body? Had he even remembered to rebury it? Why the fuck did he think this was a good idea? What the *fuck* was he supposed to do with an *arm*?! Sid was too angry

not to vocalize each and every one of these points. Unfortunately, they all came out at once as a bizarre jumble of barely intelligible words. "*You... dug... rebury... fuckinnnnnnng... YOU!*" Sid said, seething. "No need to thank me, buddy," Melvin said as he got up and stretched. "Welp, it's been great talking to you, pal. I gotta get back to Dolly. Keep chillin' and killin', broseph." Melvin walked back the way he came and disappeared into the darkness of the leaves.

After staring into the woods for a straight six minutes in pure, flabbergasted wrath, Sid finally hung his head down in resigned shame. He decided right then and there that he was going to give the suburbs a try, which he thought he'd probably screw up because he, as he reminded himself gently, couldn't do anything right.

Weather Experiments
Harrison Booth



August Waltz

John McEachern

2nd Place Poetry

Circling scales and chromatic attacks
Vamp through the ether and thicken like wax,
Seeping through edges of touch and of sound
'Till somehow they seem inseparably bound.

But even as consciousness drunkenly slows,
The hexapod fiddlers quicken their bows,
Tripping uphill until awkwardly poised
Just at the border of music and noise

Suddenly,
 Joining in
 Unison,
 Leveling
Marking an
 End to the
 Music and
 Reveling

Silence—except for a feint, winter wren—
Before starting their seasonal encore again.

Sapling Fruit

Becca Halaney

Ma,

I'm sitting here with crinkling, cold paper
chafing my bare, goosebumped thighs
and latex-glove-lubed pocketbook,
Ma, I'm dissociating down at the folder
in my purple-veined, dirty guilty hands,
and the doc's urged me about a day's worth
of times to go to the clinic, to pay the fee
'cause there's an itching and a burning
and I know you'd flip your shit if you
found out I didn't know which of four
callers had left it behind, if
my tired, foggy urgings, assurances
of my virginity came some years too late,
and Ma,

do you remember when we picked
and prodded, delicate, at the crumpled
photos packed into Opa's tattered
boxes years ago, tearing
the tape and filing them away
all over again? I curled
the corner off the silty page,
and your fingers pushed it firmly
back onto the crumbling paper—

"My first real boyfriend,"
You smiled and smoothed a thumb
across your vintage, teenage
faces. I remember the rush
of bell-bottomed youth and inexperience,
stoned bliss flush back into
your voice and I recognized it
as my own when I, too, would
tumble through the green hills
of college—eventually. I remember

looking up at you with open-bloomed
preteen eyes, back at that boy's mane
of teased Woodstock hair, his motorcycle
handlebar mustache and patchy, pubescent
goatee, not knowing the meaning of "sex"
but periwinkle-naively suspecting
it had something or everything to do with
the melting, tea-kettle-whistling love
in your middle-aged eyes when you told
me, "I thought he'd be the man I'd marry."

Ma,

I remember your nineteen-year-old, cheeky
smile with dainty, crooked teeth, your tall
wispy stature always tricked stiff-backed authority
into thinking you were a good girl, could
tip that one over if you blow on her too hard,
and I remember how you never told me
about the cigarettes, the dirt grass,
the Guinness you kept in your tuition-
provided-mini fridge. I'm sorry, Ma,

but I learned through second-
hand taboo when I called your younger,
hipper sister for help, sitting here,
naked like a newborn, my shiver-
socked feet in janky, poking
cowboy stirrups: you never told me
that, when you were as old as myself,
you, too, sat on this frigid, scratchy
stretcher bed, sick and panicking
because you couldn't tell your

Mother

Ma, how

Were you so stone-faced brave?
Where did you find the dollars and cents,
the loopholes, the courage
to go lie beneath the vacuum?
Why didn't you marry the soft-
smiled, tangle-haired boy
from the photograph? Ma,

did he see the two red lines, did he know
your child's heart carried another
inside of it? Was he excited
for the dirty diapers and Gerber
jars of fatherhood, or did he name
you a Cain-marked sinner?
Did you rush to place your freshly
legal finger into the
diamond offered by another
to ensure that it would never
happen again? Picked a cop for my
father over a bohemian to avoid
flying so close to the sun? Or maybe,
Ma,

it had nothing to do with that
at all, and I know your taut-
lipped shame will never
tell me.

I'm grown now, Ma, as insatiable
a critter as you were in your doll-
faced youth, clawing and choking
through the curse of womanhood
and the contradictions ground into
it—too much a harlot and too much
a puritan—and I wonder when
you forgot the fear that came with
facing Oma's sepia, rotting-
flower judgement, when you
turned that missed-shot judgement
on me, inadvertently, skyward-
gazing leaving me to face
the gnawing jaws of loving,
infection alone.

Six Months

Harrison Booth

What cold and shivering emotion brings the snow,
Harbinger of the failing
Year's silver promises, more than

Mere raindrops slipping into the Celsius underground.
Under a sky of light blue
Schadenfreude, you breathe the joy of the icicles
That hang, glassily content, from the hawthorn boughs.

What happiness brings December, those days of latest Autumn
that
Everyone but you seems to have forgotten.

Winter, then, arrives like the steam from Autumn's dying
exhalation—
Irony engraved in each frosted leaf, that we
Should find beauty lining nature's coffin, and that we use death as
an excuse for
Hot chocolate. But soon you

Find yourself, once the full moon withers to new, wishing
Once more to have your summer constellations back,
Rewriting the browns to emerald,

Turning the blizzards to recrudescant rainfall,
Healing the skeletal meadows and naked canopies—
Every gift of summer

That has wandered away with the year. You become
Hungry for the warm-weather life of a lazy amphibian. Half a day
lying
In the outdoor pool, contemplating
Novel plots and the strawberry ice cream stain on your shirt; half a
day
Groping for your sunglasses in the shade of the cherry tree,
Sitting in the grass with a book on your lap, and sleep in the wind.

Winter and spring soon fly away like crows before the rain, and
Everything you had asked for

Comes back with the swallows catching flies in the yellow air. But
Although you are satisfied at first,
Never can the present fulfill the need for what was and what yet
will be.

Near the end of July, as you watch bats in the blood-orange light
of

Evening plucking mosquitoes' complaints out of a humid sky, the
Vines of longing begin to cling to your lonely memories. For we
live

Ever in the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow, and
Remembering is never enough to fill this empty stomach. You
shiver in the

Haze of the coming dusk,
And hearing the piccolo trills of the
Veeries from deep in the trees, you find your
Ears wishing that they were the sparrows of winter.

Manifestation
Joy Tarr



Dreamin' of Serena

Maddy Lee

What's in the closet? Me, mainly. I have been since middle-school, living deep in the dark like the proverbial childhood monster. More afraid of you than you are of me. But no matter how hard we try to hide parts of ourselves, there is always someone that can see right through it. It doesn't matter if you wear pink. It doesn't matter if your hair is long. It doesn't matter if you wore eyeliner sharp enough to shave with. Birds of a feather have a sixth sense for that kind of thing. They can tell the genuine from the façade—and I had a pretty good facade.

I would be more upset about having my bluff called if it didn't come with an inherent sense of belonging. We're all the monsters in our own closets. We all cuddle up to skeletons at night, and ship our things to Narnia. There's a societal sense that we should be ashamed, but I'm not. I used to be. Then I realized it's no more a defining characteristic than the color of my hair. But even the color of my hair was something I never thought I would change. Until I met a girl that did.

Her name was Serena. She was from Costa-Rica, and introduced herself as a kleptomaniac. I once saw her pawing through the cabinets in the teacher's lounge to see if anybody had a mug she wanted. They didn't, thankfully. But it was my first taste of someone who really didn't care about the rules. Or what other people thought.

When she came out to everyone, she dyed her hair blond. She wore crop tops with rainbow sleeves and overall-shorts. And crocs. She listened to musical soundtracks and was the lead in the school play. Whenever they rehearsed the kissing scene—though her partner was one of the best looking boys in school—she would follow it up with an exaggerated gag. He laughed every time. Everybody laughed—every time. She was the kind of girl people wanted to laugh for.

She changed the game for me. I thought I was supposed to have a crush on her. Isn't that what happens when you meet someone

so unique, so unlike yourself, so characteristic of all the things you wanted to be? She's supposed to be the "manic-pixie-dream-girl"-esque character of my high school romance. Something about 'supposed to' just never clicked. She wound up more like a mentor.

She got her license before anybody else. Drove a giant soccer-mom minivan, and would take me home after drama practices. I played the villain. Beautiful, powerful, queer-coded. No male love interest. The director always commented on how convincing my distaste for the hero was. So did Serena.

On these drives home—which couldn't have been longer than fifteen minutes—we would talk about all facets of life. She told me about the girls she was talking to. She told me about the prides she marched in. She told me about the newest rainbow-colored jacket she ordered off an independent Etsy shop. I was enthralled, listening to a life I just didn't have. She was so unapologetic. I didn't get it.

The day I came out to her, she told me she had a feeling that I was—y'know. She walked me inside for the first time that day. Every other time she had stayed in the driveway to make sure I got to the door safely. I was kind of embarrassed to have her inside. Dad was single, divorced, overworked. Didn't clean much. He bought things off of Amazon every week, even though we never had the space for them. I cowered as we walked in. She sat on the couch and didn't even glance around. Not a single second of judgement. She asked me when I knew, what I went by, how I defined all this. She asked if I was out. I told her no, and watched a strange look cross her face.

Disappointment? Sadness? Maybe nostalgia. It made me more conscious of myself than I had ever been in her presence.

A small part of me wanted to drag her back in the closet. We could play dress up with mom's heels like we were five. We could make shadow puppets on the wall. She could keep me company in the cramped, decrepit space that I called my own.

But I knew she wasn't like me. Not on a surface level. Not even

deep down. I was like a cactus. Thorny, unapproachable. I didn't need the light to survive. She was a sunflower. Wherever the brightness was, she held her face to it and basked in the glory. She wasn't afraid of exposure to the elements or being picked out of the ground by passing children.

We sat on the couch for another two and a half hours. Talking. About all things that our respective experiences had taught us. Had made of us. The more she talked, the more human she became. I saw the cracks in the image I had glorified. The more she talked, the less human she became. I saw the sincerity in all of it. The blinds were never open at dad's house. As the sun went down, the darkness grew. We sat across from one another in the equivalent of dim-lit candle lighting. The mood was—palpable.

She leaned forward to kiss me. I knew it was coming as soon as I saw her eyes lid. Her eyeshadow was a sparkly pink, splashed across the canvas without care for detail or mess. She was beautiful, magnanimous, eccentric, vibrant, confident. She was perfect. And I didn't want to kiss her. I told her so, and she froze in her spot. A wrinkle developed in her brow. Not hurt. Not rejection. Confusion.

"You don't?" she asked. I reiterated my no.

And she laughed. Incredulous and delighted. A response was on her lips when the lock in the door snapped. Dad walked through, flicking the lights on. He had another Amazon box in his arms. He gave a warm hello to Serena, a friendly "how was your day?" to me. As slow as the intensity had come, it dissipated into nothing. She was just a girl. Just a friend. And my dad was home.

She didn't stay for long after that. Slung her backpack onto her shoulder and gave me a soft goodbye as she headed back out to her car. I watched her go through the visible slit window in the door. It was winter, and already growing dull and dim outside.

I came out to my dad that night. It was a long, tedious, and wildly uncomfortable conversation. He took it surprisingly well. I wondered why I hadn't done this sooner. He came out to me too. Told me all about why he and my mom hadn't worked out. Told

me about his own experiences in his own closet. How deep and dark it felt some nights. How controlled and quaint it felt on others. Neither of us went to bed until the wee hours of the morning.

The next week at school, I was different. Still closeted, don't get me wrong. I would be coughing up coat hangers for another two or three years. But I carried myself taller. Prouder. I would never be bold or vibrant. I would never live a life in the unadulterated sun. I would never draw people to me or be the first one noticed in a crowded room. I would never be Serena. But I wasn't alone. There's something to be said for that.

I dyed my hair red second semester. Not bright, just over the top of my natural color. You could really only see it on summer afternoons, when it reflected the light around it. Serena was the first one to notice, then everyone else. They talked about how pretty it was. How much it suited me. I agreed. It did suit me.

And even miles deep in the dark, the lonely, and the secretive—even in pitch darkness when you couldn't even see five feet in front of your face—it suited me. When I wanted bright red, if I ever did, it would be there. But for now it was for me.

For me and anyone I chose to share the light with.

A Cyclic Killing, a Cyclic Wait

Harrison Booth

3rd Place Poetry

Nothing will
Change us
If an ocean can't.

All the time now
I feel a light,
Stinging rainfall
Eating away at the monumental
Promise we call hope.
There is a
Chrysalis, suspended over cerulean
Undulations, a
Vessel with something radiant beneath its
Seal—a beautiful, restless
Day. By day I watch the coast for a lingering
Signal of life within
Its
Womb, something telling me we're nearing
Some kind of end, something freed from its cage
Of procrastination.

We're sick—
But we're unable to
Pin down
What ails us. For better or worse, something is about to burst, and
we're trying to bring the
Circle around, comprehend, comprehend.

Until the last feather falls,
You will not see me shiver
Like November is coming.
You will not hear me break
Like the leaves burning
Crisp
On the desert forest floor.
Drowning fish
And children with their own breath

caught in their throats
Crowd on our doorsteps with something
They are trying to tell us. They

Beg with methane eyes, reach out like

They are trying to tell us. They
Crowd on our doorsteps with something
Caught in their throats,
And children with their own breath
Drowning fish
On the desert forest floor—
Crisp
Like the leaves burning.
You will not hear me break
Like November is coming.
You will not see me shiver
Until the last feather falls.

Circle around, comprehend, comprehend
What ails us. For better or worse, something is about to burst, and
we're trying to bring the
Pin down...
But we're unable to.
We're sick

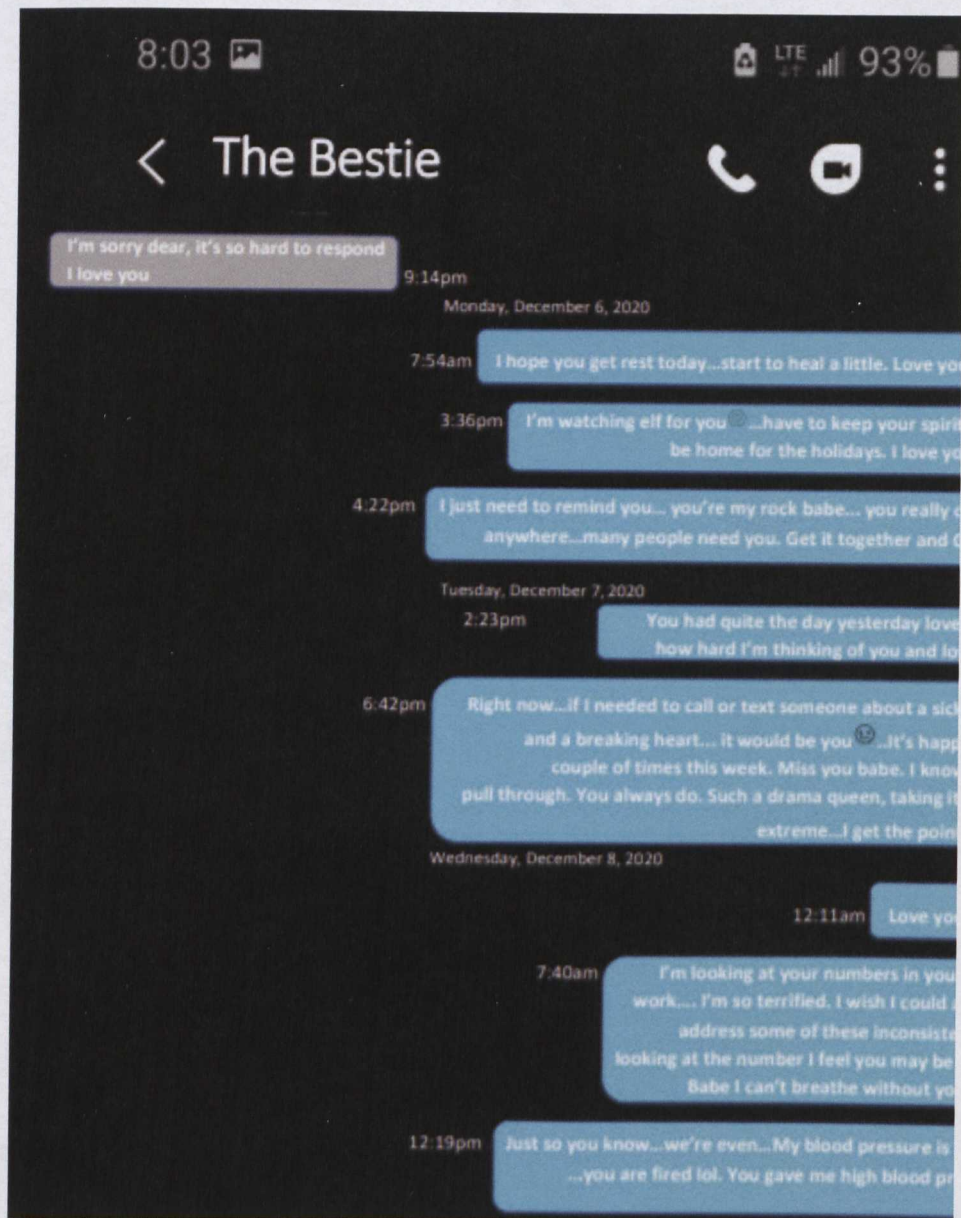
Of procrastination.
Some kind of end, something freed from its cage
Womb, something telling me we're nearing
Its
Signal of life within.
Day by day I watch the coast for a lingering
Seal, a beautiful, restless
Vessel with something radiant beneath its
Undulations, a
Chrysalis suspended over cerulean.
There is a
Promise we call hope
Eating away at the monumental
Stinging rainfall...
I feel a light,

All the time now.

If an ocean can't
Change us,
Nothing will.

COVID Coma

Laura Vonella



7:15am I go to work today... ugh I'd rather not.

8:17am So yesterday I did not want to leave the house because I couldn't find under ware that fit lol... I am eating my feelings...right now I need you to just kind of walk out of there.

10:28am 🤔 🧊 🌨️ 🌨️



MMS5:57pm

Thursday, December 10, 2020

12:37pm I'm watching a movie called Burnt with Bradley Cooper... every time I see eggs I want Korean lol...ugh miss you

3:54pm This lady just came in the store... a bit of a B**** really... I was super sweet and she was short and didn't smile...then I realized I was looking at me lol...remind me to smile when going out lol

Friday December 11, 2020

7:05pm Stannis just burned his daughter alive!!!!

7:56pm They killed John Snow!!!! 🤔

Saturday December 12, 2020

7:51am I'm watching "happiest season" Twilight girl is looking....buuutthhh. In a hot way?

2:19pm You're getting better babe.

5:14pm So I'm finally watching Super store... this is the dumbest, funniest s*** ever.

Sunday December 13, 2020

12:27pm ...it's the 13th...you're still under. At this point I'm guessing you would make me get a tree. I guess I need to for Dominic. I miss you.

2:40pm Babe! They are waking you up! Keep fighting... stay on track. Come home.

7:15pm Your D-Dimer went down thank God. Still not out of the woods...but so much better.

Monday, December 14, 2020

8:26am Yesterday was great news... some reason... today is hard.

9:19am It's snowing 🌨️

7:23pm RAMSEY IS NUTS!!!!

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

2:17pm Who do I tell this crazy S*** to.....come home babe.

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

8:14am Babe...it's two weeks now. I miss you.

2:11pm It's ...supposed to get up to 12 inches. Wish you were here to tell me to get bent.

4:25pm Today you're not so great babe.... must be the weather.
Come home or go home. We love you and everyone misses you so much.



MMS 4:26pm

Thursday, December 17, 2020



MMS 8:35am It was pretty... you would have liked waking up to it on a day with nothing to do.

10:17am You're breathing better babe. You have GOT to start breathing on your own. You have a fight when you get out...don't worry about that.. you will have everything you need for that. I just need you to breathe.

10:33am Dominic said to start writing to you. I wish I would have from the start so you could see how crazy it has been for you.

4:24pm well if you were awake I would ask what opinion I hold hardest... the honors program asked me to join...I have to send 2 more essays.... ugh I don't know if i'm honor good.

10:00pm Everyone is asleep here. It's one of those times you want someone to talk to... you were always that someone...I just think of things you would tell me... it's so hard...it's so hard right now.

Friday, December 18, 2020

8:56am Cooking today...it's the kind of day you would be here schooling me on it...miss you.



MMS10:22am



Saturday, December 19, 2020

6:20pm Everything will be ok

9:29pm Remember when you were like, why does Ry want to bite...and I was like aww he's a kitten...yeah so that was a D*** answer I see now. His brother has an affinity for biting!!!!

Sunday, December 20, 2020

11:06am You will be ok

7:07pm For prosperity sake...I may need to watch "Down to you". I know it's your fav. I finished Game of Thrones...finally. There is much to talk about.

Monday, December 21, 2020

MMS9:08am



Brothers 😊😊 just like Ry lol

6:43pm Devil wears Prada tonight... many many times wanting to text lol

7:48pm Your work was pretty amazing tonight. They went above and beyond today...so many people love you ❤️

Tuesday, December 22, 2020

8:57am I hope I am making good choices.

10:41am I hope you can dream right now. I hope you are somewhere on a 🌊

10:42am Ry is doing great. Misses his dad but he's ok. ❤️ ...him and his brother have so many similarities now that he's older.

Wednesday, December 23, 2020

5:42pm Best day ever... today solidified knowing you another 20 years ❤️

5:47pm I'm so excited I can't stand it

Thursday, December 24, 2020

MMS10:20am



It is only up from here. I cannot wait.

3:04pm You are awake and sitting there... and I can't talk to you...
...I have realized I have no patience.



MMS3:53pm

Friday, December 25, 2020

1:17pm I think today you would be ok with it snowing.



MMS 11:34am Christmas lovin

5:33pm I know being alone must be scary...not talking to some one
when you want or need to. I wish I was there more than
anything in my being. Please stay strong... continue to improve.
You will be home in no time.

7:34pm Merry Christmas babe. Merry Christmas

Saturday, December 26, 2020

2:49pm I talked to you today. I don't know why I'm so nervous about it...
it was such a relief to hear you speak.

Sunday, December 27, 2020



MMS 12:50pm

Victoria Page will not dance the dance of the red shoes tonight



3:52pm

Soooo...bringing your phone to you finally.... there is so much to tell you



MMS 3:55pm

Been a month and a few days... I just kinda want to stare uncomfortably at you lol... and watch you breathe lol

4:02pm

I just want you to know I am here for literally anything you need. I don't want to over burden you with my Guatemala-ness???lol.. but I don't want you to have to make any extra efforts that are not needed. So whatever you need. At this point being useful to you makes everyone feel better. A lot of people were pulling for you. I hope it isn't over whelming.

Tuesday, December 28, 2020

5:53pm

Seems you may be a bit still...and they wouldn't let me bring you anything...so stupid. I hate that you're just sitting in a room 🙄

8:31pm

Over this now 🙄

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

2:12pm

Hopefully rehab soon love. I HATE not being able to help.... If you ever want to hear the ridiculousness that went on during this whole thing... lol

Jesus 🙄

I will need you to never die again lol

Wednesday, December 30, 2020

8:47am

You get your phone back today. It'll be weird not texting you everyday no lol. There are so many people who want to reach out to you. Focus on getting better. You will be home in no time.

Today

.... typing

Just Now



head empty

Morgan Bliss

here's the thing
i say head empty, no thoughts as often as i please in place of
some longer explanation
no forgetful, no eerie hazy of what should be complex neurons
firing scattered all to
dust, no concerning inability to focus

just
head empty
no thoughts
nothing is so much easier than the confusing wealth of something
i don't know

but i try not to lie (i really do)
and that all really isn't wholly true
sometimes my head is full of thoughts but they just aren't right
or so i'm told
they're not profitable enough to be valued, they're not smart
enough to be academic
an endless mass of questions upon questions and disconnected
facts spinning idly
around
maybe, if i'm lucky, a brain cell bouncing between the walls of my
mind like the old
windows screensaver and when it hits a corner i am graced with a
moment of
coherency
never enough

maybe it's some cycle of rebirth,
as for the first eighteen years of my life i was placed on a pedestal
to be smart and gifted
and somehow better, just for the speed of thoughts and efficiency
to which i could focus
them down
but only because i had to
i had no choice in understanding or any understanding at all,

no real learning just
absorbing information to spit it back out in the fiery fury of a child
given rights to ask
questions
i wonder where those thoughts all went

i certainly had them, with grades to prove it, and the knowledge
enough to fake a smile
and hide tired eyes
i was told that brain cells don't grow back, when you hit your head
hard enough
head trauma shatters the fragile connections of systems i don't
understand
what of unkindnesses?

every time i was told to shut up
that's a stupid question
every time my words got caught in my throat for the thoughts
moved too fast to even
speak them
every time i was ignored for being just, like that
curiosity tamped down, taped shut, put away, told it wasn't for the
time and left to rot

i think that's what happened
thoughts left to stagnate and wilt no longer sought the light of
being thunk and
questioned and thought

head empty
no thoughts left

but there's still something there, now
even if it's not right by these binary standards of professionalism
we've holed ourselves
so tightly into
who am i to neglect the sparks of life that have made their nest in
the wasteland of a
space that was once thriving
some metaphor of a weed blooming in concrete
they are mine, and curious, and that is value enough
full of thoughts. just not the way they're wanted to be heard.



July
Harrison Booth

(I Have Buried) Good and Terrible Men

Maddy Lee

"It's not your turn," he said, his voice booming throughout the garden. Deep and powerful, spoken from on high. It shakes the bones, but not the ground. As my heart hammers, the leaves upon the trees are still. There is no wind here.

But the garden is beautiful. Cobblestone walkways in between man-eating flowers, willowy trees wrapped around the low-lying iron fence. A post is set up before each plot, a little white card printed in swooping, scratched letters. I stand before them.

Primula vulgaris. The primrose. I run the soft pink petals, rounded outwards, through my fingers. It looks the way I might have drawn a flower from memory—like a child's picture shown for approval. Perhaps fitting, then, that the primrose is the flower of youth—of folly and naivety. I've always been fond of the young—their passion, their optimism, their virtue. The petals tear beneath my fingers. They are not built to last.

"It's not your turn," the voice says, closer this time. I turn around to find him, robes fading into the pavement. So dark, he is impossible to see; so bright, he is impossible to look at. I squint and shade my eyes with a hand.

"When?" I ask.

He answers, "You should have gone by now."

I don't want to go, but he knows that without my saying it. I want to be here. I want to be young and taste the nectar from the flowers, the sap from the trees, the raindrops that pool in the leaves of the brush. I want to be safe—and foolish.

He does not acknowledge this. Instead, he reaches above his head. The dying wisps of twigs awaken at his presence, sprouting fruit and leaves before a second has passed. It's a magnificent sight—the gift of life in real time. Outside the garden, the world is not beautiful like this. It's dark, harsh, and warring. The fruits of

my home are watered in tears, not raindrops. He hands it to me, bright purple and ripened.

"Eat," he says. *Leave*, he means.

I take a last glance at the primroses. They turn their faces to him, delicately blooming. Each one, a child, experiencing love for the first time. They bloom and die daily, save a miraculous handful. Those few bloom for lifetimes, tenderly plucked from the ground, planted in a plot all their own on the farside of the garden.

I have never seen the farside of the garden.

"Eat," he says again. He is Life and Light, Death and Darkness, All and Nothing. He is not meant to ask twice. I sigh, and take a tiny bite of the fruit. It is profoundly sour, stinging my tongue as I chew.

He becomes easier to look at. The garden starts to wilt, fade, and retreat into the distance. The cobblestone path underneath grows infinitely, taking with it only me and him. He removes his hood. This time, he takes a familiar face. A kind boy, two weeks out from an engagement. He died last night, I think. I remember his name in the reports. When he speaks, his voice still booms, but more distorted and from far away. He sounds underwater. He sounds like drowning.

"Don't return, child. There is nothing for you here."

.....

The garden, the man, the reprieve—all of it goes dark. I awake back at home, spine aching in my armchair, smoky tendrils of a candle long gone out around me. There is a chill in the air and the permeable stench of death and boiled meat. My sister, aged ten years in ten days, lays her head upon my desk, sleeping soundly. When I stand, my knees crack and lock. I grit my teeth, and cross the uneven threshold to the bedroom. The mattress is soft—fit for a Queen. I will not sleep a wink upon it.

Outside these drywalls, men, women, and children are dying by

the hundreds. Everyday. These dark days have been long and brutal, and I fear all we might lose before we gain. I fear loss is not the worst we will know before it's all over.

If I were lost, I think, maybe I could stay in the garden for all my days.

Then again—

I glance at my sister, lips parted and a small pool of spit forming beneath. She's still young, though older than our mother was when she had us. The day had been long and exhausting. I wonder if the clanging of walnut and silt plays in her mind like it does in mine. Old and new friends alike are outside, strumming songs of reunion on the guitars and bringing tin-foil wrapped meals with the sunrise. Too many good have gone before us. Too many more have yet to go. I try to justify this year and come up empty. Until the stonemason runs out of work—until the coroner's name is once more forgotten—we are stuck. Even then, it will not rid our home of its ghosts, weighing heavy upon us in dropped gazes—in empty chairs—in slips of the tongue.

Something sounds outside and I look to the door. When the handle turns, I'm expecting him to walk through.

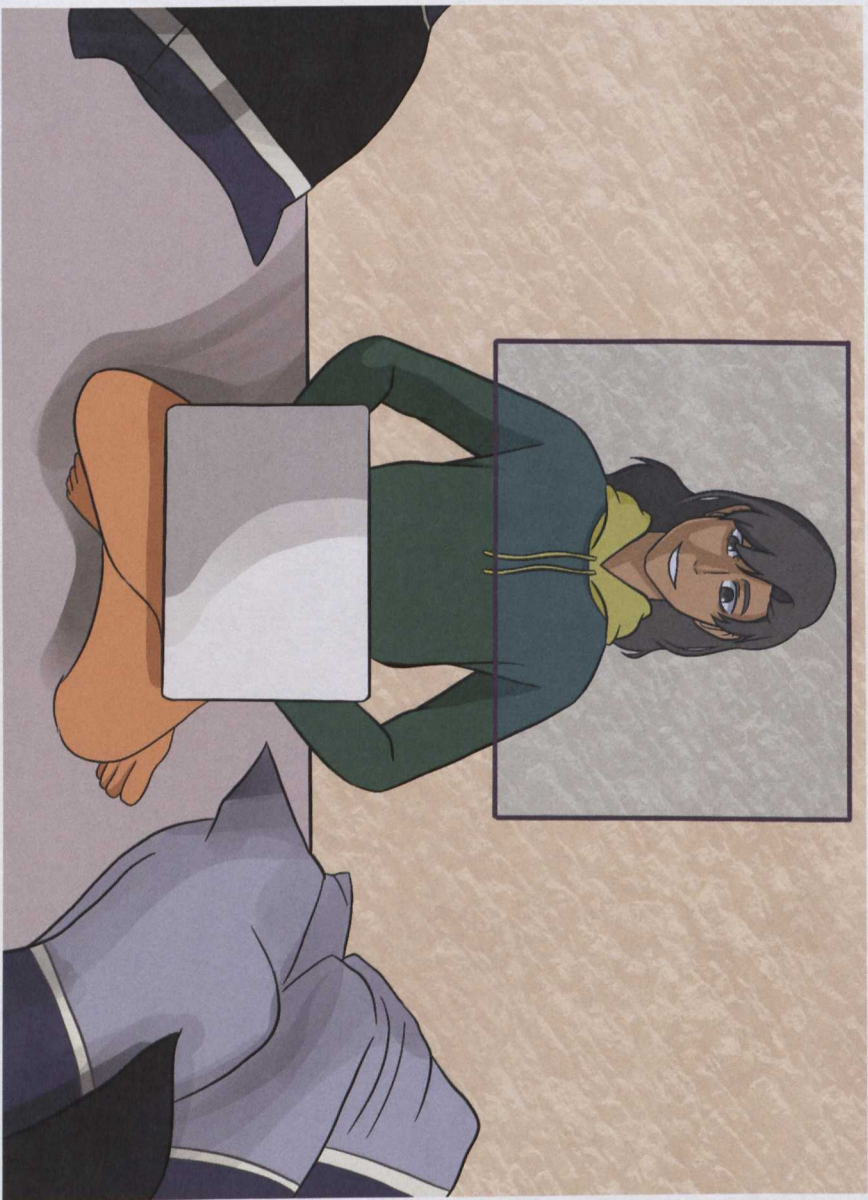
But he doesn't. It's my father, telling me to get some rest for the day ahead. Come morning, there will be more meals to be delivered, more hugs to begrudgingly accept, more unending ennui to endure. The people mean well and hope, in their kindness, that they might care for us enough to reverse the irreversible. They won't, but for this they cannot be blamed. The year has been vicious to many of them as well, and ours is hardly the first tragedy to carve itself upon this town's soul. And there they will be each time to offer their help and to fail. To witness. Perhaps this makes them braver than us—for though it's my first, I cannot fathom worse.

The sun will rise at the top of the hill—on the other side of the threshold and millions of miles from the garden. It is our own place to be—where, sadly, we are all too welcome. Immortal beds lined one by one in their asymmetry, some high with the mounds

and some low with the valleys. There, we have buried good and terrible men alike.

Tomorrow, worst of all, is when we bury the in-between.

***A Frame of
Blue Light***
Jyoti Duwady



marchgustuary

Danielle Wendt

so long since i've left my house,
my skin is permanently marbled blue,
so pale,
i'm worried the sun has also decided to
social distance.

my self-inflicted hibernation
was sorely lacking preparation.
the soothing empty
has become an endless fogginess,
a nothingness that makes my head spin,

i don't know what month it is,
or the last time i was
risen before the sun hit its peak,
or when i will stop feeling
the heaviness of my bones.

the two-week break has become
so vast i can hardly see straight.
i miss your arms around mine.
i never knew how wide a gap
six feet could make.
i never knew how long
two weeks could take.

Father Paul and the Victorian Titty

Painting

Eamonn Fay

Father Paul sat in the pews of St. Bartholomew's in silence. The confessionals had been empty all afternoon. It was unusually quiet, even for a Monday. Typically, the more devout would be coming in to atone for missing a mass or something to a similar level of non-heinousness. Today, though, there hadn't seemed to be anyone. Father Paul glanced at his watch. Two-forty-five. As long as he had been there, never had Father Paul seen a totally empty confession. There usually had been at least one or two people, but never zero. Father Paul was growing a bit tired and antsy. He had finished every decade of the rosary and prayed for just about everyone he could think of in the time he had been waiting. He got up and began to pace about the church. He never liked the look of the place much. It was large compared to most churches, but not terribly ornate. The drab, beige walls were only broken up by wooden beams and second-rate stained glass that was bright in contrast to the rest of the place but looked too vague. He had looked at each window trying to figure out what they depicted but never saw anything more than random colors. Father Paul looked up to the front of the church and sighed for the crucifix which was showing its age. Decay was beginning to eat away at it, and the subsequent headache of having to get it refurbished with the church's already tight funding was beginning to eat away at him.

The doors clattered open from behind him. Father Paul turned to see who had come in. A stout man entered wearing a black, knitted cap and a leather jacket. His hands were tucked deep into his pockets, and he looked about in a seemingly confused manner. As his eyes met Father Paul's, he gave a halfhearted smile, nodding his head quickly. Father Paul smiled, somewhat relieved, and made his way into a confessional. He sat silently in the dark for a minute or two, patiently waiting for the man to join him. Suddenly, there was a knock on the confessional door on his end. Father Paul opened the door and looked at the man expectantly. "Something wrong?" he said to the man. The stranger awkwardly avoided the priest's eyes and mumbled to himself for a moment before finally admitting that he didn't know how this worked. The priest nodded

in understanding and pointed out to the other door. Nodding in quick understanding and tacit thanks, the man went into the other door on the other side of the confessional booth.

"It's so dark in here," the man said. "Is there a light?"

"I take it that this is your first confession?" Father Paul said.

"My first what?" the man said.

"The sacrament of penance?" the priest clarified. "This is where you confess your sins to God."

The man was silent. "Oh, no," the man said. "No. That's not what I'm here for."

"Oh," said the priest. "Excuse my presumption. Please, step out. We'll talk outside then."

The priest stepped out into the church, listening as the man fumbled about the confessional looking for the doorknob. "Damn it," he muttered to himself from inside. Father Paul sighed and opened the door for him. Looking at the priest in what seemed like shock, the disoriented man nodded again in thanks before stumbling out of the booth and into the light.

"So," the priest said. "What can I do for you?"

The man, still avoiding his gaze, cleared his throat. "I've got a bit of a problem with my house," he said. "And I was looking for an exorcist."

The priest was a bit taken aback. "An exorcist?" the priest said. "That's a bit... out of my jurisdiction. I may be able to tell you how to *get* one, but may I first ask why you would like one?"

"You see, sir, erm...or do I call ya Father?" the man said, looking at the priest for confirmation. The priest sighed and nodded his head. "Either is fine," the priest said. "Go on."

"Well, Father," the man said. "You see the other week I went to that

flea market they do in the plaza every Sunday. I was lookin' about as usual and this painting catches my eye. It looks a little old, a little chipped. It's a painting of some lady who looks straight outta Victorian times. Big curly hair, you know the look. But—and keep in mind I didn't get it to... to *look at it* or nothin' you understand—the woman in the painting is nearly buck naked. It's real tasteful, you see? You don't see no more than sideboob. Now again allow me to stress this: I did not buy it to... *do the dirty*."

The priest shook his head in mild discomfort. "I believe you. Go on."

"The *real* reason I bought it was to see if I could make a quick buck, you know? It's old, it's valuable maybe. So, I ask the guy if it's really old and he says yes, and that it's original. I asked him how much and he told me to just take it and said he couldn't sell the damn—I mean—darn thing anyhow. So, I decide why not? I take it off his hands, get lots of weird looks on the way home, and I set it up in my room. Y'know, just until I figure out a better place for it. Covered up. Of course. But, anyway, here's why I came in: that night, weird stuff started happening. It's the middle of the night, two, three in the morning maybe, and I wake up to the sound of the painting falling flat onto the ground. *Boof!*"

Father Paul jumped slightly at the man's sudden exclamation which had echoed through the church. "Oh," the man said. "Sorry. Too loud?" The priest quickly regained his composure and tried with great effort to mask his annoyance.

"And then... the laughin'. From somewhere in the room, I hear this laughing. This crazy, wild lady laughing. I'm terrified, Father, *petrified*. I couldn't move an inch I was so damn scared. Eventually I worked up the balls—err—*guts* I mean. Sorry." The man made a quick, upside-down sign of the cross and made finger guns at the crucifix. Father Paul could only watch in complete bewilderment. "Anyway, I finally worked up the guts to turn on the lamp on my nightstand. I turn it on, and *boom*. The laughing stops, and the painting is knocked over."

"Are you sure it wasn't just a dream?" the priest asked. "Or some sort of sleep paralysis?"

"Damn sure," the man said. "I mean—darn sure. Never had no dream like that. Anyway, I picked up the painting and—Father, you're not gonna believe this—the lady in the painting changed! She was facing me now—a full frontal! And there is some full on boobage! I mean—rackage—I mean—breastage?" After a moment of lingering silence, he did another sign of the cross and finger guns combo toward the crucifix again. "Stop doing that," the priest said in exasperation. "And look, if you're trying to confess that you picked up a racy painting, you haven't got to jump through all these hoops. We all succumb to our lust at times. We can get back into the confessional and—"

"Woah!" the man said, offended. "You think I'd take something like that for... sexy reasons? I promise ya, I am not the type of guy to go looking for a smutty, Victorian titty painting, alright? So, as I was saying..."

The priest held a hand up to him, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. He pulled one from the box and felt around his pocket for his lighter. "Let's take this outside."

They walked through the vestibule into the frigid, winter air. The parking lot was mostly empty. Father Paul saw his own car and—presumably—the car the strange man came in. It was a grim and unpleasant reminder that he was truly alone with him. The priest lit his cigarette, took a long drag, and motioned for the man to continue.

"Anyway, the lady in the painting is now full-frontal nude. And I'm thinkin': 'the hell did I just buy? I gotta take this back to the dude! But the next flea market ain't until next Sunday, so I had to keep it in my house a little longer. So, I do. I put it up in my attic, cover it up, and forget about it. Couple nights go by. Maybe three or four days. But the other night I heard it again! The laughing! And something's bumping around up there in the attic, too! First, I try and tell myself: it's rats. It's gotta be rats. Forgive me for my naivete. The deadliest of the eight sins, I know. I just couldn't face the truth. Then, all the sudden, it stops: the rummaging, the laughing. Then I hear the attic ladder coming down! Then creaky footsteps... creak... creak... creak... Then comes this dainty little knock at my bedroom door. 'Who's there?' I yell, grabbin' my

slugger from my bedside. Silence. Nothin' but silence. A minute passes. Then another. Eventually I get sick of waitin'. So, I open the door and... nobody. Nobody's there."

Father Paul flicked his cigarette into a nearby trashcan and, after realizing the man wasn't done, promptly lit another.

"The attic ladder is down. That laughing starts again, clear as day! Real slow, I look into that dark attic and what do I catch a glimpse of? Father, I tell you: you don't know *true* fear until you see the bona fide bare bum of a ghost. Right there! Right in front of ya! Real as milk!"

"As *milk*?" the priest mouthed to himself.

"Honestly, Father—bottom line is—it scares the piss—I mean—pee right outta me!" the man said. "And—I'll come to confessin' for it, I promise—I've got ladies over sometimes. I can't have a naked ghost broad walking around laughing at nothing while I've got ladies over! It's scary, and just a bad look. A lot of undue explaining. *Kills the vibe*, you know? So, can you help me, Father? Can you exorcise this demon?"

The priest thoughtfully took the last puff of his second cigarette, exhaling the smoke with an exasperated sigh before flicking it into the trash can beside him. He nodded in semi-understanding, still without even the faintest clue as to where to begin. "Well," the priest began, clearing his throat. "This isn't exactly my area of expertise. But if you *are* in complete earnest and don't think these are simply delusions, I can get you in touch with someone who knows more than I do about it. Or I can bless your house for you if you wish. But that's about the extent of what I can do." He held his breath and prayed to God that the man wouldn't take him up on either of his offers.

The man shook his head. "No, no," he said. "I need an exorcism. And fast. Damn it."

"Maybe get rid of the painting, then?" Father Paul said. "Burn it if you have to?"

"That won't do," the man said, not caring to explain himself further. "I'll try St. Matthew's next." Without so much as a thank you, the man walked to his car in a huff. The engine of his car rattled and roared coarsely as he sped off. Father Paul barely had any time to process what had just transpired before another car suddenly pulled into the lot. A young lady bundled up with a heavy coat and a red scarf stepped out of the car and hurried up the steps. Father Paul recognized her from last Sunday's service. "Excuse me," she said to the priest. "I know I'm late. Would you by any chance still be doing confessions?" Father Paul checked his watch. Three-fifteen. He smiled and shrugged. "It's a bit late," the priest said. "But I'm not busy. Please, come in." The young woman smiled. "Thank you," she said. "I'm nervous. This is actually my first confession."

"Don't be," Father Paul said. "Trust me, you aren't going to surprise me."

First Sunrise
Maddy Lee



On A Train in Late December

John McEachern

I sit still, racing with the howling whip past
Windows shrouded in thin screens of dark,
Draped from rods of stiff, plastic light.
Out in the cold, the ones returning last,
They and I recline, laying stiff backs on stark,
Groovy fabrics, flashing dull and bright.
Over there, the aisles and emptying seats
Opening a velvet chasm between us,
Sits a man typing out twilight hours;
A student under rough, zippered sheets;
A child, stumbled over her fuss;
Her mother, a sighing, sentinel tower.

No sooner are Sleep's contorted conditions met
Then I awake to a cut hum and delay's awesome threat

The plastic lights flicker and quit
And as their shrouding beams remit,
In a cloud-ringed dome, passing by,
There appears a cold and starry sky.
It vaults over fields of corn and rushes,
Trees like soiled chimney brushes,
Cities grasping with distant glow
At the shapeless mass of nightly flow:
Layer upon layer, dark and dark
Stretching back beyond the sparks,
Of pale blue light which dully shine
Through the just cracked doors of endless time.

Far below, snow falls in silence, never to shatter
From answers to questions that no longer matter.

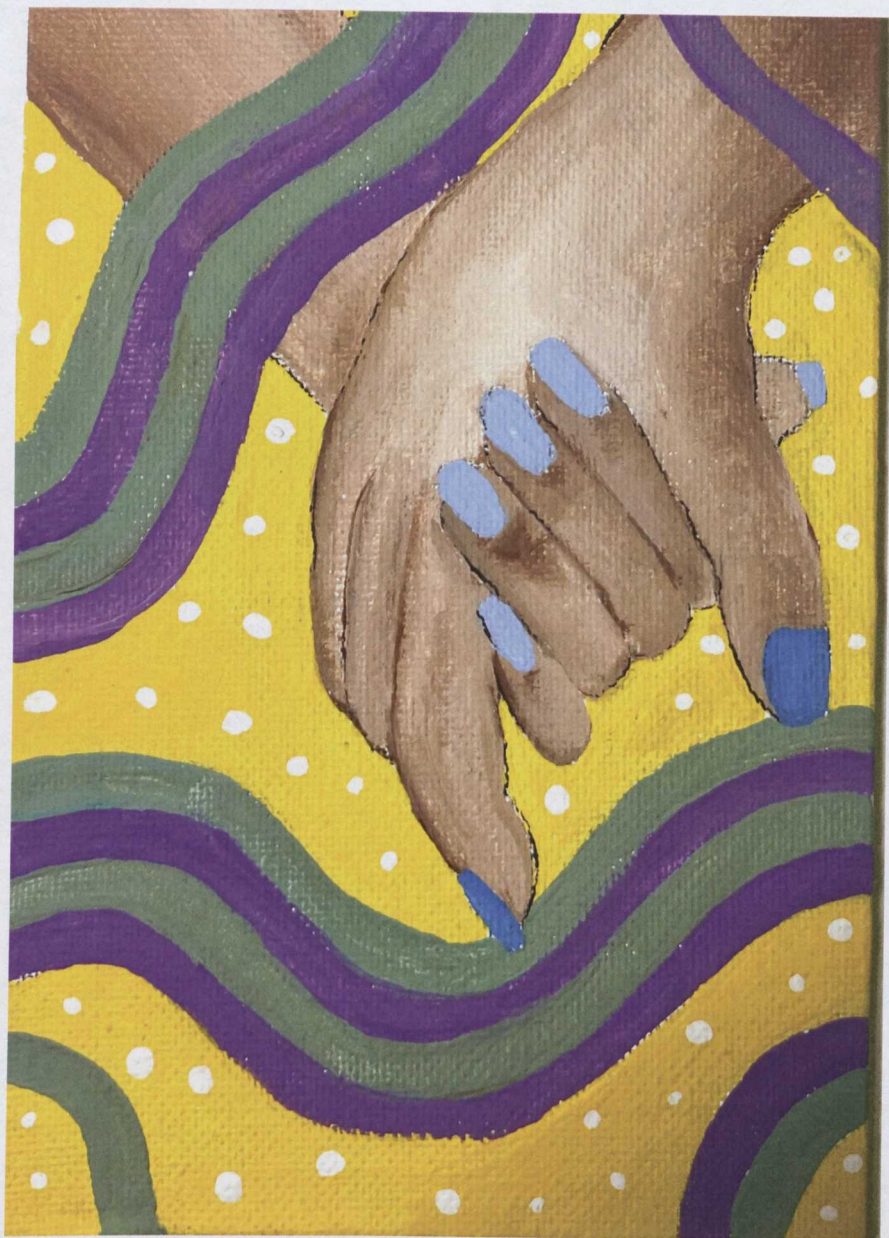
But just as quickly, the curtains fall,
And we find ourselves racing with blinders again—
We, returning last, all packed in our set,
And drifting away as the stations call.
But as for me, though the clock reads ten,

I find that slumber no longer besets,
As the walls close in on our warm little place
And a box of strangers becomes something more:
I notice a thread, as thin as a vein,
And through the carpet, begin to trace
It's snaking path from door to door
From seat to seat and through the train.

It touches each of us sharing this ride,
Crossing the endless velvet divide,
To cause my muscles to shutter and start
As wine-hot blood pumps into my heart.

I'm There

Joy Tarr



Air Ball

Becca Halaney

Thousand Island salad dressing dripped from her chin, but not in the direction it would if you had taken too big of a forkful, or spat a bite out after choking on a tomato swallowed too hastily—no, not in the direction that spilled things *should* drip. Instead Dembe snorted and scrubbed at her nose as the dressing trickled down from her lips, into her nostrils, then into her eyes, and dribbled from her hair onto the floor below. As one bare toe brushed against the ceiling of her kitchen, her dazed thoughts shifted from worrying about having soiled her work uniform to wondering how on God's green Earth she had come to be suspended, floating unsupported in the air. When she had successfully blown the sauce out of her nose and rubbed it out of her eyeballs, her gaze focused on the stucco ceiling below... well, technically above her, although she was looking down at the rest of her body between her head and what should be the top of the room. Dembe's body hung as if dangled by puppeteer, and although she was floating upside down, the absence of blood rushing to her head pleasantly surprised her; at least some part of her morning was going right.

She tilted her head back to look down at the floor, where her feet should have been securely planted: the tupperware and fork she had been using to shovel its contents into her mouth mere minutes before painted a picture on the linoleum floor, fanned out in an arc of splattered greens and what remaining sauce had not been flung into her face upon her sudden ascent. Kirby took turns wagging his tail, lapping at the unintentional treat, and glancing up at her with a quizzical pause in his joyous panting. Dembe forced a shaky cough and spoke, assuring the both of them, "It's okay, buddy, I'm okay," The tremble in her voice rendered the words unconvincing. Beneath the pounding of her heart and Kirby's slurping, she heard the gentle *plip-plopping* of dressing droplets falling a five foot distance from the crown of her head onto the ground. Still blinking the stinging vinegar out of her eyes, Dembe tried to measure her breathing and think rationally while searching the room for her phone. She knew she had left it on the counter, which would have been muscle memory if she were right-side-up, but from her position in the room, the layout

felt completely alien. The effort of reorganizing the mirror-image furniture in her head was dizzying, but a short, muffled buzz from the counter beside the fridge sent a rush of relief through her stomach.

Now, *how the hell am I going to reach that?* Dembe sniffed, felt the nervous sweat beading around the back of her neck, and reached a quivering hand toward that corner of the room. At least she could move at all, but the fridge sat at least ten feet from where she dangled aimlessly between the ceiling and the floor. If only Kirby could understand her if she told him to call someone, or if he had opposable thumbs. She worried that if she moved her feet, or changed her center of balance at all, she would fall tumbling head-first to the floor. The timid movement of extending her hand did nothing to push the rest of her into motion, and biting her lip, she attempted to move her foot; again, her position remained in a state of rest. Maybe if she could push off the ceiling, she wondered, and extended her leg straight above her. Close, but a few centimeters separated the tip of her big toe from the nearest available surface. Dembe screwed her eyes shut and breathed a tight sigh. Chrissie wouldn't get home for another two hours at least; even if she could rile Kirby enough to get him barking and howling, it wouldn't be unusual enough for a neighbor to come check on her. Even if she could reach her phone, what would she tell anyone? *"Hey Chrissie, this is not a prank, I need you to come home right now because I somehow broke gravity and am stuck floating in mid-air"?*

While she waited, she tried to retrace her steps from that morning to string together some sort of logical explanation for how she had ended up in this predicament. First thought as she woke up that morning was *no no no I'm going to be late for work*, and then she became cognizant that the reason she woke up at 6:58pm instead of 7:26pm or later: because her roommate's arthritic foster dog had thrown up on the carpet. Third thought, did the good of being woken up in time for her shift outweigh the bad of having to clean up after Kirby? Five minutes later, she leaned in and out of the shower curtain to eat bites of two granola bars clutched in her dry left fist. She rubbed her hair dry with a towel in one hand and scooped Kirby's mess into a fistful of wadded tissues in the other. She tugged her scrubs over her head in the same motion as

slinging her lanyard badges over her neck. *Thank God my resolution was consistent meal prep*, and she dropped a tupperware into her lunchbox, pried the lid from yesterday's leftover salad, stuffed a forkful in her mouth, hopped to tip-toe grab her morning prescription sitting inside the top cabinet—that moment, right as her toes connected again with the floor, her world lurched three feet up and 180 degrees backward. Gravity had broken for Dembe.

She could find no explanation for why this happened, or exactly what it was that had changed in or to her body; the next two hours were spent intermittently attempting to move herself forward in space and coaxing Kirby into barks. For the last thirty minutes or so, she decided instead to close her eyes and try to sleep. Maybe her alarm would wake her up, secured by a strict relationship with the Earth.

Instead, she opened her eyes to the sound of the door opening, and felt relief at the familiarity of Chrissie setting her backpack down with a sigh. "Chris, Chrissie I really need you to come in here—"

"Coming, I thought you had work?" Kirby licked the dressing from around his lips and snuffled his way across the floor to meet Chrissie at the kitchen entrance. She looked much different upside-down, Dembe thought as she stared helplessly into Chrissie's eyes wide with stupefaction.

Dembe's swallow seemed deafeningly loud as she waited for Chrissie's reaction to her body's incorrect relationship with the rest of the room. Chrissie blinked heavily once or twice before almost shouting,

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"Um, it doesn't hurt, but I don't know how to get down." After two hours of sitting suspended like that, Dembe surprised herself with how casual her voice sounded. "Could you grab my hand and pull downward?"

A constricted half-laugh squirmed from Chrissie's throat, and she seemed unable to move. "What *happened*? I'm scared to touch

you, what if you fall on your head or—”

Dembe stretched an arm toward her nonetheless, “*Please*, I’m dizzy sitting like this.”

They compromised on Chrissie first piling couch cushions beneath Dembe’s dangling body, and Dembe held her breath while Chrissie gently tugged her down. She didn’t fall, in fact her center of gravity seemed to remain fixed, unchanged. By the time they had collaboratively maneuvered her feet mostly downward and her head mostly upright, Dembe felt desperate to plant her toes back where they belonged, nestled between the pillows on the floor. Chrissie insisted on not letting go of her hands. When Dembe touched a toe to the ground, the weightlessness didn’t change. She stared in wonder as her bare foot instead pushed off the ground, as if it were the ground that had come up to meet her and given her a shove upwards. Chrissie screeched when Dembe went upward in the air again, but stifled it when the both of them realized how slow Dembe was drifting, sliding back and up from the point she had made contact with the linoleum. Dembe met her roommate’s eyes.

“Can you drive me to the hospital?”

Chrissie snapped out of her bewildered daze as soon as she had begun to nod an affirmative, “What? No, no, how will we get you out? The hospital doesn’t have an awning to drive under, what if we get there and you float away?”

Dembe felt nauseous at the idea; the ceiling had felt a sickening height enough. She reached behind her to catch hold of the doorknob to the spice cabinet, to steady herself in place while she remained upright and in reach of something she could grab onto. After making the phone call, Chrissie held Dembe’s hand and waited, cross-legged on the ground. Kirby nestled his head onto Chrissie’s knee, and Dembe locked eyes with him. Strange that he didn’t seem to register that anything was wrong with her, he held her gaze with ears perked and nose flaring as if the biggest concern in the world was whether she would reach out and pat him or not—but Dembe wasn’t there in that room, and in the depths of his eyes she began a daydream.

What if they had maneuvered her into Chrissie's beat-up Honda; would they buckle her in, or let her bounce around in the back seat? What if Chrissie held her hand while towing her weightless body into the ER, but had sneezed or tripped or something and Dembe had indeed gone spinning, floating off into space, tugged away screaming by the wind? She could see Chrissie below, flailing her arms and chasing after Dembe while she experienced plane take-off but from outside an aircraft. The breeze would toss and tumble her away like a kite, up and up until she shouldn't have been able to breathe, but in this imagination she felt fine; why shouldn't she, what had happened to her didn't conform to the bounds of physics or the limitations of the human body. If her blood hadn't rushed to her head while she hung upside down for two hours, who's to say her lungs wouldn't continue to act like normal as she ascended past telephone lines, past the tops of trees and above the first cloud layer, beyond the second and into the blackness of the atmosphere?

While the stars glittered multifold, reflected twice in her wide eyes, she decided the story didn't end with her drifting off to space. After all, Chrissie had called an ambulance rather than risk the possibility.

So daydream Dembe got caught in a passing storm, pushed back down by the force of the raindrops until she tumbled into the branches of a tree. When they found her, thirty miles from the hospital, they'd put an ankle monitor on her, in case it happened again. She imagined life tethered, Chrissie walking Kirby with one hand while holding a line connected to Dembe's harness in the other; Dembe bobbed like a balloon behind her, and waved at the confused people below. The governor would thank her for her accidental contribution to science, and would organize a fundraiser to have Dembe's home refitted to accommodate her new state of being. She would dangle about from a bike lock in front of their apartment, watching Chrissie oversee the renovation through the open window. Handrails everywhere, just like the International Space Station; toilets and chairs with seatbelts to keep her down. Maybe not a tether, maybe instead Dembe would be wheelchair bound... but the tether idea was more fun.

Then Kevin Durant, or his management or marketing team or

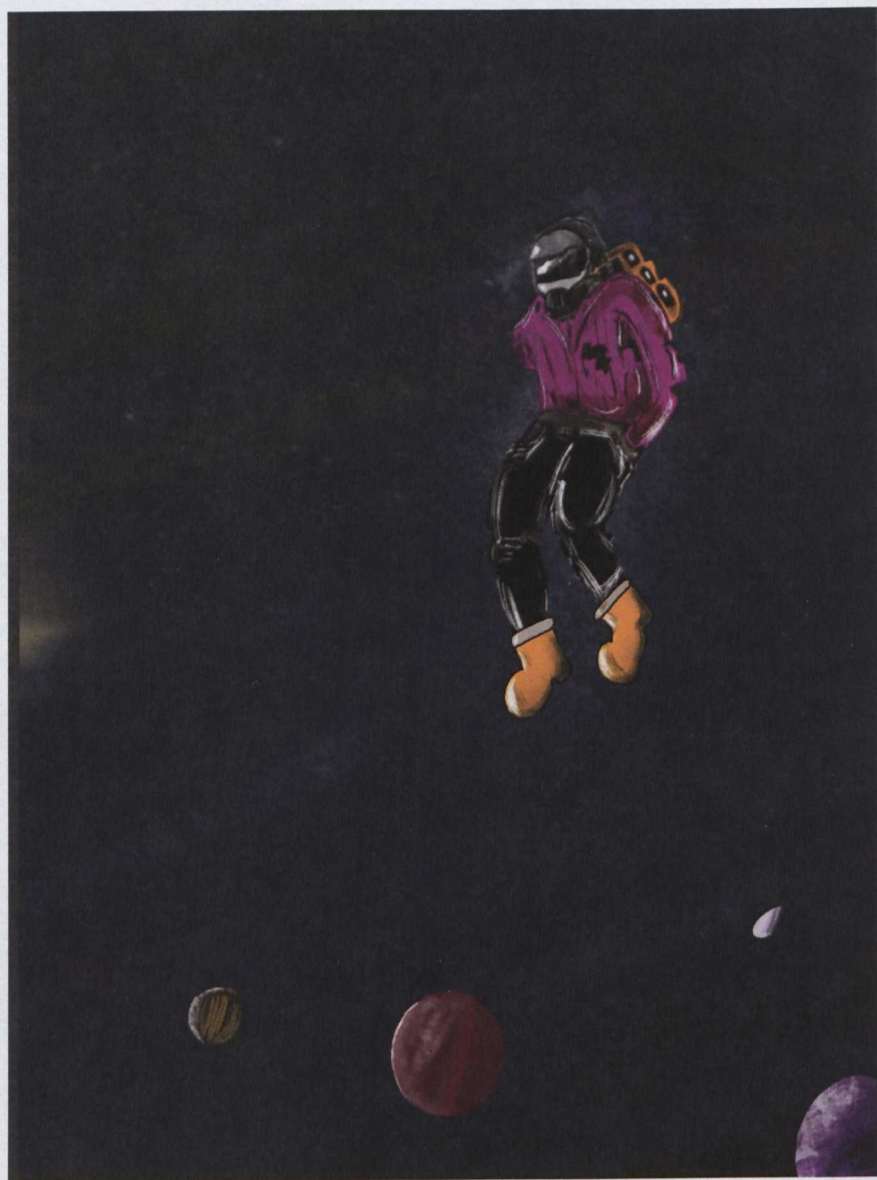
what-have-you would come knocking one day, "We've heard about you, saw your interview on the TV, and we think you'd be a great inspiration if you were to try out basketball, at least one promotional game: who would win? The world's top trained players, or a five-foot-two woman who can fly? Watch to find out, and don't forget to donate to Dell Children's to help kids get the mobility aids they need!"

She'd fly across the court, tethered to the ceiling and soaring above the heads of Dinwiddie and his fans. The crowd gasps and roars as she kicks off of one end of the stadium, propelled through the air by the force she exerted against the building.

Sirens, and she refocussed her eyes as Kirby began to bark at the noise. They would load her onto the ambulance, soon.

Freedom and Space

Eliezer Mercedes



Contrast
Literary
Magazine

Spring
2020

Contrast Literary Magazine

McDaniel College
2020

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Editor's Note 2020

*"Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos...
to celebrate a world that lies spread out around
us like a bewildering and stupendous dream."*

—John Cheever

Dear Readers,

It is with great humility and joy that we present to you this year's issue of *Contrast*. I hope the poems, short stories, and artwork found in this literary magazine bring you some comfort during these unusual and stressful times. When Nate and I sat down last fall to hold the first creative writing workshop of the semester, no one in the room could have possibly predicted we would end up here half a year later. We had expected to distribute print copies of this issue at the Unveiling Ceremony and celebrate the great talent found within these pages by hearing the published writers read their work aloud.

However, as all of you have adapted to this new norm within your lives, we too have adapted to still present this issue in some form and stay committed to *Contrast's* mission. First and foremost, we work to provide a space to connect McDaniel's creative minds. Writing, art, and any other form of creative expression bring people together. After all, the students featured in this magazine have laid bare parts of their innermost thoughts and have invited you to relate to these feelings. Now more than ever, we must stay connected.

We had an overwhelming number of submissions this year, each of which expressed an incredible display of vulnerability. Though composing far before this pandemic hit, these students have attempted to capture the chaos in their lives and make sense of their corner of the world. We hope you'll take the time to carefully read through this digital magazine, reflect on any similar experiences, and then send this PDF along to share with someone else. Let's work together to stay connected despite being socially isolated and continue to spread the joys, sorrows, catharsis, and triumphs of art.

—Marya Kuratova

Editor's Note 2020

We had a lot of great submissions this year, and it was a challenge deciding which ones to share with our readers. Unfortunately, we didn't realize the greater challenge was yet to come. Editing and publishing is its own beast under the best of circumstances, but these tumultuous times were a bit of a curveball. Thank you to everyone for your patience, and apologies that you may not have another issue of *Contrast* to place on your shelf along with the others. However, while the format may be different, the core purpose of *Contrast* remains a constant: to provide a platform for McDaniel students to create meaning through their works of art and share them with you.

To those who helped serve on the Editorial Board, I'd like to offer my thanks. Your thoughts and debate helped make this magazine possible. To those whose works are published in the following pages, I'd like to offer my congratulations. To create is no easy task, nor is putting your final product out into the world for all to see, especially when the product of your labors is near and dear to your heart. You've all had the courage to make that step and you can be proud to know that your efforts have paid off. And to those who submitted art, poetry, and prose that ultimately didn't make it into this year's edition of *Contrast*, I'd like to offer my encouragement. I know it can be disheartening to work on something and then not have the chance to share it with others, but that is by no means the end. There will always be more opportunities, with next year's *Contrast* being but one of them, so long as you keep creating.

Whoever is reading this, I hope you'll decide to submit to next year's edition, whether you submitted to this one, chose not to, or are only learning about it now. You might not always be happy with what you make, and any writer or artist will always be the first to critique their own work, but I encourage you to push past that self-doubt and continue to share your creativity with others.

—Nathan Wright

The Unanswered Question

Luke Anthony

I woke to the golden rays of light trickling through my shades, illuminating that little chrome box, slightly too large to fit into one's pocket, that sat on the table in my apartment. The reflection of the beams across its polished surface produced a brilliant display of color across my living room wall. "How cruel," I thought as I moved to collect that metallic monster and begin my day.

It all started when the box was created. Celebrated as a holiday of the new world, it was the day when the world would no longer wonder "why." The box held the answer to every question imaginable. From the "What is the answer to homework problem A?" to the "Will I get the job?" or "Does she really love me?" the box had all the answers and delivered them in the same robotic tone regardless of the question. It made fact out of feeling, leaving no place for emotion.

School, or as we called it Schooling Day, lasted only one afternoon and was a basic crash course on how to use the machine. Once that was learned, all other questions could be asked of the box. I received it, as all children do, on my tenth birthday in preparation for Schooling Day. I remember the feeling of that cool metal as I slipped it out of the wrapping paper, trembling with excitement as all my older friends had already received theirs. I couldn't wait to ask this mysterious machine all my deepest burning questions. Back then I thought it was the happiest day of my life. Now, with my wrinkled hands of years gone by, I clutch my box, that perfectly pristine cube as cold and unchanged as the day I received it, and loath its existence with every fiber of my being.

How old am I? I don't know, I lost track years ago. But why does it even matter when the box has all the answers? Why does anything matter when we have this magnificent little box? The wastebasket filled to the brim with all the questions I wish I'd left unanswered. Because why should anyone think when the answers are in the palm of your hand?

"What does Dad want for his birthday?" Rather than think sincerely about what I might like, my children ask the box instead.

"Will our marriage survive?" She asked the box in confidence, rather than coming to me to try and work out our problems together.

"Why isn't he happy? Should we up the dosage?" My psychologist consults the box apathetically, like I'm not even in the room. She can't understand why I hadn't asked the box yet. "Because the box is the problem," I want to scream.

These wretched thoughts plague my mind as I enter work. I'm retiring today. "What a wonderful career" and "a treasured employee" they recite to me. Yet what did I really do when the box already gave us the most efficient way to perform every job and automate it? I sat at my desk waiting day in and day out in case something broke. But the box is never wrong, so the machines never broke.

My only solace from the box comes when I return home to my dark and empty apartment each night. I leave that monstrous cube at the door and embrace the darkness of my home which obscures the machine from my sight. Wrapped in this darkness, I can almost forget about the box until the morning light thrusts me back to the cold reality of its existence. In the night, I can dream about the good times past, the days before my tenth birthday when I received that wretched creation, and the day yet to come, when I finally escape the box's clutches in eternity.

It was one of the very first questions I asked my box, "What's on the other side?" And to this day I'll never forget that chilling answer as the box granted my request. Yet as I fear what lies ahead, I still yearn for it. It is the one place the box can't follow me. The place where all my questions will remain unanswered and I will never know again. I may already know what lies ahead, but without the box it will most certainly be a Heaven.

Fruiting Body

Lauren Beckjord

1st Place Art



A Hopeful Little Girl in a Starbucks

Eli Bendel-Simso

2nd Place Poetry

There's so much love in my heart
for the little girl with plastic butterflies on her sandals
and a Band-Aid on her knee peeking out from the hem of her sundress
who once waddled up to me, a stranger standing in line for coffee,
looked up at my short, bright blue hair,
and asked, sincerely and shining with hope,
"Are you a fairy?"

The kind of question that could only come
from someone who trusts that there's light,
who understands that there are wonderful things in life—
fairies included—
and if you happen to see one in a Starbucks in a strip mall
you'd better go over and make sure you don't miss it.
I hope she grows up still finding beauty everywhere.
Someday she can put bright colors in her hair
and be a fairy, too.

Chameleon Skin

Eli Bendel-Simso

Chameleons transform themselves.
Their skin reflects, the nanocrystals
scoping out the best way to blend in.
You don't need armor if you get good enough at hiding.

People learn to do the same thing,
to change the exterior to match surroundings—
but blending into the crowd instead of the jungle.
Keep up with the style. Don't stand out.
It's too bright, too dark, you won't look like everyone else.
We feel safest when we feel invisible.

I'm a secret agent behind enemy lines.
We all are, or we wouldn't feel like we need to hide.
No one is a native to the nation of conformity.

Someday I'll change career paths. I'll be a diplomat,
a public figure, and never have to pretend I belong here.
My coat of arms will be the ink I needle into my skin
and with ceremony I'll bejewel myself.
Hair bright as neon will act as my banner,
an announcement that I Am Coming,
so hide if you want, but I will not.

I may need armor then, once I give up on hiding.
But you know what they say. The best defense.
My words will be my weapons, my poems switchblades,
and I will learn tricks, watch the steel reflect the sunlight.
A handgun license is a poor man's replacement
for the magnum opus I will compose
with the energy I'll have saved by living out loud.
Chameleons can't speak, but flamingos never shut up.

Stomp Stomp

Eli Bendel-Simso

There is a sense of power, of control, that fills me
when I pull tight the yellow laces of my black boots,
the heavy soles grounding me, ensuring I
stay warm and dry and safe. There's so much I can do!
I clomp down the stairs on the way to class.
The footsteps echo through the building,
and I refuse to hide, to let my presence go unknown.
I step outside and watch the ground, on the lookout
for the crispest autumn leaves to flatten,
crushing them with my full weight under the rubber tread.
The pop of color binds my feet into the leather
and I look down and feel that my boots are a part of me.
Stomp stomp stomp! Such a simple detail as
the right shoes can bring so much comfort.

A Eulogy for the Girl I Was

Eli Bendel Simso

I know I am not the one who killed her. There was never a moment where I chose to leave her behind to die, the happy, enthusiastic girl who loved stories and knew that as soon as she left this piece of shit town she would do great things. But still, I feel guilty. I feel guilty that she died, or rather transformed, before she could grow up and do all the things she never doubted she would get the chance to do. I feel guilty that it was a slow death, that I couldn't make it quick and painless, that I spent years starving her and convincing her to hide, to change herself, to carve off pieces of herself until she fit the shape that the world promised her would be safe, and even then it wasn't enough to save her. The world doesn't spare even those who would self-destruct to conform.

But more than the guilt, I feel angry that I have been left with the memory of how happy she could have been. That little girl knew *nothing*, had no idea she was in such danger, no idea that little girls are rarely allowed to be little girls for long. People are not so kind, to see something undamaged and let it continue to exist that way.

There was no single action taken, no dagger through her heart, no noose around her neck. There were smaller stab wounds. There were punctures in her skin, in the shape of a teacher when she was 9 who never for a day let her forget her speech impediment, in the shape of a society that failed to teach her that feeding herself was more important than being thin enough to disappear, in the shape of the small acts of violence perpetrated by other children, and eventually by adults, and in the shapes of all the betrayals of all the people who meant the most to her. Enough grains of sand, enough tiny pebbles, can bury a little girl in no time.

I like to think she's still watching, from heaven or hell or wherever the past versions of ourselves end up. I like to think she knows there's no reason to be afraid anymore, that after the painstaking metamorphosis she would undergo, something indestructible would emerge. I like to think she isn't really dead, but just waiting for a time when the world doesn't seem so cold and hard and

dangerous, for a time when she can come out of hiding and let the shell she's been hiding in finally retire.

I am not convinced that time will come, but a girl can dream.

Thoughts Unfurled
Gwyneth Berry



Poem on a Train

Morgan Bliss

I do all of my self reflecting
Staring at the half translucent side view of myself in a stained
train window

Maybe that's how I'm meant to be perceived
Never quite whole, never quite there
Superimposed onto passing field and farm and dike

I've been told I need to be perceived to be known
To be known to be loved

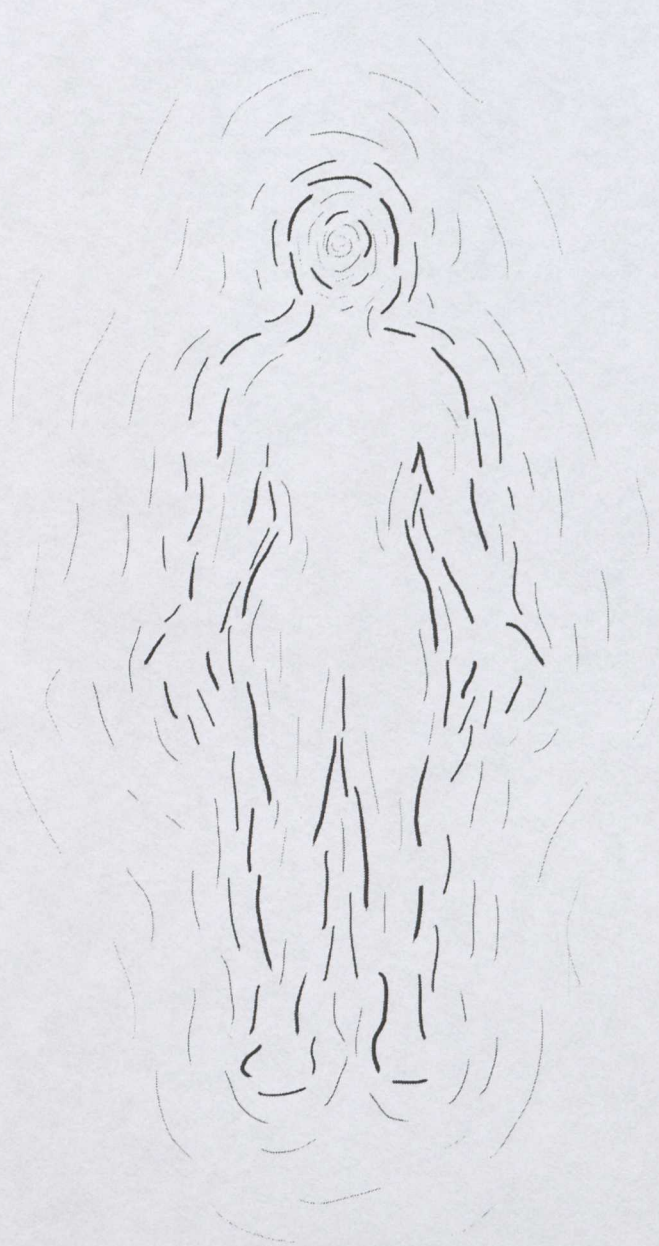
I think I am known in this
In this shifting, fluid state, never quite one, never full
In this being unknown
In this warped, distorted reflection that tilts and pulls with
each jostle of the train car

I am the reflection to others of what I think I am and even
that conception is hazy

Lost, among the blur of town and time passing by.

Sorry Not Here RN Maybe Try Later

Morgan Bliss



Something to be Said of Religion

Morgan Bliss



Oh to Lay on the Floor and Stare at the Ceiling

Morgan Bliss



Henna stained hands
Hands from West Africa
Henna from South Asia
Skin from the Earth
The glow of a phone
Against brown skin
Skin from West Africa
Phone from East Asia
New screen from down the street
I think he listens to
Songs from YouTube
Vocals in English but throat from Malaysia
My home is an amalgamation of cultures
Rugs from Persia
Calligraphy from Arabia
Statues and masks from the Sahara
A screen from China
A show from Korea
Music plays from all of the above
My teachers are from Palestine, Kenya, and France.
Their students are from India, Senegal, and Korea.
I lean against a car door, a Japanese model.
The sun sets in the west.
The moon rises in the east.
This world is deeply connected.

Coffee Eyes

Khadija Diop

The first time I see her, I think coffee.

Not because we're in the middle of a coffee shop and everything around us is coffee, the scent of espresso, the sound of Keurigs and traditional coffee makers brewing liquid energy, the light chatter and clicking of keyboards, the baristas crafting in the background the drink that makes the world go round.

No, I think coffee because my barista turns around, a few wisps and strands of hair coming out from under her scarf, and calls out in the calmest voice I might have ever heard in my life.

"Order for Maysa!" She sets the red cup down on the counter and pushes her strands back under her headscarf, sighing deeply.

"Can't believe it's only 9 in the morning," she says, smiling softly. Her skin is a soft mocha color, her scarf black like pure espresso and her eyes are soft like lattes. Her voice is as smooth as the coffee machine pouring macchiatos out behind us, with a hint of vanilla, I think, and I let my lips turn up in a small smile, as I peruse the menu behind her head.

For what, Padma? You get the same order every day.

"So what can I get you, Miss Padma?"

My eyes turn back to the barista, whose name tag reads Ramatou.

"Sorry," she says, waving her hands. "If that came out weird. I just, you're the big journalist Padma Kapoor right? From *The Times* newspaper. I loved your piece on women of color in the arts. It was so... *inspiring*," she says, slightly drawing out the last part. I smile even wider and clear my throat looking behind me, to see if I'm holding up any impatient patrons.

No one in sight.

"Thank you, Miss... Ramatou?"

"Call me Rama."

"It's a piece that I enjoyed writing and I'm glad that you liked it too. It's important to express ourselves in unconventional ways." I brush a stray hair that comes from my ponytail back under my headband. Rama nods quite a bit, even while she talks herself.

"I agree completely. And it's so nice to see more people in our own community so accepting and forward of talents that we share. I really appreciate seeing more poets of color."

I nod my head, grinning wider. Rama pats her cheek and her mouth drops open in an O shape.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Padma—"

"Call me Padma."

"Padma. I was so busy rambling I never took your order. What can I get you?"

"I just want a peppermint mocha with whipped cream. As hot as possible, please."

"Coming right up, Padma. Thank you for entertaining my rambles."

As she makes my coffee, we chat a bit more because of the lack of people in the shop. The morning rush is over and the early noon people are starting to settle in. Rama tells me a bit about herself. She's been working at *Qahwahti* for 3 years now and is also a student at the local community college. She lives with her best friend Saja, who works full time as the manager at the mall. She loves to read, especially journal pieces, which is how she knew me on the spot and hopes to become a journalist after graduating. The rest of her family lives back home in Sudan.

"Maybe I can read one of your pieces someday," I say, my arm pressed on the counter. I'm always mesmerized by how quickly and efficiently some baristas work. Her fingers are soft and nimble

as she works the grounds into the small Keurig cup, adding some small yet savory spices such as cardamom, pepper, and cinnamon and giving the cup to the machine to be turned into brown gold. She does all this so manually and with such routine while still talking to me, as if she's riding a bike down the street. It's a comforting feeling.

She has a homely energy. Her voice is warm and inviting and her constant smiles are reassuring that things will turn out okay. It's nice. She's a physical embodiment that things will be okay.

"How often do you come here, Padma?" Rama asks me, as she puts the finishing touches on my drink, the whipped cream canister fitted in her hand.

"I come every day actually. I've been doing so for the past 3 months. Why is this the first time I'm seeing you?"

"Oh, I used to work in the backroom often. I only recently got promoted to being a barista. It's really nice out here."

"Oh really?" I say, moving my elbows from the counter. "You work really well. You must have been doing this for a long time."

Rama shrugs, putting a lid on the cup.

"Nah. One day of training, one day of work, and it's not so bad. Besides, coffee is just that great. It's ... nice."

I grin and nod my head. "It is really nice. There are really poetic ways to describe it, but it is—"

"9 in the afternoon." Rama smiles, handing me my cup. I smile. I suppose she read about my article on the perfection of Panic! At the Disco.

"And your eyes are the size of the moon."

Rama gives a small giggle. "Have a good day, Padma. I hope I can see you again."

"Well... " I say. "May I see your Sharpie?" She hands it to me and I extend my other hand for her.

"May I have your hand?" I say. Rama blinks and hesitates for a moment before extending her hand out, placing it in my palm. It's warm and feels soft like cotton, like a mitten on a cold day.

My face warms a bit and I think hers does as well, but it's not apparent under her mocha skin.

Taking the pen off the Sharpie, I press it on the top part of her skin, drawing a chubby 4, followed by a 1, then a 0.

After I finish with the last digit, I trace a small lotus next to the numerals.

"Call me? Maybe when you get off and we can go grab lunch? I can also give you some stellar book recommendations?"

Rama smiles slowly until her grin is so wide, dimples show up in her cheeks. She's absolutely adorable. She nods fervently.

"Yes, yes that would be absolutely amazing! I will totally text you like, as soon as I grab my phone."

"Great." I hand her back the marker and lift my coffee cup up. "I'll see you, okay?"

"For sure," Rama says.

As I leave the cozy shop, I take a quick sip on my drink and smile. It's a lot warmer than usual.

Star Songs

Khadija Diop

Abha sees heavenly bodies within the world.

She sees constellations in the back of buses and draws out the map of the stars on the street signs. She sees the moon in the sun and the sun in the moon. She sees galaxies in the forests and in the galaxies she sees flora.

Abha sees black holes in humans. She sees the light go out of each of them slowly, no matter who it is. Somehow, she'll find something wrong.

She finds malice in the saccharine grins of her fellow classmates and envy in the praises of her acquaintances. She's more aware than they think.

But she keeps her thoughts to herself. It's better that way, not to let on all your thoughts.

Life's quieter that way.

Days go by, and she still sees black holes in her closest companions and the heavens in flora and fauna.

Her family concern moves past her completely, as the black holes show themselves in the false concern of her parents' requests.

Why don't you go over to Harvi's house?

You don't get out enough, darling.

You're always keeping to yourself.

Solitude can't be good for your health.

Your friends are concerned for you.

Black holes, growing stronger each day. She tries to keep from getting sucked in.

At night, she counts the spots in the sky and memorizes the outline of the constellations. They're really her only companions. The night is when she's alive, dancing with the stars and singing with the moon. The only time she feels alive.

In her class, on a moderate fall day, she sees starlight on her campus in actual human form.

A girl with cerulean dreads and sepia skin, she shines and smiles much more realistically.

Abha squints. She looks again, though she tries to go without staring.

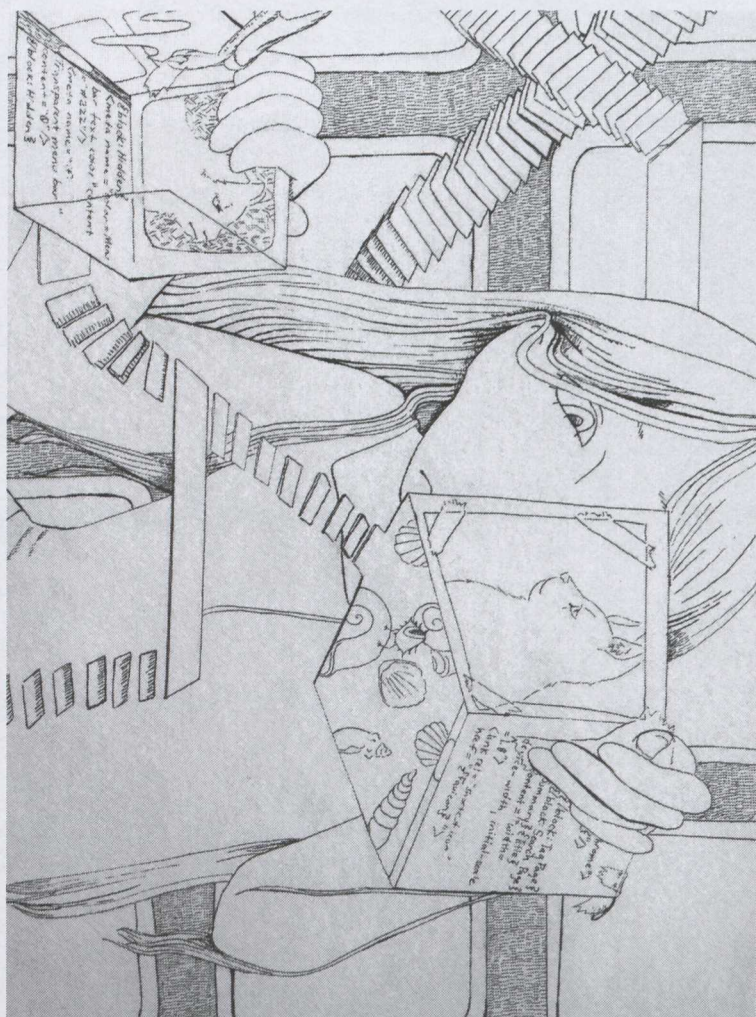
The girl notices Abha and sends a genuine smile her way.

She smiles back, a rare thing she never does but it feels right this time.

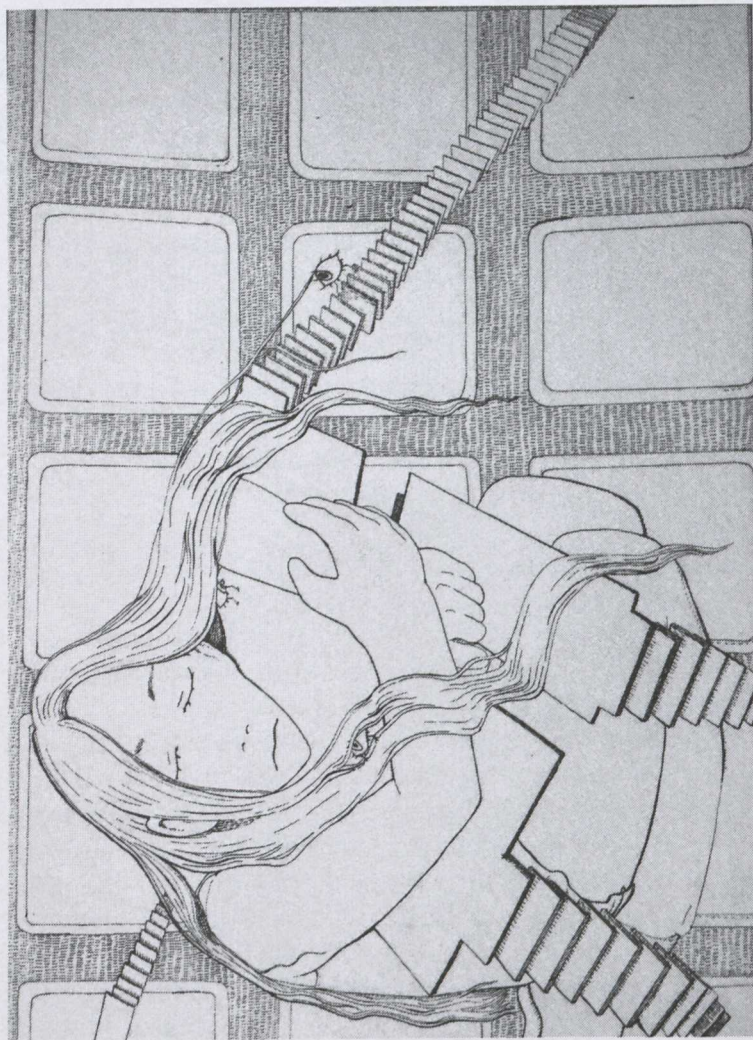
The girl's name is Amira. Amira is starlight to Abha, and the only starlight around in her life.

Amira sees galaxies in the ocean and forests in stars and constellations in the clouds. She sees stars in the front of buses.

Abha can't find any black holes with her.



Effects
Sheila Evans



Big Red

Eamonn Fay

2nd Place Prose

Valerie stood frozen outside of Sweisson Theatre. It was strange. She knew every cold spot in the residence halls, where not to be past twelve, which entities were kind, and which were nasty. For a moment, she thought she had figured everything out. Yet, two years in, here was something new and different. A pull. An invisible hand beckoning her to come on in. She must have passed this place a million times heading to her dorm from the library, only going inside once or twice for some crummy orientation productions during her first year. Never had she felt anything out of the ordinary until now. Valerie felt suspicious. She wasn't afraid. Only inquisitive. What should have been apprehension only felt like a tempting curiosity. She told herself no as she climbed up the steps, scolding herself as she jiggled the handle of the double doors. Of course, she knew, campus security locks everything at two at the latest. It was three-thirty now, so there was no chance that—

Oh dear. Unlocked.

The door creaked open eerily. It was terribly chilly, maybe more so than it was outside. The door clattered shut behind her. A tenseness hit Valerie instantly as she stepped inside. It was a dreadful feeling, but not quite a dangerous one. It was an imposing, authoritative sort of dread. She felt like a child about to be yelled at. The lights were still on in the lobby for some reason. There was no production going on to her knowledge. It was possible someone was in there, but she couldn't imagine why. It had been a while since she'd last been there. Her memory was a bit rusty, but nothing looked immediately out of place. The aged, red paint on the walls and ornate golden ribbons overhanging the doors looked as antique as ever. The walls were adorned with the same creepy black-and-white photos of long dead alumni as before. Aside from the temperature, she couldn't place what was so wrong about where she was. It was familiar enough, yet so alien.

Two staircases leading up to the theatre itself were on either side of her. She stepped to the doors on her right and wondered for a moment if they would be unlocked too. Without thinking she turned the handle and pushed. A little *click* echoed through the theatre. Valerie felt outside of herself. Her curiosity was taking her much farther than she usually let it. Though, strangely, it hadn't felt like she was acting odd. These weren't things she normally did, yet they felt like things she had been doing of her own volition. It was dark. The lights in the theatre were off. She thought about turning on her phone's flashlight but thought better of it. If there were someone or something in here, she wouldn't want to alert it to her presence. She let the railing guide her way. Slowly creeping up the stairs, she did her best to make as little noise as possible. The farther up the stairs she got, the more that imposing dread set in. At first, she couldn't place why she felt that way. But with each step the vague feeling became more obvious. Valerie was trespassing; she was not a welcome guest. And she had a sinking feeling that something was about to teach her a lesson. She tripped on the second-to-last step, falling shoulder-first on the floor with a dull thud.

THUNK!

Valerie gasped as the room was suddenly illuminated by a spotlight in the center of the stage. She scrambled to her feet, her mouth agape with fearful anticipation. Nothing was there. The already oppressive chill was somehow getting harsher. She could see the vapor of her heavy breaths in the dim light. That nagging feeling of impending punishment was in full force. The voice of Ralphie's mom from *A Christmas Story* came to mind. *Don't you give me that look! You're gonna get it!* From the balcony above her, a sudden cacophony of notes blared from the organ. She recoiled in terror, backing into the wall. It sounded like someone had begun mashing on the keys headfirst. The spotlight moved stage left. From behind the tattered curtain, a figure sauntered out. Valerie put her hand over her mouth. Its flesh was candy red and its body impossibly bony. It had an intimidating stature, easily standing at seven feet tall. It wasn't wearing any clothes as far as she could tell, but thankfully seemed to have nothing to cover up. The long, shaggy black hair on its head canvased its greasy face. The key-

smashing above her died down as it reached the center of the stage.

Its head slowly swiveled toward Valerie, and their eyes met. A terror induced paralysis struck her. Its ugly mug was plainly visible now. A great, crooked smile of yellowed teeth was spread across its face. It didn't appear to have a nose, only two skeletal nostrils. Worst of all were its eyes. They were yellow and glazed, the lights above giving them the illusion of glowing. The theatre was completely silent. Valerie remained trapped in a torturous staring contest with the ghoul. It stared at her ceaselessly, still sporting the same horrible grimace. She was still, but her mind was racing. She wanted so badly to run. But she still couldn't move. It was as though she was being held in place. It had brought her here and now it refused to let her go. She had been ensnared. She decided to try calling out to it. To ask it what it wanted from her. It was worth a shot, she thought. It probably wouldn't give her any satisfactory answers, but she'd do anything to break the eerie silence. Valerie opened her mouth to speak. Only a weak whimper escaped.

The creature's mouth dropped open and its eyes widened. It began to wheeze with laughter, as though it had no voice. She couldn't believe it. It had scared her into silence and now it was mocking her. The wheezing continued as the lights above shut off with another loud *THUNK*. Then, amid the dusty laughter, footsteps. The slapping sound of bare feet on a hard floor. A surge of adrenaline unfroze Valerie. She gasped suddenly as though she had just realized what was happening. Now in pitch black, she fumbled for the railing and hurried down the steps. She frantically felt for the door handle as she reached the bottom, pushing it down and bolting into the lobby. Relief swept over her as the front doors came into view. She scurried over to the doors and pushed. Click. *Oh no*, she thought. *No, no, no*. The door was jammed. With both hands, she pushed the door with all her might. It wouldn't budge. The lights in the lobby shut off with a soft, electrical buzz. The staircase door creaked open behind. Footsteps slowly approached her. She imagined it hunkered down in the dark, slowly creeping toward her with that god-awful grin. Valerie didn't dare look. She took three steps back before charging at the door with a shrill scream, either out of fury or desperate terror.

The door violently swung open, causing her to stumble forward into the chilly winter air, which felt warmer by comparison. Quickly regaining her balance, she hurried down the steps and bolted toward her residence hall, not looking back.

Valerie, now in the safety of her locked dorm room, was still catching her breath. Never had she dealt with an entity so forward. Manifestations were rare in her experience. Even when they did happen, they were usually no more than vague outlines and silhouettes. The sort of fleeting encounters that make one question whether they happened at all. Whatever she had just escaped from had gone against anything she had ever seen. Valerie never liked the word "demon." To her it carried an air of religion, something her overzealous mother tried to impose on her growing up. She no longer spoke of her strange experiences for fear of being called possessed. The last thing she wanted was Father Whatshisname from St. Matthew's to come to her house with a crucifix and holy water. As she changed into her pajama pants, she tried to think of any other way she could describe it but found none.

It didn't really matter what she decided to call it. Whatever it was, it was horribly malignant. It wasn't human. It probably never had been. And it certainly wasn't to be fucked with.

Of Women and Witchcraft

Sophie Gilbert

3rd Place Prose

Nothing like a mid-morning run. Especially when chased by fifty angry villagers throwing stones. I didn't dare turn around to see if my family was among them. It didn't much matter anyhow. Not at this point. Luckily, most of them turned back once the village was out of sight.

"Don't you dare come back, you damned witch!"

Wasn't planning on it.

I walked for what felt like hours. I didn't know what I was looking for. I figured the chances were high that I would die of starvation long before I found a village that would take me in. It took several miles of me wallowing in self-pity to notice a peculiar mark on the tree to my left. It resembled a box with several lines running across it, diagonally and vertically. Even stranger, I could spot a tree with a similar marking farther to the right. It wasn't uncommon for travelers to leave trail signs in order to navigate the woods, so I was hopeful that maybe by following the strange symbols I would find a resting place or maybe a trader's outpost. Sure enough, after following the symbols for quite a ways, I started to make out the vague outline of a building in the distance.

Upon closer inspection, there was smoke coming out of a small chimney. At this point, I was willing to beg for a place to spend the night as the light was rapidly fading from the treetops.

However, I ducked behind the side of the building as the door opened. Out walked a man and a woman heavy with child. The man carried a small vial of some sort and they spoke in hushed voices before following the strange symbols back out into the forest. I caught the words "witch" and "devil's work" before they wandered out of earshot. I took that as my chance to slip into the cottage and see who inhabited it before I made my introduction. To my surprise, my eyes fell on the soft figure of a woman not much older than me.

The woman inside had a kind of otherworldly grace, sweeping around the cottage with ease while a pot bubbled on the stovetop. Her red hair fell in curls down past her waist, but I watched as she deftly braided it before stepping back to the stove. Was this the witch the couple spoke of? The one practicing devil's magic? If that was the case, then may the Lord have mercy on my soul. The strange woman hadn't said a word, and yet I felt I would do anything she said.

I attempted to get a better look at the cottage, crouching closer to the entry. It was then that a small tabby came around the corner and rubbed up against my leg. I felt a tickle in my nose, but I couldn't keep the sneeze from escaping. The woman by the stove moved faster than I could follow, and before I could blink she had grabbed me and put a dagger to my throat.

"It's not polite to sneak around," she said, much more calmly than I expected for one holding a deadly weapon. She then released me and turned her back on me as if I was no more important than the cat. Less so, I thought, as she scooped the tabby now winding around her feet up into her arms.

"I'm... very sorry. I didn't know who lived here, and I wanted to get an idea of who I was about to beg from. Can never be too careful."

"What brings you all the way out here, traveler? You'd have much more luck with that in the town."

"I'm afraid my presence in town is no longer welcome."

"You're in luck then. I have a stew cooking on the stove."

I couldn't help the grumbling of my stomach as I was reminded that I hadn't eaten since the previous evening.

"You'll have to tell me the story though."

"Story?"

"Of why you are no longer welcome in town."

"Ah. That. Must I? I don't even know your name yet."

She raised her eyebrow at me.

"You want to eat, don't you?"

"Fine. But food first."

She smiled mischievously and poured out two bowls of the stew before setting them on the table.

"You can call me Meyriene."

I took several wolfish bites before pausing, summing up the courage to spill my troubles to this peculiar, enticing stranger. Meyriene.

"I was caught with the blacksmith's daughter."

"Oh?"

"In her bed."

She remained silent, but I could see the shock and understanding in her wide eyes.

"They accused me of bewitching her, and she wasn't in much place to argue. So I guess they think I'm a witch now. At least, that's what they were yelling at me as they ran me out of town."

She looked askance at me before finally taking a small bite of her own food.

"You're in good company then."

"Are you really a witch?"

She shrugged.

"The people believe what they want to believe. I use what I find in the forest to create various remedies and draughts. They call

it witchcraft, I call it science. They come all the same once their youngest is sick or their wife is struggling with childbirth."

"Could you teach me?"

I didn't know why I was so eager to stay, but I told myself it was because I had no other prospects. Not that it felt like her eyes were physically pinning me in my chair.

"Why would I possibly do that?"

"I could be an assistant. I don't have anywhere else to go, so I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Anything?"

I choked on the bite I had just put in my mouth. Whether or not she had meant it to sound so appealing, I couldn't help imagining all the things she could ask (and what I would happily acquiesce too). Once I stopped coughing, I looked up to see the hint of a smile on her face before she schooled her expression back into polite concern.

"Careful, there. Can't have you dying before I've made up my mind about you."

Just then the cat jumped up on the table between us, sniffing at the remainder of my food only to be startled off the table when I sneezed again.

"I'm really getting tired of that," I said, wiping a hand across my face.

She picked up the cat consolingly as if he was the one inconvenienced.

"You're allergic to Rys?"

"Rys?"

She gestured to the cat now purring in her arms.

"I guess? Is that why I keep sneezing?"

"In a word, yes. Here, I have something that would help. After all, if one of you has to go, it's not going to be the cat."

I wanted to ask if that was a joke, but I got the feeling she was completely serious. She let the cat go and went to grab a vial from the shelves. She then put water on the stove to boil. After it started bubbling, she mixed in the contents of the vial before pouring it out into a cup and handing it to me.

"This tea should help."

"How do you even know all this?"

She looked away, not meeting my eyes.

"My father. He was an apothecary. I learned everything I know and then some from him. He passed about five years ago. The city had no interest in a woman physician though. They do not believe that a woman is capable of such study. It's much easier to work out here where at least I'm left alone and somewhat respected. Even if it's under the guise of witchcraft."

"What about your mother?"

"I never knew her. She died after giving birth to me."

"So you've been out here by yourself for five years?"

"Not exactly. I have friends who work the trade routes, picking off the merchants going to and from the city."

"So criminals."

"You and I are no more respected than them anymore. And yes. Sometimes they'll stay for as much as a week if they find themselves in a bind. As a trade-off, they give me some of their spoils, especially the ingredients I need from the city."

She had a point, and furthermore, I liked the strong set of her jaw,

as if daring me to judge her. Her strength, I realized, made her even more enticing. It was then that I realized I was staring. Again. I took a sip of the tea she put in front of me to hide the blush painting my cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend. I ... admire you. The life you've made for yourself."

She stayed silent for a second, turning towards the window.

"I think I've made up my mind," she said at last.

"Well?"

"Stay."

"Really?"

She turned back to me.

"Unless you've changed your mind so quickly. I've been alone here for quite some time and ... I find myself intrigued by the idea of getting to know you better."

"Meyriene?"

"Yes?"

"I want to get to know you better, too. And thank you."

"You won't be thanking me when I make you toil away over ragweed or split wood for the fire out in the snow. But you're welcome."

We sat there talking over our food far after it had gone cold.

"Do you miss her?" she asked, her spoon scraping against an empty bowl.

"Who?"

"The girl. The one you had to leave behind."

I thought for a second. Pictured her sun-bleached hair and infectious smile. But also the constant hiding and the fighting over the future. It was now that I realized we never really had one. She was never going to leave the village. She'd marry the baker's son and have half a dozen children with him, and might never think of me again. She might even be happy.

"Yes. And no. I miss the good times, but those have been gone for a while."

"Hmm."

I couldn't read her expression in the dimming light.

"I'm sorry. That you had to go through that. I ... know what it's like."

Then, before I could respond, she got up to clear the table and asked me to go outside to the river and wash the dishes.

I found over the course of the evening I loved to watch her work. Her sure hands, mixing and running along the pages of her books, her eyes darting across her work station intently, her bitten lips twisting into the occasional mischievous smile once she looked up from her table to track my movements. There was something about her that was just as cat-like as Rys. Meanwhile, I did my best to start memorizing the plants she kept dried on the shelves and the most common cures. If I wanted to stay, she said, I would have to prove myself useful. She winked at me as she said it though, and I knocked over half the vials I was working with.

Finally, when it got dark and the candle on the table burned down to the wick, we settled down for the night, her on the bed and I on a makeshift cot. It was itchy and cold, and I was a far way away from the place I had called home. But, listening to Meyriene's soft breathing and watching the fire burn down to embers, I felt more at home than I ever had in the village. More myself. Free. And no matter what happened next, I felt that I had been given the chance for a new life, one I would love. With someone I could grow to love. Someone who understood the cost of abandoning the life

you knew for something uncertain. That was the last thought I had as the cottage drifted away, and I started to dream about the bright future ahead of me.

Consolation

Brenna Gutshall



Say it Simply with Flowers

Brenna Gutshall

John stood outside of Amis des Fleurs fidgeting with the hem of his yellow argyle sweater. He second guessed his choice of outfit while he debated on whether or not he should enter the pretentious looking, French-named flower shop. It did have the best reviews within a ten-block radius, however, and John didn't want to put in the time or effort necessary to broaden his search limits. A ten-block radius was a perfectly average distance; this was only their first real date after all.

A tiny, silver bell tinged as he entered the shop and John made a face of disdain at the clichéd woven-basket displays showcasing the spring-fresh flowers. Signs hung on the wall, emblazoned with swirly fonts: *Predict your Personality. Find their Favorite. Say it Simply. With Amis des Fleurs.*

A curly-haired man stood behind the counter wearing a forest green apron and a simple t-shirt with slacks combo. He was creating an equally abhorrent arrangement to the ones featured at the front, this one in blues and purples. Before John could decide that leaving would be the best option, the man looked up from his flowers and judgingly raised his eyebrow. He was scruffy with his stubbled jaw and tired eyes, but the lopsided smirk he wore screamed that he knew John was thinking about fleeing. *Oh, fuck no*, John was not about to give this pompous asshole the satisfaction of chasing him off so easily.

John marched right up to the counter and pushed the vase of flowers that the worker was fiddling with aside. "I need a pretty bouquet for a girl. Nothing too expensive, but something that still looks just as fancy and tasteful."

The man gave direct eye contact with John as he slid the vase that he was just working on back in front of him. "So, you want me to make you a bouquet that's expensive without being expensive?" the man asked, crossing his arms. He may have been muscular and he may have had some tattoos and the eye contact may have been a bit intimidating, but John remained entirely unfazed.

"Yes. Exactly, glad you understood," John said in a smarmy tone of voice. The kind of tone you use when it's incredibly obvious how much you hate the person that you're talking to. The kind of tone where you want them to know exactly how inconvenient and unproductive this entire conversation is going to be for them if they try to fight whatever it is you are saying. The curly-haired man looked at John with dull, unamused eyes. He had a nametag on, but John wasn't going to give this guy the upper hand by reading it and thereafter referring to him mentally by said name. Especially now that he was completely ignoring John, focus turned entirely to sticking the little stems of those purple-blue flowers into the already full arrangement. This guy was a dick.

John squinted at the man and began drumming on the countertop with the pads of his fingers, the rhythm growing more and more intense until he was just smacking the counter. When that didn't work, he began snapping his fingers in the guy's face.

John's arm was suddenly snatched in a forceful grip. The other man tilted his head slightly to the right and his eyes narrowed, a clear signal of the other's annoyance and frustration. "Would you—stop—that." There was a long pause filled only by the sounds of aggressive finger snapping.

Groaning, he shoved John's arm away in realization that, no, John would not stop. "Okay fine. First things first. What is your favorite flower?" He motioned towards nothing in particular as he spoke. John guessed he was indicating the entire store, or maybe the door. "Which ones speak to you?"

"My favorite?" John asked. "Shouldn't you be asking me what's *her* favorite flower?"

The florist looked at him, incredulous. "Do you know her favorite flower?"

"Well ... no." The guy had him there. "I don't have a favorite flower though. Roses are nice, I guess; don't girls like those? Those ones are nice, too," he said, pointing to some red, pink, and orange flowers that looked like the babies that a mini sunflower and a carnation might make. They seemed rare. John certainly didn't

know what they were.

"Oh boy, you've gotta be shitting me," the man said.

"What?" John asked.

"Zinnias?" he said, as though that meant something. "Really?"

"What's wrong with 'em? I mean you're the one selling them here, so I don't see the problem."

"It's not the flowers. It's the personality they reflect—probably should have seen this coming though." The florist appraised John from head to toe and frowned.

"What the fuck?" John responded. He knew fuck-all about flowers but even John could tell that that was an insult. Did this man seriously just insult John with flowers?

The man began pulling out some vase options. "Okay look. Typically, I would tell you whether I think you and your date are a good fit for each other based on the flowers that you guys like, a flower fortune if you will—"

"I wouldn't," John interjected.

"But," he continued, pointedly ignoring him. "Since you don't know her favorite flower, we will have to figure that out first. We'll just work in the opposite direction. Tell me what she's like and I'll tell you her favorite flower." The florist filled the vase with a mixed assortment of the zinnias John had pointed out earlier, leaving plenty of room for other types, too. "Then I'll make a bouquet of her favorites mixed with your zinnias. See if I can make them work together." He didn't sound hopeful.

This is insane, John thought; but he didn't really have anything to disprove that this wasn't true. Maybe the flowers really could predict your personality, like the sign said. Or maybe this guy was insane.

"So, what exactly do you need to know about her?"

"Let's start simple. Who is she to you? Is she, you know...?"

John waited a bit, but the man failed to elaborate any further.

"No, I do not *know*."

"Are you guys like ... dating?" he guessed. "She your girlfriend? Wife—no, you wouldn't be here if you were already married to her. Best friend? Soon-to-be girlfriend? Oh! Maybe a friend-with-benefits? We get those a lot—friends-with-benefits who will hopefully become something more—"

"Monica. Her name is Monica. She is a great girl. We've been friends for a little while, but we're going on a date tonight. Now please for the love of God, just sell me a bouquet." John began to think he should've just left when he had the opportunity. Now he was going to be late, and if he didn't show up with flowers for Monica, she would be heartbroken over the fact that he didn't even have a proper excuse as to why he was so late.

The guy was wandering throughout his own goddamn store. He didn't seem to care about John's predicament at all. "Going on a date. But not yet dating. Okay, I can work with this."

"Thank fuck for that," John replied.

"So, if you asked this girl to be your girlfriend, would she say yes?"

"I would hope so," John replied.

"Hope isn't something you take a chance on with flowers, buddy. I need yes or no answers here."

"Yes, then. Monica would say yes." John quickly accepted the reality that answering his questions was the only way to get out of this store as quickly as possible with flowers in hand.

"Hmm, okay then daffodils are out."

Chasing after the florist, John followed him from flower to flower and watched as he passed up on the cute, yellow trumpet-shaped

flowers.

"But even if yellow is her favorite color?"

"Not that yellow. Unless you want to be friend-zoned," the guy looked back at John. "Probably not the yellow of your sweater, either." *Fucking dick.*

Glancing at his watch, John decided to take matters into his own hands. "You know what? Just add some of these and these," John pointed at a few of the different nearby flowers. "Sell me the bouquet and I'll be off."

"You sure about that?" The guy looked extremely skeptical about John's choices, but what the fuck did he know anyway? *Judgmental bastard.* Flowers were flowers, that's all. Monica will think they're pretty and then they will sit on her counter and wilt away.

"One hundred percent certain."

"Monica. Hey, I hope you weren't waiting long. I bought these for you," John announced to his beautiful date, finally arriving at the cafe. "You will not believe the trouble I had to go through, but it was all worth it—for you." He presented the bouquet with a flourish. The arrangement did turn out looking quite tasteful just as John had asked. There was no way he admitted that to the florist though. In fact, John believed it was all his doing. He did pick the flowers after all, and he would be giving no credit to that asshole shopkeeper what-so-ever.

"Oh, John!" Monica's reaction was very promising. If she was mad that he was late, her face didn't show it now. Instead, she appraised every type of flower in the arrangement with loving caramel-colored eyes.

The guy told John what each flower was called, but he honestly just zoned out until it was time to pay. The zinnias were still in there, as well as another type of red flower, some honeysuckle, and some pink ones that made the florist smirk. John resisted the itch to remove them from the arrangement; that would have meant defeat. There were violets added too; apparently, they "broke

up the reds and pinks" which ... did make a tiny bit of sense. Whatever, it looked good to John. What mattered most, however, was if Monica liked it.

Monica paused for an abnormally long moment. John began to wonder if she said something while he was busy thinking, something that he was now meant to respond to. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Yes!" Monica finally blurted. She looked at John with wide, cheerful eyes. "Of course, I'll marry you. I just couldn't believe it at first, John. This is so exciting and sudden. I mean, we've been friends for a while now, but I never knew how you always felt!"

"Woah, what?"

"I'm saying yes, John," Monica said. She looked at him sympathetically as if he was surprised by her answer. *Where the hell did she get that idea from? I don't want to marry her.* John wondered, but wasn't sure how to ask what she was talking about. He didn't want to embarrass her. It wasn't like he had gotten down on one knee or was holding a diamond ring out to her though, so if anything, she would really just be embarrassing herself.

"I have to admit, the zinnias really threw me off for a moment," Monica continued. *And okay, rude. Why does everyone hate zinnias?* "But when I saw the violets, they really balanced the zinnias out and made your intentions clear. How did you know violets were my favorite?" She looked at John curiously. How was he meant to answer this question?

"Right... well, lucky guess?" John decided that getting her to keep talking would be his only hope of figuring out what was going on—and then figuring out how to get out of it. "Since my intentions are so clear, I would love to hear your uh ... interpretation. Yeah, I want to hear what gave it away."

"Well the myrtle was clearly the most obvious part. Everyone knows they represent good luck in *marriage*. Then the honeysuckle and red salvia are meant to represent how our love will be bonded forever, right? And the mixing of our two favorites was a nice

romantic touch, John." Monica sounded sickly sweet and over the moon. John just felt sick.

"Does everyone view flowers with such ... passion? Like does everyone just know what every single flower is meant to indicate?" he asked. Monica hadn't shown any interest in this kind of thing before. Maybe she hit her head earlier or was waiting until right now to show him how crazy she was.

"I mean most people do. Don't you?" Now she looked confused. *Fuck*. He was supposed to know exactly what his bouquet meant.

"Oh yeah. Yeah, of course! I just don't seem to know ... as much as you do. Are you an expert?"

"Not really. I know as much as anyone else does," she assured.

Sure, if by "anyone" she actually meant that florist dude he talked to earlier.

"Your favorite flower says a lot about you, John. Flowers are important to think about, especially when it is someone's favorite one."

Everyone can't really be like this, right? It was obvious that Monica felt very strongly about this sort of thing, and the florist knew a lot too—but that was his job. Flowers couldn't really be that ordinary a topic to most people. It didn't make any sense to John.

"I see... So, then what's the deal with zinnias then?"

Monica opened her mouth but closed it quickly and scrunched up her nose. She was deciding what to say. It was sort of cute. Too bad he had to shut this marriage talk down soon. "Zinnias themselves are very pretty. They represent thoughts of friends who are absent in your life at the moment."

"That doesn't seem so bad. You and that—uh man at the flower shop were getting me all worked up about it," John joked. Monica looked at him seriously.

"Well I suppose they have a nice sentiment for certain occasions, but when they are added to bouquets that are meant to be romantic, well..."

John was getting annoyed. *Why can't people just finish their fucking sentences and stop making him guess what they mean?*

"Well..." John made a small "go-on" gesture as he leaned in closer to Monica across the table.

Monica sighed. "Zinnias basically show unfaithfulness in the relationship."

"Unfaithfulness? Are you saying that the flowers mean I am going to cheat on you? That is incredibly judgmental." *But it wasn't wrong exactly.* John wasn't cheating on Monica per se; he was just testing the waters with a couple girls right now. He honestly didn't think Monica and him were all that serious yet. This was their first date for crying out loud.

"No! I know you wouldn't cheat on me because we balance each other. My violets mean loyalty. They represent faithfulness. Don't you see, John, we can work past this."

"Oh really. We can work past this. But if I was with anybody else, I would cheat on them?"

"Not necessarily, but it's possible."

"It's possible!" John closed his eyes and reined in his outburst. He opened them and saw a worried Monica. John gave her a very forced smile. "Look, Monica, this has been an enlightening conversation, but I think the engagement should be called off."

"But we can move past this, John. I know we can—"

"No Monica. We can't. You were right, flowers are important and if you are going to judge me for mine and hold it over my head like this, then I don't think we can be together."

"John—"

"I'm sorry. It's not you, it's my flower or whatever."

That was a close one, John thought as he left the cafe. He would probably think back on this moment from time to time, about Monica's absence in his life and what could have been. He needed to pick up some flowers for his date with Lucy tomorrow though. Maybe he could broaden his search limits to a 15-block radius this time.

Twelve/Fifteen/Twenty

Brenna Gutshall

TWELVE.

When I was twelve,
I realized no one wanted to be close to me.
Best friends forever, and I equaled three.

Despite this, I always knew
that three best friends could never be true.
Because best friends only ever meant two.

The two of you together
and me.
Standing in the space just beside you both.
Hoping, but knowing I'm not.

FIFTEEN.

At fifteen I wanted to love.
My first boyfriend and I equaled two
but we weren't best friends.
The closer we got,
the farther apart we stretched.
Though I didn't mind the separation.

One now at college.
One still in high school.
Both feeling like strangers
who desired to remain exactly that.
We were the best of strangers,
and I have never known anything different.

(You were the greatest boyfriend I ever had.)

TWENTY.

When I turned twenty
I created an orbit that was already there.
Rings surround me like stages of a video game,
a game which few people even bother progressing through.
Almost none reach the innermost rings
and I have never let anyone completely inside.
There is no one at the center but me.
I fear that whoever it is that gets inside
will break the orbit and send all of us hurtling.
Then I would be alone.

So, in my fucked-up way of orbiting those I call friends
and keeping them all at a safe distance
where they must crawl slowly towards an unreachable center,
you have now found yourself back at ring one.
And you will never get as close as you did before.

Once upon a time, you were in the orbit around my heart
but now you can find yourself at the start all over again.
I will not make the same mistakes as I did before.
There is nowhere for you to go, but out of my orbit entirely.

I don't get my hopes up anymore.
Me, myself, and I equal one.
One best friend to myself.

What Dystopian World are You Living in Right Now? —Buzzfeed

Brenna Gutshall

It's a pleasure to know that the life you are living is the best possible life—a perfect life determined by you, for you. At least that is what we were always told.

At age three I was given my first Quiz. It's called a Quiz, but it really wasn't as bad as it sounded. You don't have to study for it. And you don't even have to be able to read yet. The first Quiz was designed with bright, interesting pictures as answers instead of words, and the only thing three-year-old me needed to do was touch the picture that I presumably liked the most when each question appeared on the screen. Everyone takes this Quiz on their third birthday; it determines which zodiac sign you should really belong to. From then on that's your real zodiac sign. "The first big decision," my mother called it. You cannot retake this Quiz.

I am an Aries. I am 18 years old and have taken 3,716 Quizzes so far in my life. I want to travel to London, but the Grand Canyon is my ideal vacation destination. My favorite candy is Snickers even though I am allergic to peanuts. I like the Star Wars trilogy, the OG ones. I want a pet dog, specifically a beagle. My favorite sport is basketball. I don't play basketball though, because my hobby is reading. My name is Erica—there were 14 other Ericas attending my high school. Only eight at my grade school though. I don't yet know how many Ericas will be attending my college. Apparently, Erica was a popular answer to the What Should You Name Your Baby Girl Quiz during the year of my birth. Not that I'm complaining. I like my name.

I imagine some of the other Ericas didn't even make it to a college. Their Quizzes probably sent them right out into their ideal work field. The whole reason for the creation of Quizzes was to make our world more efficient and to make the people in our society more passionate about their lives. BuzzFeed Corporation has stated similar sentiments in many of their daily articles about the institution of their perfect Quizzes within our society. Everyone has a role to play, and thanks to BuzzFeed's Quizzes each role will

fit each person perfectly. What is there to complain about, when everyone is living the very life that was created for them—a life based entirely on their own decisions?

My decisions have brought me here. As I looked out the car window, my mother chattering nervously from behind the wheel, I finally let it all sink in. I'm going to college. It was one of my dreams, so obviously I am excited. I watched as the countryside gave way to the shopping district and continued to stare blankly until only townhomes and the odd family-owned business passed by my window. It wouldn't be long until we reached the heart of this growing college town. The next chapter of my life was quickly approaching me. I couldn't help but think about what the Major Quiz might say, or what classes I'll be assigned based on my responses. Will I need to wait until my second year to add a minor, or could I add one right away? Maybe I won't even get to have a minor. What club will my future Quizzes tell me to join? Should I take the College Sports Quiz and join a team?

"Alright, sweetie. We're here!" my mom announced in her sing-song voice. I looked out at the entrance of the college that I would be calling home for at least the next year. Opening the car door, I took my first step onto the campus and my first look into the future. There was no need to go on an early tour of the school; the College Quiz simply picked the best option available for me. The College Preparations Quiz ensured that a tour wasn't necessary—I was a free spirit after all with a thrill for surprises and fun, new experiences. Mom had gotten out of the car, too, and she quickly pulled me into a big hug.

"Mom," I huffed. The First Day on Campus Quiz promised she wouldn't cause a scene.

"I know. I know. This is where I leave you for your next big decision! My last Quiz said that I would be the type of parent who lets you do this on your own, so that's what I'm gonna do." She stepped back, but still held me at an arm's length away. "Oh, look at you. You're going to make such a great future here."

"Thanks for driving me, Mom." She smiled serenely at me, and I smiled right back.

"Of course, Dear." She tucked a loose strand of my stringy, blonde hair back behind my ear, and afterwards finally allowed me to retrieve my things from the car. "Oh, come here and give me one last hug."

"Bye, Mom." I let the awkward hug persist despite the weird angle my arm was bent at in order to keep hold of my backpack. I was one of those lucky kids whose Backpack Etiquette Quiz had said I was the type of person to carry my backpack by only using one strap. It was so cool.

"Bye, Sweetie. I know you'll be just fine here. Your Dorm Quiz said you'll get a double and your Roommate Quiz said you'll be assigned a rockin' roomie who loves art and music." I began pushing her toward the car door. "Don't forget, your Homesick Quiz said you'll call me tomorrow morning!"

"Mom, that last one wasn't a real Quiz."

"I know. I know. Call me anyway." Mom got into the car, but before she left, rolled down her window to say, "I love you, Erica."

"Love you too, Mom."

I waved her off, knowing she was leaving with tears in her eyes. Her Quiz said she would. I sighed and grabbed the handle of my brown-leather suitcase. All I brought with me was this suitcase and a backpack, both stuffed to maximum capacity. There were lots of other college freshmen arriving at the same time, many with one suitcase just like me. One girl with a pristine white dress, however, trudged past me with three pink cases on her arms; two individuals whom I could only assume to be her parents pulled along even more matching suitcases, hurrying to keep up with their daughter. Another boy who had just said goodbye to his mother had five suitcases to carry all on his own. That was the way of the Quizzes. They told you what you needed to bring. They told your parents how they would react. They told you anything you could ever desire to know.

"Hey, Erica," a boy called out to me from farther along the path. He was tall with shaggy, brown hair and a huge grin that became

more and more visible as he rushed towards me.

"Hello, Jackson." Jackson number five to be exact. I don't really talk to the previous four Jacksons anymore. The first was my neighbor from when we lived in Alabama. We didn't live there long. The other three were from grade school. Their Quizzes could have taken them anywhere really. This Jackson's Quiz apparently brought him here to the same college that mine did—*great*.

"So, Erica, are you going to be my biggest fan out there at all the basketball games again?" Jackson's hobby is sports, and the What Sport Should You Play Quiz said that he would be the best at basketball. He's been playing for eight years now. I wish he could retake that particular Quiz—then again, that would involve a lot of paperwork and chances are likely that he would just get the same results anyway. Doesn't mean he's actually any good at basketball though. I would know; the Sports Quiz said that basketball is my favorite sport.

The one-time Quiz stipulation was put into practice for a reason; if citizens could simply retake any Quiz as many times as desired, then all anyone would ever do was continue to retake them over and over. Now you must apply for Quiz retakes through BuzzFeed Corporation, but you can only do this for certain Quizzes and the results rarely changed. The biggest decisions are near impossible to take twice.

"I'll certainly be at the games, if that's what you're asking," I responded. He was my friend, but Jackson was the type of person who would follow you around like a lost puppy if you gave him the slightest bit of encouragement.

"Awesome, it'll be just like high school. I'm so glad we got the same college. Wonder if we'll get the same major, too?" He pondered aloud.

"Doubtful."

"Why do you say that? We have so much in common."

"Not really."

"We both like dogs," he pleaded as if that was substantial enough reasoning.

"Over half the population likes dogs."

"You like basketball. I play basketball." We have had this conversation many times before.

I rolled my eyes and stopped walking in order to face him head on. "Look. Those things are irrelevant to our majors, let alone our future careers. Don't get your hopes up is all I'm trying to say, Jackson."

Turns out those things aren't as irrelevant as you would think.

The Major Quiz. The Quiz that I had been looking forward to ever since the College Quiz determined where I would be going. It was finally happening. I had been planning for this Quiz all summer—not that it was necessary to prepare for. Immediately after marking my arrival and receiving my dorm information, I was ushered into a Quizzing room. Jackson was sent to a different Quizzing room from me, but I promised to meet up with him after we got our responses back. I was curious what his major would be, since there was no way we'd get the same one.

The lighting felt abrasive in the large room, and the desk chairs were made of an uncomfortable plastic. At least the digital workspaces were modernized and closed-off from one another—this allowed for a genuine and accurate Quizzing experience. The Major Quiz would be uploaded to everyone's workspace at the exact same time. There was no time limit for the Quiz, but it needed to be completed in one sitting so if you had to leave, you had to then restart. The BuzzFeed info packets always recommend that the quickest answers are the answers most honest to yourself. We all learn this to be the truth early on.

I've taken many Quizzes in my life, ranging from the practically pointless ones, like the Which Muppet Are You Quiz, to the prominent life-changing ones, like the Where Should You Attend College Quiz. Each Quiz has always made sense to me; my favorite silly noise would help determine my Muppet, the quote that most

describes myself would help determine the best college for me. It made sense. I could accept what these Quizzes said as fact. I really was the most like Scooter, and Mount Faraday University was obviously the best fit for a girl like me.

Staring at my digital workspace, however, seeing question number one of the Major Quiz—that did not make sense.

What's the Best Major for You?—Buzzfeed

What is your ideal pet?

Dog

Cat

Bird

Fish

This had to be a joke. They probably just uploaded the wrong Quiz to my digital workspace. My major couldn't possibly be determined by such trivial information as my ideal pet. That was stupid. My favorite hobby would make sense—maybe even my favorite sport if the Quiz thought I could be in sports management or something—but my ideal pet?

"Uh, Mrs. Gregory? I believe there is some sort of mistake with my Major Quiz."

The woman seated at the front of the Quizzing room with the obnoxiously large nametag looked up from her screen and smiled reassuringly. Her kind eyes crinkled from behind her horn-rimmed glasses. "There are no mistakes with the Quizzes, Dear. There are never any mistakes. Just do your best."

This next big decision is determined by you, for you. Suddenly, feeling a shock like lightning through my entire spine, BuzzFeed's slogan ran through my head. I bolted upright out of my seat. Looking around wildly at the other faces just like mine, seated in front of workspaces, taking Quizzes, deciding what their majors will be, I was shocked. Our lives ... are really going to be decided based on ... this Quiz? Everyone was staring right back at me—the freak-show standing in the middle of the room. *Has she never seen a Quiz before?* they must have all been thinking. Mrs. Gregory

called my name, or at least I think it was my name. For all I know she could have been speaking to any of the Ericas who were bound to be sitting in this very room.

I clenched my fists; my long, coral-painted nails, chosen just for me by the What Nail Style Should You Pick Next Quiz, dug harshly into my palms. I slowly retook my seat, and after a few deep breaths I willed my index finger to touch the screen.

What's the Best Major for You?—Buzzfeed

What is your ideal pet?

Dog

Cat

Bird

Fish

And as I desperately tried to be like everyone else, deciding what my major would be with a Quiz that did not make sense, I realized. We're told it's a pleasure to know that the life you are living is the best possible life. And it was a pleasure, that blind belief. I should have never tried to doubt my decisions; there is no Quiz retake for believing in the system. If I no longer *know* that the life I am living is the best possible life, I can no longer live in blissful ignorance.

No. Now I can only pretend.

Beyond the Schoolhouse

Abbi Hayden

A tiny cottage rests on soft, green moss
 Stuck in a summer sunset
 Even if the trees are bare
 And snow flurries around it
Consumed by eternal radiance

 The stream is run by fairies
 They welcome all who find it
Creatures nestle in the shallow nooks
Delicate waterfalls churn the smallest of whirlpools
 Bubbles dance across the surface

A spring, once used by many,
 Trickles through the rocks
 Its offerings sit patiently
Longing for a companion

 There is history beyond the magic
 Stone chimneys along the bank crumble
Treasures of the past peak through the sienna clay
 A lost ring, a coin of yore
 Wait to be uncovered

Aubade des Ténèbres

Abbi Hayden

It's morning, for me,
Even though it's almost dusk.
The audacity of my body to wake up,
To make me face reality.
All I want is to be unconscious,
To be numb and peacefully unaware.

It's already 3pm.
At least I got to skip a few meals.
Should I shower and get dressed?
I could just stay in my wrinkled pajamas—
I'm not leaving my room today, anyways.

It's time to get up I guess,
To act like a "normal" person. Where's my phone?
It doesn't matter.
No one messaged me.
No one cares.

God, I wish I didn't feel this way.
What if I woke up at dawn?
To birds chirping and fresh dew?
I could draw a warm bubble bath;
Make a frothy latte.
Start the day bright and early!
How does anyone do that?

I sleep for 14 hours
And still feel like a husk.
Battered and exhausted,
Empty and brittle.
It's morning for me,
In the late afternoon.
It's morning for me,
But it's nothing good.

Withering Away

Abbi Hayden

At 6 years old
It started
She ran her fingers along my calf
And muttered something
About my body being too big

At 9 years old
It happened
She saw me reading a magazine
And muttered something
About my face being pretty like theirs
But my body being too big

At 12 years old
It went like this
She watched me step on a scale
And muttered something
With a look of disgust painted across her face
About that number
And my body being too big

At 15 years old
It shocked me
She heard me fantasize
And muttered something
With a look of pity painted across her face
About the audition
She didn't want me to get my hopes up
With my body being too big

At 18 years old
It consumed me
She took over my soul
And muttered something
With a look of seduction painted across her face
About control
She wanted me to obey her
She wanted to fix the problem
—My body being too big

Prodrome

Hannah Honick

1st Place Poetry

When I was nine
I had the best bottle cap collection in the world and
my father taught me
how to make toasted peanut butter sandwiches and
recycle everything and
identify poison ivy and
he said things like
if it's worth listening to it's worth listening to loud and
let your freak flag fly and
you are the master of your own destiny

When I was ten
I was old enough to know the sick of him stumbling home
smelling like stars and vodka and
my father taught me
how to brew coffee and
pick up broken glass safely and
lock my knees to support the weight of others and
he said things like
I'm sorry and
I'm so fucking sorry and
don't you dare start because you will not be able to stop

Bringer of Treasure

Hannah Honick

1st Place Prose

It's pretty hard being a prophet. It's living a life of self-sacrifice and ridicule. Everyone thinks you're crazy, stoned, lying, or all three. It makes it even more difficult to help the downtrodden when you're downtrodden yourself. I haven't given up though. Martyrs aren't allowed to give up.

I glance around the waiting room. The walls are beige and there are flea market paintings and motivational posters hung on every available surface. The other patients look around the room, too, their dull eyes rolling in their heads like dirty marbles and their teeth gnashing idly. Poor things. So stupid and unaware. I can't leave though. I'm in the lion's den of it all, and I have to prove myself.

"Jasper Moore," says the secretary with too much lipstick. She has a Southern accent, and her bloody lips drawl out my last name just a little too long. I hang on to the sound of my name as it bounces around the waiting room. I like the way it feels when someone else says it.

"You can head on back, Honey," she says tentatively when I don't stand up, as if I were waiting for her permission, but also like she was kind of scared to speak to me. I know where the right office is though. I can get there by myself. Straight back through the neutral hall, two right turns, and I'm there. The door is open. I know who I'm here to see, but I read the placard on the door anyway. Dr. Bronson.

"Hello, Jasper," he says in his deep voice. "How are we today?" He always says "we" like we're equal.

"Fine." I think I'm telling the truth.

"Wonderful. How are you feeling about your new medications?" These appointments are always almost entirely questions.

"Fine." This is mostly the truth, too. The Depakote is to keep me from having episodes and the Risperdal is to keep me from having hallucinations. They're mostly working, not that I really want them to. I miss being manic. I could be getting a lot more done.

"I miss being manic though," I say, giving the eye-glassed doctor a glimpse into my brain. I enjoy doling out little gifts like these and the appointments go a lot better when I forfeit at least some information, but nothing important.

"Now, why is that?" Dr. Bronson says as he writes something on a comically large yellow legal pad.

He writes slowly, even though I think he should have learned by now to write faster, but I wait for him to finish anyway. I can't really blame him. I'm well-adjusted, so he must get bored with me pretty quickly. I am almost entirely normal, and he's used to talking to crazies all day. It must be exciting.

"Because there just always feels like there's so much to be done." I probably shouldn't have said that.

He knows I haven't had a job in over a year. I'm sure Mom made sure to tell him that multiple times.

"What do you think needs to be done, Jasper?"

"Just preparations, for my future I guess. It can be overwhelming sometimes." If I can be vague enough, I can usually deflect him.

"Why are we feeling overwhelmed today?" He asks, his mustache trembling at the expectation of a breakthrough. We're not going to have one.

"Dr. Bronson, I don't believe we are feeling anything today. It's just me," I say in my absolute most polite voice.

"Now, Jasper, you know I only use the collective 'we' to reaffirm you. You're not alone in this, and I am someone who is here to help you along. Let's move on. Let's talk about your hallucinations."

Success.

"They're mostly gone," I say, which is the truth.

"Could you please explain that a little more? Has there been a decline in all of your hallucinations, or just the complex visual ones? Are you still seeing the characters you refer to as the messengers?"

"I still see them sometimes, but only from far away, and I can't hear them anymore," I lie. It's true they've stopped talking to me, but they're still around. They've already told me everything worth knowing anyway. Mercury and Mars, two benign rats, are at home in my room. They like it best under my bed. Twelve, a tall blue figure, is behind the furiously scribbling Dr. Bronson, its spindly arms outstretched to rest flat on either wall of his office. I can hear it breathing, deep and slow, in and out, like it's meditating.

"That's very good, Jasper. Very good. How do you feel about that?" asks Dr. Bronson.

"Fine." I make sure to make lots of eye contact. They care about that.

"Wonderful. Now, as you know, we have recently made some adjustments to your diagnosis," he said, as he leans forward a little, like he's telling me a secret.

"I know," I say, leaning back in my own chair. He could keep his secrets, and I would sure as shit keep mine.

"Do you remember what we changed?" He liked to ask me stupid simple questions like this to make sure I haven't lost any time.

"Yes. You used to think I had schizophrenia, and now you think I have schizoaffective disorder."

"Correct. Do you know why we think that's a more accurate diagnosis for you?" He had to make sure I understood every detail of what he said to me. There are rules about that kind of thing.

"Because I exhibit symptoms of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, including alternating manic and depressive episodes, psychosis, and grandiose delusions," I recite, nearly word-for-word, what was probably written in my file. Pieces of it were accurate, but he was the one with delusions if he thought I believed it all.

"Correct again. Have you spoken to your mother about this? You don't have to, and I certainly won't say anything to her, but I would like you to work towards building a stronger relationship with her. I'd love to bring you both into the office to chat sometime." He was always trying to include my mother in things, no matter how many times I politely declined.

"No, I haven't," I say simply, not wanting to stay on this topic long. I try not to discuss my diagnosis with her at all if it can be avoided. I can still remember the first time I told her about my destiny to be a savior. She had slapped me across the face as soon as the words came out of my mouth, and signed me up for counseling at our church the very next day, not that it had done any good. She was a true believer, just not in me. My hand rose reflexively to cup my cheek where, even now, the skin still held a memory of her stinging palm, like she had wrapped it in thorns beforehand. It hadn't changed anything. I knew what I was meant to do and nothing anyone could say would change that. I was taking orders from the big man himself.

"I would still strongly urge you to consider it. I believe it would be good for you both to discuss these things."

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. He launches into some spiel about family and social support networks, something I'd heard a million times over the years.

"Could you explain this dichotomy in your responses?" he says, pulling me out of my own head.

"What?" I clearly hadn't been listening. He pulls a sheet of paper out of a folder on his desk and flips it around so I can see it's the questionnaire I have to fill out every time I'm here so he can track my progress.

"You indicated on the inventory that you have thought about self-harming activities recently. However, you have also indicated positive changes in mood and overall wellbeing. This seems incongruent," he says as he returns the paper to the folder and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. There's a wrinkle in between his eyebrows like a little mouth that forms when I confuse him.

"Thoughts are not desires," I say, making a point to speak to his eyebrow mouth, just in case it's going to tell me something important, which it never does. His regular mouth launches into another monologue. This time, it was something about being able to recognize and work through our own self-destructive behavior. He seems satisfied I'm not going to off myself in the next week, which meant we were probably going to wrap up a little early. He always kept the clock in his office set five minutes fast, probably to cheat his patients out of their purchased time. I block out his conclusion, his voice droning on way too long for me to even pretend to pay attention. He finishes. I get up, and leave. I walk back through the winding hallway. I walk through the beige waiting room and past the other patients with their lolling tongues and jittery movements. I say goodbye to the secretary with too much makeup, even though I don't particularly want to. She smiles flatly at me, which I can tell she didn't want to do either. I walk home.

Twelve is with me, directly behind me actually. I turn just to make sure. His fur makes him look a little blurry in the sunlight as it's ruffled by the wind.

Jasper. Jasper. Jasper. Jasper.

I can't tell if it's Twelve or the wind. It might be both.

Jasper. Jasper. Jasper. Jasper.

Twelve likes to say things over and over like that, his swishy whisper voice blending his words together until they're all connected, like a chain.

Jasper. Jasper. Bringer of treasure. Jasper. Jasper. Jasper.

He never says anything important anymore, so I don't bother turning around to look at him again. I can feel where he is behind me anyway. Instead, I think about Dr. Bronson. He's probably my favorite therapist I've had so far. He knows how to keep his distance. And he's not always comparing me to Jesus. That's probably the most annoying thing they do. That's why I like him. I'll save him when the time comes.

Jasper. Jasper. Jasper.

I don't even think I'm Jesus. I'm not Jesus. I might even be better. I'm going to die for others, just like he did, after all. And I'm going to do it myself. I can make decisions like that for the greater good.

Jasper. Bringer of treasure. Jasper. Jasper.

I look down at my feet. The color is starting to melt off my shoes, leaving a sticky trail on the sidewalk like a snail. I like leaving marks on the world like that.

Jasper. Bringer of treasure.

I am Jasper. I have always been Jasper.

Kingdom Come

Hannah Honick

I don't think you're in heaven
because we were heathens together
but I can imagine you
kicking down the pearly gates,
with blood still leaking from your open wrists,
to make peace with your maker
by bribing his angels with Vicodin.

I guess you might be in hell
because you sure were a hellion,
a frenzy of metal and muscle and music.
I can see you now, fist fighting demons,
proud of your broken nose and bruised knuckles
but wishing I was there to witness
your drinking contest with the devil.

I fear you're in purgatory
because you never could stand the boredom
of gray faces and blank spaces.
Maybe that's why you draped your skin with
pretty ink and razorblade ribbons.
Maybe that's why you left me stuck
trying to talk your grave into coughing up your soul.

I hope to god you're somewhere
because I cannot bear the thought of
you running down a drain, running away
from me, from everything we were.
They told me
it wasn't my fault.
There was nothing to be done.

I think you're here with me
because I can feel your fingers feather down my spine
and your spirit singing me to sleep.
I don't know what to do with all these strangers with flowers
telling me that you were going nowhere fast.
Please tell me what to do with all these backhanded condolences.
You went nowhere fast without me.

Substitute

Hannah Honick

"Honestly, I can't believe you haven't broken up with him yet," said Maeve.

"Do you really hate him that much?" Eliza was sitting on the floor, messily painting her toenails an electric teal.

"I don't really hate him. I would just say that I am disappointed that you happen to be dating literally the most boring boy I have ever met in my entire life."

"Oh come on. He's not that bad."

"He is so bad! He is so bad, that every time I speak to him, the sheer force of his lack of personality makes me want to jump out of a window."

Eliza laughed at that.

"Maybe you should spend less time complaining and more time doing my hair." She capped the polish and began blowing on her nails.

"But I'm just so good at complaining."

"You are that, but you're also good at hair, and that's really the only reason I keep you around."

"Pretty sure I live here, but alright." Maeve groaned, and rolled over, before flopping off the bed. She was fond of flopping. "What am I doing to your hair?" She knelt down on the floor behind Eliza and began to brush the tangles out of her coconut-scented hair, which had once been dyed blue but had now faded to a silvery gray.

"Could you braid it and like put it up? Do it that fancy way that looks kind of like a crown but not really because it's just in the back."

"Your wish is my command, your highness," Maeve said in a vague attempt at a British accent as she began portioning out the strands of Eliza's hair.

"Oh shut up. You know I would do your hair if you ever had a date."

"That's a pretty big if."

"I'm serious though, Maeve. If you actually put some effort in or talked to more than like three people or maybe didn't use insults as your only mode of communication—"

"Then what?" Maeve cut her off.

"Then you could have any guy you wanted probably."

Maeve stiffened a little at that and paused to glance at Eliza's face in the full-length mirror they were sitting in front of. Eliza was scrolling through something on her phone, not paying attention, her still-wet fingernails like little jewels.

"Maybe I just don't want anybody." She tucked the last loose piece of hair into place with a bobby pin, and then sat back on her heels. "All done."

"Perfect, that's exactly what I was talking about." Eliza lifted her hands to the back of her head to gently touch the braids. "I just meant that any guy would be lucky to have you." She continued, as she inched closer to the mirror and began on her makeup. Maeve lay back on the rug, suddenly a little more conscious of the dark circles under her eyes and acne that still dotted her forehead even though she thought it was supposed to disappear after high school.

"Yeah, okay. Sure."

"I'm serious," Eliza said.

"You already said that." Maeve rolled over and began scrolling through her own phone. She didn't have anything interesting to

be looking at, but had the distinct urge to seem a little busier than she actually was.

"You could try online dating. You'd kill on Tinder."

Maeve mumbled some noncommittal response.

"You could be going out, too."

"Think about it though. If I ever left this room, there would be no one here to help you get ready for all your boring dates with all your boring boyfriends."

"It's just the one. It's been the same one for a year now. You know that."

"Yeah, I know."

"You could still go out and do, I don't know, something. It doesn't have to be a date."

"But why would I ever want to do anything when the alternative is always sitting around with you?"

Maeve regretted it almost as soon as she'd said it. She held her breath, waiting for Eliza's response to ensure that she wasn't being too weird.

"I'm not that great." Eliza smiled a little bit and lowered the brush she'd been using to apply foundation to her face.

"You are literally that great."

Eliza went back to her makeup, looked a little bit sad, and didn't respond. They sat in silence for a little while. Maeve grew bored of pretending to be busy on her phone and resorted to pulling a thread that was dangling from her tank top. She wound it tightly around her finger as she went, cutting off the circulation. They'd sat in silence hundreds of times, as roommates often do, but this silence felt different, more embarrassing and childish.

"Can you come do my eyeliner? Pretty please? My hands won't stop shaking."

Maeve wondered if Eliza was anxious about the date or about her. She sat up and scooted over to her anyway, quickly unraveling the string from her finger.

"Do you need me to do your mascara too?" Maeve asked as she dug through Eliza's massive makeup bag.

"Probably. And I want wings. Make sure they're even."

Maeve knew that already, of course. She always wore it that way.

"Yeah, yeah." She cupped Eliza's cheek to steady her head, praying her own hands weren't shaking either. She smoothed the black around Eliza's eyes in the way she liked best. She always said it looked like calligraphy, like art. Maeve couldn't resist looking at Eliza's lips, the way they formed an O as she applied the mascara. She imagined how they felt, how they tasted. She shook herself out of it, and shrank away from her friend, upset at herself for thinking about her like that.

"Oh shit, I'm almost gonna be late." Eliza was chronically late, so this was hardly a surprise. She stood and went to the closet. She began babbling on about the restaurant they would be going to, Indian or Moroccan or something else she couldn't remember.

Maeve watched somewhat awkwardly as she undressed, knowing it would be stranger to make a show of looking away. They'd lived together for almost three years now. She felt those clichéd butterflies crawling under her skin as she nonchalantly glanced at the pale white softness of Eliza's stomach and thighs.

Eliza complained about them constantly, but Maeve thought they were perfect. She found herself wiping her hands on her sweatpants, a habit she'd had to adopt a little more recently.

The butterflies settled a little when Eliza put her dress on, slowly, so as not to mess up her hair or makeup. It was charcoal gray, embroidered with stars and planets around the hem. Maeve had

helped pick it out for Eliza to wear for her anniversary. Eliza put her shoes on and returned to the mirror for one last check.

"How do I look?"

"You look beautiful," Maeve said before she could even think about the words. Eliza smiled and blushed in the same sad sort of way she had earlier.

"Thanks, Maeve."

Maeve shoved her hands in her pockets and looked at herself in the mirror behind Eliza. She felt particularly gawky and sharp next to Eliza's curves.

"That's what friends are for."

"Alright. Don't wait up. I'll see you in the morning." With that, she was gone.

Maeve felt very lonely in the sudden quiet of the room. The tiled floor seemed colder than usual through her mismatched socks. The fluorescent bulbs of the overhead light seemed harsher. The room felt smaller. Maeve plucked the bright teal nail polish from the floor and began absentmindedly painting her nails, perhaps for lack of anything better to do. She finished her left and then clasped her hands together, imagining, for a moment, that it belonged to someone else.

It is cold here
Between the pillars
In the red brick building on Rhode Island Avenue
Where the vaulted ceilings go up and up and up
Where people come to meet their Maker
And pay His tax collector

I wish the portraits were lower and younger
So that I could graze mosaicked faces
With my outstretched fingers
Touch the cheeks of angels
The bas relief of scriptures
Feel the weight of a halo in my hand

But in the empty afternoon
I am the apocrypha of people
With no cross around my neck and no salvation
I am not named for the roses on the altar
So I contemplate the crypt and drop dimes in the charity box
As others beg for blessings of body and blood

I do not disturb the holy water
For I am not holy
And I do not kneel for I am not reverent
But I think that if God did exist this is where He would be
Eyes turned upward and feet planted firmly on marble
Like mine are

Lacuna

Lyra Houghton

The house was overgrown and rotting in the rafters, but it should not have been. Instead of Victorian rails, it had a concrete step. There was no knocker on the door replaced by a decorative plexiglass window, surrounded by sidelong slats of pale yellow, length-wise shingles. In the middle of the woods was a typical modern home in all respects but for its abandonment, and that was what made it strange.

He did not want to be here; he did not have to be here, and he did not need to be here. No personal joy or ambition made him push aside the tangles of glossy English ivy that cobwebbed across the walkway. No law or contract compelled him to scrape his shoes at the welcome mat, whose kitschy words were too frayed to read now. If he hadn't ducked his head through the doorway and uncapped his purple marker, his day-to-day urgencies would not be altered. But here he stood in front of a simple kitchen table.

Dust hung, gold and dull, suspended in the familiar rays of sunlight filtering through dirty windows. Surrounding the table were empty piles of clutter: books with broken spines, lamps with no bulbs, dry pens and cardboard boxes with forgotten mementos that were stacked without order on the hardwood floor ... and yet the table was blank but for dust and two objects. The man wiped away its grime and set his hat down. Beside it now was a gently burning candle, one of those Yankee types with a whimsical name on the front, meant to evoke whatever blue and twilight felt like.

A sealed orange envelope lay at the candle's side. Lines upon lines of numbers and letters marched across its face, getting smaller and smaller as space ran out. The back side lay on chipped wood, but he knew that it was no different from the front that he looked at now. He sat down and took his glasses off.

The handwriting had changed in style and clarity from the first line to the most recent—but that was to be expected; so had he....

INTENDED FOR TOMORROW

His eyes traveled down and across the thick orange paper.

INTENDED FOR MARCH 01, 2010
INTENDED FOR APRIL 01, 2010
INTENDED FOR NOVEMBER 2010
INTENDED FOR JANUARY 2012
INTENDED FOR...

The man closed his eyes and ran his hands down his face. No, of course, he couldn't do this. Not yet, he told himself, and revoked the most recent black block letters with a slash of purple.

~~INTENDED FOR JULY 2021~~

Then, in larger print to compensate for the thickness of the marker tip:

INTENDED FOR...

His fingers shook, hovered over the envelope. A tuft of inky filament had been dislodged from the rest of the marker, and now it brushed against the new words, leaving a shadow of color just beside the R. The man muttered a curse and jerked his hand away, recapping the marker in one fevered motion.

INTENDED FOR....

It stared him in the face, two biting words, making him turn away and close his eyes and run his hands up his face again, as if trying to wipe away the shadows. No, it was more than shadows there. He was old. The house had been this way ever since he could remember, but over time he had steadily approached a similar state of being, tired and lined and worn around the edges. This marker was foreign in his hands, a synthetic shell of scents and plastics that he did not like. Its ink on the envelope taunted him from behind his back. When was the first time he had come here? Decades ago, now. He had picked up the envelope, felt the outline of its contents, put it back and gone home. Tomorrow, he said—he would return tomorrow.

Decades ago, now.

Time flowed strangely sometimes, a rip-roaring slipstream of cold and blue and sweet that put on a nice show of observable speed, an impressive demonstration of linear power, and yet so often its eddies found him here, tossed around in circles only to be let go after an acknowledgment, just a bit of acknowledgment that yes,

time was moving, and he was trying to stand for a little while in the thick of it, just trying to stand for a little bit with his eyes open.

Still with his eyes shut tight, he reached out in the dark and held the envelope in his left hand.

It was a piece of paper. What was there to lose?

That was the kind of thought that nagged him every so often. When he had first come to open the envelope, it had bothered him long into the night, and he had woken up cold, the candle snuffed out by the morning wind. That was when he took some lead from his pocket and promised himself that he would open it later. He was tired; he deserved to take a break before doing it properly, perhaps when it was warmer outside, and then surely he would be able to take the envelope by the tab and tear it cleanly away. He imagined the paper stored inside folded neatly in his hands.

The next day was hot and muggy. The man imagined reading the paper through, and shivered.

More frequent in his thoughts as he aged was the idea that life would be so much more peaceful if he abandoned the envelope and its contents altogether. He could go home without it tugging at the small of his back like a tether, and he would not look back. Maybe it was weak to leave the envelope sealed shut, but it was also weak to let himself be pulled back here—he had been a man for some time now; why was he still listening to the notion of *if*?

The soft light of the candle melted through the dark, though still he did not let himself see.

It would be so easy ... put an end to the gray dread sinking through his stomach once and for all ... things could be normal again, and he could live without the weight of worry and obligation that threatened to drown his mind in the days and months after each visit to the house.

The envelope trembled towards the flame.

No!

Something stopped him. His hand warmed in the candle's unseen glow. Why couldn't he move it forward? He couldn't reverse flames. If he could, he would have done this long ago.

And yet he would have come back.

Papery breaths filled the house and crashed around the pulse fluttering in his ears. Something in him demanded he run. Decades ago, now. He still wasn't ready. He never would be. The man heard but could not see the marker clatter to the floor. His hands trembled but did not open; his eyes squeezed shut tighter by their own accord. The sunlight sifting through the window pane was stolen by phosphene flashes in the dark.

Plunged into a storm of fireworks, the man tore the envelope open—the paper sprung into his hand—

and he found peace.

The Goddess of Resurrection

Imani Jackson

3rd Place Art



Writing Struggles

Kate Jacob

Sometimes
Writing is like
A natural spring.
The words form rapidly in your mind
And pour forth in a rushing, steady stream
And you can hardly write them down fast enough.
By the time the well dries
There is a smile on your face
And a block of words on the page.
And it's rough,
As all first drafts are,
But it's good.
And you are proud.
But sometimes,
Writing is like
Climbing a mountain.
Except there's no clear path,
And you forgot to bring
A water bottle and snacks.
And then you meet a bear along the way,
And you have to wrestle the bear.
So by the time you drag yourself to the top
Of the mountain
There are brambles in your hair
And tears in your clothes
And you're bleeding in several places.
You made it,
But only after great struggle.
This is one of those times.

From the Discarded Winter Jacket, Inside a Thrift Store

Marya Kuratova

I know I am no longer whole.
Missing buttons in key places
like your gap-toothed smile,
I am but a fragment of what once was.
The memory of the coffee stain on my left sleeve
will never quite wash out,
perpetually mapping out the shape of that cold day
and my hem is frayed, unraveling like the woolen scarf
you often tied around my neck
or the laughter you'd toss over your shoulder.

I know I am no longer useful.
But why did you have to give me up?
I now sleep in the catacombs amongst other discarded souls.
We wait for the day we're chosen again.
Those newer, cleaner, more put-together
are the lucky few returned to the world of the living.
But I am left behind, forgotten.

It's been months since I have embraced you
or anyone. Would you still slip into me as comfortably
as a hand into a well-worn glove, or would you
stretch and strain to fit?
I wouldn't mind. I'd rip at the seams,
just for the brief chance to feel your heart beat again.

The Bazaar

Marya Kuratova

The sixth time he made you cry in front of us, you only paused a minute to shakily blow into the sodden tissue before turning back to us.

"Go grab your coin purses. Nicky, help your sister put on her shoes."

"But, Mama—"

"Now. We're going to the bazaar."

My brother and I turned to each other with sparkling eyes. The bazaar was always a special treat. Filled with exotic shiny trinkets, delicately baked goods, and the widest assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables, the town bazaar was a dizzying plethora of sensory overload in the best way imaginable. We usually weren't allowed to go. There were too many sad-eyed children selling sickly litters of kittens or puppies or chicks from overcrowded baskets. We can't save them all, you'd woefully say. You preferred to not even look.

But this time, you silently helped us tuck our cloth coin purses into the safest possible pocket and impatiently led us to the bus station at the corner of the street. The bus ride was uncharacteristically silent. You mouthed the names of the stops to yourself and held Nicky's hand as he bounced excitedly from one foot to the other. Usually I was the one jostling you both, but this time I just stared at the angry mark on your arm.

"Mama, is it going to—"

"Hush. Just two more stops."

I don't know why I tried to ask. Of course it would bruise. I was well acquainted with the intricate life cycle of a bruise before most kids even had their first real tumble off the playground. I was familiar with the way the mottled purple gathered just beneath the

skin, like angry storm clouds spitting lightning in obvious disgust, only to morph and fade into a sickly brown-yellow, the color of the weak tea you never had time to drink in the mornings. I stared at the red mark so intently that my eyes hurt, but then Nicky pushed me towards the door and it was time to go.

At the entrance to the bazaar, next to the old beggar woman clutching a cracked mug for change, you stopped us and knelt down to eye level, relaying the same warning just like every time.

"Stay together, don't lose sight of me, hold on to your purses, and do not get lost. Do you understand?"

Nicky nodded quickly, three times in rapid succession like his tapping, anxious feet. I gave you a soft kiss on the cheek. "Yes, Mama."

"Good." You straightened up and took our hands again. "Maybe we can find some fresh doughnuts for breakfast tomorrow."

We set out down the first aisle, pushed from all directions by various customers, mostly housewives with large baskets that bumped into my shoulders. I peeked around the bustling adults, scanning the tables of wares.

As we passed down the aisle of antique trinkets, my brother pointed out old pocket watches, dainty wooden ships in glass bottles, and dusty mink fur hats with flaps to cover your ears. I looked for tables selling old family photographs and faded postcards—I liked imagining what their joyful lives must have been like.

We rounded yet another corner, and Nicky and I gasped at the same time. Up ahead, a magnificent golden orb glittered in the last rays of the setting sun. We pulled you along faster, racing to see the treasure ahead. The sphere perched on a golden stand, which caused the magical glittering. The sphere itself was a deep azure blue, covered with crisscrossing lines and splotches of emerald green.

"It's a globe," you announced. "A model of our world."

Nicky and I gazed at it in wonder. The table owner was preoccupied with another customer, so you reached forward to tap the side, and the glittering globe spun on its axis. The blue and green mixed and blended together into a beautiful shade, one touch greener—happier—than your eyes.

"Wow," Nicky breathed beside me.

The vendor turned to us at last. "1,000 rubles and it's yours."

You shook your head. "Thank you, we're just looking."

"But, Mama, don't you want to look at it every day?"

I tugged on your arm and then stood on my tiptoes to tap a green splotch on the globe.

"Where would you want to go, if you could?"

You hesitated a second longer, looking wistfully at my finger on the green mass of some far-away land.

"We can't afford it. Come along."

So we trailed after you once more, weaving through the crowd toward other tables, looking for doughnuts and fresh berries and other such practical items that did not encourage fantastical dreams or wistful thoughts.

Looking back now, the bazaar was just as much of an escape for you as it was for us. Lost in the maze of vendors, farmers, and shopkeepers all vying for the attention of the ever-changing throng of customers, you found comfort in the shifting, churning landscape where no one knew each other and all they wanted was your money, not your love or patience or forgiveness.

Flora and Fauna

Marya Kuratova

The night you ignored my no
you brought flowers, as if to atone for my defloration.
I can still hear the hyena cackle of your laugh
as you told me it didn't matter. Discarded
articles of clothing fell like deadened leaves
off the stem. The silken bedsheets were vines of ivy
ensnaring me in their clutches. I did not like your warmth.
Silly girl, don't you know plants can't scream?
And the animalistic rasping of the ceiling fan
counting out my last bits of sanity did nothing
to block out your brutish grunts.

2... you shifted your weight, crushing my petals.

7... it hurt. Rose thorns and wolves' teeth drawing blood.

26... in the animal kingdom, does time stop for the mouse
when it's being devoured?

Now these bruises are blossoming,
while the flowers within me have wilted,
just like your bouquet slowly drying on the kitchen counter.
It's perpetually autumn
and even my roots have shriveled, retreated within themselves.
The disgusted glance you threw
over your shoulder as you left poisoned my soil.
I don't want to be watered. But what will I do
when my sense of self doesn't grow back in the spring?

Deadly Beauty
Marya Kuratova



Therapy Visit No. 102393489

Marya Kuratova

I pulled into the driveway, parked crookedly, and looked out at the quaint cottage before me. The blue paint on the front door was fading and the rosebushes lining the walkway hadn't been watered in some time, but the welcome mat looked new and the white lace curtains in the windows seemed like a nice touch. Someone was trying to make an effort. I saw the curtain in the front bay window twitch out of place. *This should be good.* I sighed, considered loitering outside to smoke a cigarette first, then eventually steeled myself to just head inside. I slammed the car door and the curtain shifted back into place. I glared at the rosebushes and the tiny hanging plaque they surrounded, the engraved words still shiny and new: Psychotherapist Jim Kowalski, LCSW-C.

I did not want to be here. But he was literally my last resort. Dozens and dozens of therapists in town had turned me down, told me they just couldn't help me anymore as they furrowed their brows in concern. Believe me, if there's a shrink within a 50-mile radius, he knows my name and he wants nothing to do with me. Guess I'm just that fucked up.

But this guy was new. He must have just gotten his degree or license or whatever and still hadn't joined any of the local shrink social groups where they swap horror stories about me. He was blissfully unaware.

I rolled my eyes one more time for good measure and pressed the doorbell with one quick, short burst. I knew he was on the other side of the door, waiting for the right moment to open it. I could almost hear him breathing. Five, six seconds passed and then he turned the knob. *Not bad. He didn't want to seem too eager.*

A shock of curly orange hair greeted me. He was younger than I expected. Way younger. He was gangly and awkward, even just standing there. The blue corduroy sweater hung off his thin frame like it didn't quite want to touch him. His khakis sported a fading stain on the left thigh where he had obviously spilled his breakfast and unsuccessfully tried to blot it out, which just further smeared it

across the fabric. He had a stupid, boyish grin plastered on his face and the biggest fucking pimple I've ever seen, smack dab on the center of his large nose. I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Guh—" he coughed, clearing his throat. "Good morning! You must be Samantha."

"The one and only. Can I come in?"

"Oh, of course." He swung the door open wider. "Please do!"

I squeezed past him and paused just inside the entryway.

"Oh, if you could just take your shoes off, that would be great. My mom is weird about tracking in outside dirt."

I raised my eyebrows again, but obliged.

"I know, I know. It looks bad to still live with my parents. Like, you must be thinking 'how good can this guy really be?' But we all have to start somewhere, right? I'm just starting out and still saving for an office of my own. It's going to be great though when I finally move out and—sorry, I'm rambling. Just nerves, sorry. You're my first patient. Wait, I shouldn't have said that. I mean, I graduated top of my class. But like, you're my first real world patient."

He finally trailed off. I shifted my weight from one sock-clad foot to the other.

"Why don't we head into my office?"

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea."

I followed him into his office, which just turned out to be the house's living room. *Big surprise there.* He motioned for me to sit on the overstuffed loveseat and, once I did, he perched on the opposing blue armchair. I watched with half-concealed amusement as he crossed his legs and adjusted the well-placed notepad on the table beside him. He looked really uncomfortable, like he was compelled to assume this therapist posture.

"Did they teach you that in therapy school?"

"What? No, I just—" he self-consciously shifted, rubbed at the stain on his pants, and recrossed his legs the other way. Then he leaned back and steepled his fingers just below his chin.

"So, Samantha. Tell me about yourself."

"That's awfully vague, Doc."

"Oh, I'm not a doctor," he stammered, leaning forward and wiping his sweaty palms on his pants several times. "I mean, maybe one day I'll go back for my doctorate, but not quite yet. You can just call me Jim. I mean, call me whatever you're comfortable with."

"Okay, uh, Jim. Well, I'm guessing you read my file. What else do you wanna know?"

"I didn't, actually. I wanted to give you the chance to introduce yourself."

"What, like tell you my diagnoses or read you my Tinder profile? 'Cause you could've read that all on your own ahead of time."

"I know. But they told us not to let a piece of paper define you guys, so I wanted you to describe yourself... But yeah, I guess we can start with your diagnoses." He reached for the notepad on the table, bumping into the beaded lampshade in the process and whispering a quick "sorry" to it.

I started prattling off the long list. It was pretty much muscle memory at this point, a well-rehearsed script that made every previous shrink suddenly murmur "I see." So much for letting me define myself in my own words.

But poor Jimbo here was struggling to keep up. He frantically scribbled on his notepad, trying to maintain eye contact with me throughout the process, which caused the pen to continue its trajectory across the paper and onto his khakis a few times. The armchair groaned as he shifted his weight to recross his legs the other way yet again, now trying to hide the ink stains on his thigh.

There was a lot going on and the chair could barely support his little bundle of concentrated nerves.

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat that? Maybe slow down a bit?" he clicked his pen nervously.

I started again, slower, but he stopped me once more.

"I'm sorry. What is that? Trick-trichotillomania? I don't know what that is. And I didn't know there were two types of PTSD. Is that true?" He started muttering to himself. "I shouldn't have said that. That's not professional. I should've looked it up later or—" he broke off again and clicked his pen in rapid succession. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"Dude, you gotta stop apologizing."

"I'm sorry. Is it unprofessional?"

"No. I mean, kind of. I just mean you're doing okay. You can relax."

He took a deep, shaky breath. Oh boy. This guy is even more fragile than me.

"Let's start again then. What are you hoping to get out of these therapy sessions?"

Rookie mistake.

"You're not supposed to trust that I know that. Or assume that I came here willingly. Goal-setting comes later, like in the third appointment."

"Shit! You're right. I'm so sorry. God, and I just cursed! I'm so sorry." He clutched the notepad so hard to prevent himself from clicking the pen that his knuckles turned white.

"No, you're fine. I mean, I don't care. I'm just letting you know for like, your other patients."

He looked up at me sheepishly.

"Right now, you're my only patient."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure more people will make appointments soon. You're only just starting out. It's to be expected."

"Oh, God, what if no one else wants my help?!" he suddenly wailed and leaned forward to bury his face in his lap, notepad and all.

I froze.

"It's okay. I'm sure you'll have lots of patients soon enough. You just gotta get your name out there first. It will be okay."

Jim started to cry, the sobs racking his thin frame as he refused to straighten up from his collapsed huddle of self-pity.

"I'm such a failure!" he whimpered, his voice muffled by his arms wrapped around his head. The notepad, so carefully placed before, fell to the floor in a messy fan of splayed-out pages.

I looked around the suddenly terribly small room. *Aren't his parents home? Who left me alone with this guy?*

"There, there, Jimmy. I thought you were doing a great job. Letting me know I could ask for a tissue or a glass of water was a great touch. I could tell you studied hard at school. And all the blue everywhere is very calming—that was smart of you to do."

"I just don't know if I'm cut out to be a shrink. I just want to make my parents proud of me," he sobbed harder and hunched over even farther to bury his head in his knobby knees. His khakis were now covered in quite a few more stains, his snot and tears causing the ink to run. I could barely understand what he was saying between the layers of his limbs covering his face and all the sobs.

"And my girlfriend just broke up with me and she said I'm pathetic and *godammit* I just hate myself and I can't do one single thing right—"

Yep. There it is. It's never just one reason for an emotional breakdown. I would know.

Jim suddenly looked up at me. The gross pimple on his nose quivered with emotion.

"Do you think I'm pathetic?" he sniffled, wiping his nose with the sleeve of his blue sweater so hard that he almost popped the pimple. The sorriest of sights.

"Not at all." I passed him a tissue, attempting a weak smile that hopefully looked reassuring. "You're holding up so well. I can tell you have a lot going on, but you're still powering through, and that's what matters."

"Thanks." He blew hard into the tissue, and then reached for another. "You're so understanding. You're the only one who will listen to me."

"Of course. It's important to have supportive people in your life." I steepled my fingers beneath my chin, crossed my legs, and leaned back in the loveseat. "Why don't we meet again next week to talk about your support network and how this breakup has affected you?"

"Okay, yeah. If you can pencil me in to your appointment book—"

We suddenly both froze in horror. *What the fuck just happened?*

For Kristy: An Elegy

Marya Kuratova

A kaleidoscope of color
casting a mirage on time
cannot dull the shades
of your rainbow-painted hair.
I can still see it sweeping
over your pale cheek, curling
around those rose-stained lips.
I wish I had kissed you then.

My artist, you were always bursting with color.
The ringing notes of your laughter
echoing through the house were bright canary yellow.
The way you grabbed my hand
whenever you'd remember a story to tell
made me feel chestnut brown, like the warm
slosh of hot chocolate we sipped at our favorite café.
Your voice turned everything an imperial Byzantium,
made the simplest words seem grand.
The fourth time you drew my eyes,
you told me there weren't enough greens in the universe
to capture the forest you were lost in.

But the day you ran out of oil pastels
was the day your heart snapped, just like your last paintbrush.
The world is muted now, tinged gray,
and I could fill an art gallery—no, a museum—with canvasses
depicting each time I've felt blue missing you.
If only I knew how to paint.

Sea Drenched

Marya Kuratova



I Was Thinking About Me

Maddy Lee

People say that I'm self-obsessed. I can see where they would get the idea. I compulsively look in every mirror I walk past; I spend an hour getting ready; I'm vain. These aren't things I can argue with, but self-obsessed is too targeted. I think everyone should be self-obsessed. Honestly, I think everyone is. But not obsessed in cruel, manipulative, degrading ways. The self doesn't become the ultimate thing in our lives by default, but yes—we are obsessed with ourselves. How could we not be?

I am the only thing that I have ever known. These eyes first opened when I came into this world and flooded with light, color, motion, and shape. These ears gave me sound, music, whistles, and rhythm. This mouth, slowly but surely, gave me the chance to speak, sing, yell, and laugh. This mind pieced those things together into a comprehensive world I could interact with. My self is the seed from which life blooms—the vessel through which I get to live at all.

But the self can be cruel. There is intimacy in absolute company. I am me all of the time; there is never a moment of rest from the absoluteness of myself. And then, sometimes, I have the audacity to wonder who I am. Wonder what I stand for. How I could not know is beyond me. The self is a prison—is a home—that I could not leave if I wanted to. Have I not been me all of my life? And if so—

who is that?

I spiral, sometimes, thinking about everyone that I have been. All the selves that have come and passed me by. There was a child once, who was neurotically obsessed with winning and being mommy's favorite. She loved sour foods and never slept the night through. There was a teenager, too, who cut off all her hair and listened to heavy drum sets. Every day she clomped in hand-me-down heels through the hallways to homeroom. There were dozens of tweaks, alterations, and little corrections in the margins throughout. Things that would make me better, older, wiser.

I don't know if I got there, but I think about it. I think about how that teenager would feel about me now. I wonder less about the little girl. She's young, impressionable, and wide-eyed. She would take me at face value. To her, I am older. I am wiser. I am better. But I think about the teenager when I'm spiraling, because she had such a concrete view of the world. No one could convince her of anything. She was going to Harvard to become a lawyer.

I don't go to Harvard; and I'm not a lawyer. Did I fail her? I'm not angry about either of those things, personally. I've carved a life I did not know existed when I was her—when she was the self that I wore. I have friends, family, and school. I am more capable of being content than she was. Still, did I fail her?

I think about life—back when I was her. I think about the things I had wished someone would say to me and all the things I would say to her if we happened upon one another. Sometimes, I imagine meeting a girl like that—someone identical to me at that age in every way, right down to the pang in the chest. The pang that, honestly, plagues us all. It is the deep, knowing sensation of being a person—of being sad, alone, and completely filled with the self.

We are all self-obsessed. We all want to know who we are. We all want to know if we are better than we were. How could we not? If I must be me until I die, then what is the point in not utilizing that to its fullest extent? I am obligated by the sheer circumstance of my existence to experience it. What it is to see. What it is to hear. What it is to be myself.

I worry, sometimes, when others don't feel that way. I've heard it said that everyone is looking for love in this lifetime. If your self can provide the sight of a setting sun, the sound of a classic symphony, the taste of a mother's cooking, the experience of a first kiss or a summer rain—how is love so foreign? Is the self not the vessel we learn to love through? Through which we feel what it is to be loved?

Who will come to our aid but the self? I think about being trapped in a dungeon or at the top of a burning building. I think about damsels in distress and heroes saving them. I think about mortality—and reason. Am I really the kind of person that doesn't

need saving? Could I get myself out of here? I imagine tumbling down flights of stairs, dodging smoke and pulling physical maneuvers I know that I am incapable of. I think about waiting for someone to find me. I think about who would look. Life seemingly never throws these situations our way—until it does. Then we wonder, seeing it happen to our neighbor, what we would have done. Am I a hero? Am I a damsel?

Sorry—I get carried away sometimes. It's a vain quality, not one I should admit to, but it is true. I am absolutely obsessed with what it is to be me. The experiences I have had, am having, will have. Some have been magical and some have been miserable, but I certainly don't have any control over that. I don't have control over much, truthfully. I can't control time or the weather or if he likes me back or when the next train is coming. I can't control the stock market or traffic or how the movie ends. But I can control myself—the ways in which I spend my time or what to wear for this weather. What to say. What to think. What to do. There is a vast universal library—undoubtedly—but I have access only to a single book. It is me. It is mine. If I am not the protagonist of my own life, who is?

The phone is ringing. I've let it go to voicemail twice and didn't realize it. I was too busy typing, writing, reading this. I was too busy crafting sentences to accurately explain the only medium through which I am even able to communicate these thoughts at all. I was too busy wondering what it all meant—as it occurred to me—in real time with the clicking of keyboard keys. I was too busy to—the phone rings again. I answer it and apologize; I got distracted.

I was thinking about me.

Nowhere, USA

Maddy Lee

Picture a town. The air smells of honeysuckle and chicken coops, a smell that both delights and insults as cars cross the state line. The town is nothing, really, save the gathering of a post office, a Hardees, a city hall, a Main Street, and a Mexican restaurant, all round the train tracks. It was formerly a railway stop at the base of the Blue Ridge mountains, nothing but cargo trains coming through. A single barrack existed, a place for the workers to rest their heads and hop back to the trail in the morning. The town exists because some of those railway workers got tired. They rested their heads and didn't leave the next morning, gradually building a town as they addressed each day's need—a home, a liquor store, a gazebo. The population never peaks above two-thousand. Everyone knows everyone's name. Little girls meet their future husband by the third grade; their options are limited. Most will never leave this place. It is quaint, homey, and unchanging. It births its children with clipped wings—with concrete shoes. None of them will get very far from the nest. They were born here, and they will die here. In a town made for passing through.

Picture a school. The only high school in the county. It's the third in line for yearly budget increases, and built like a prison—dull, dark brick with grey font and tinted windows. The school focuses on the town. Most everyone will become farmers, so alongside math and English, the students learn bovine care and equestrian studies. Fields of cows are held back by wired fences just outside, and a barn for the agriculture classes is set up to the side. Chickens, horses, cows, pigs, ducks, and more are filled into this wooden structure for students to play at raising. On exciting days, an animal will escape the barn and into the school. Teachers will lock their doors and carry about with their fractions as the resource officer is left to chase a chicken down the hall. The sound of click click clicking talons on the linoleum is distracting and distinctive. No other school will teach their students what a runaway chicken sounds like. This knowledge, apparently, will be important one day. Tractors are parked in the senior lot, long-legged junior Jezebels perched on the hood, waiting for their ride home. They all want to be nurses, teachers, and mothers. Some bolder, more talented girls

expand their horizons through beauty or culinary school. Their husbands will be welders, farmers, or supervisors at the Blue Ridge Electric Company. The company dinners are predictable. Everyone brought their high-school sweetheart turned spouse; everyone brought their three children. Everyone leaves at 8:30.

Picture a car. A jacked up truck, mud caked deeply into the wheels, the bumper, the paint. It's in desperate need of a wash that isn't coming. Bored teenagers park it in the Ingles lot, doing donuts to impress their friends and annoy the retired couples living in the neighborhood just behind. A young boy once died in that parking lot, falling out of the back of the truck on a particularly harsh turn. He is not the first one lost, nor is he the last. The town is small; they notice when anyone is gone. For a day, it all grows silent—like the voice dropped from a choir. Next week, someone else will be doing donuts in the same parking lot. This town grieves powerfully, but not for very long.

Picture a road. Half a mile from a childhood home is a road lit by streetlamps and police sirens. Drugs have flooded into the neighborhood. People are tired, stressed, poor, and susceptible. A meth lab exploded on the night before senior prom, waking up half the neighborhood and getting the police called. Everyone had known what the shed was, long before it got blown sky-high, but the man that owned the property was polite enough. Paid his taxes. No one was hurt, and the drugs were completely destroyed. The neighbors mostly chalked it up to a win and went back to bed. The owner of the house is on the run now, but who cares? Mary Kate Duke has to alter her dress in the morning.

Picture a man. He has lived in the town, gone to the school, driven the car down the backroads all his life. His wife cleans the kitchen from snack time as his two children swing in the backyard. The scent of a roasting pork in the Crock-Pot fills the air alongside his burning cigarette. He stares out the window, watching the sunset on the mountains in the distance. He thinks back on the town, the years spent kicking cans down empty streets. He thinks back on the school, kissing his first girlfriend under the staircase only to find, some ten years later, she would be his wife. Who else would be? Who else is there? He thinks back on the car, the first truck he ever sped down the backroads, past the stagnant homes,

driveways, and lives. For a moment, at the peak of seventeen, he wondered what would happen if he just kept driving. If he picked a direction and didn't turn around. What would he even do out there? The world is vast and unpredictable and too many of them have never even met each other. The world out there is nothing like the one he knows, but maybe that was the point.

He sees his children running back to the house through the window and spares a thought for them. They were born here. They will live here. And what after that? Will his daughter, one day, drive her own way down the backroads? Maybe she will have the courage to keep going. Or maybe she will stay. Everyone else seems to. Thinking back on the hundreds of lives he had weaved through, not one had ever gone the distance. The door flies open and his lap is filled with excitable, wriggling children. Big, bright eyes stare up at him as little mouths ramble on about their pointless, menial days. He listens with rapt interest, even as he follows his wife upstairs to tuck them into bed. The perils of kindergarten are thrilling—who used whose paste; the game of tag at recess; whatever happened to the classroom bunny. He kisses their foreheads as the rays of the evening shine through into the room. As their tired faces are illuminated, he fears for them.

Picture a sunset. Every day, it falls upon the town and the people within it. It falls upon homes, roads, cars, schools, and sleeping children. It falls upon everyone.

With any luck, thinks a weary man, not everyone.

A Sestina for my Mother

Mikayla Lee

3rd Place Poetry

He is like 10 pounds of hot,
heavy, jagged-edged, molten amber bricks
stacked upon your chest like staggering Jenga blocks. Open
your eyes. Those Smirnoff shots have clouded
your judgment, smudged your moral lens,
and left you dry and pale—bluish.

Your newfound love has left me alone with my blue
fuzzy blanket. You used to drape it across me when it was still hot,
fresh from the dryer. You used to use it to wipe your glasses lens
but it always left a smudge. "It's cold as bricks,"
you used to say before wrapping me up in that fluffy cloud.
I wish you would have left the door open.

Why didn't you leave the door open?
I remember how he forced my face into that same blue
fuzzy blanket. For some reason, it didn't feel as fluffy as a cloud
this time. My face was so hot;
It still is, like a blistering brick
steaming beneath the sun rays beaming through a glass lens.

Is it wrong to say it lends
me comfort to see you finally open
your eyes and find them holding back tears, weighing down your
eyelids like bricks?
How do you feel when you see the black and blue
trace he's left on my back? You are haughty,
Now that he has left you, and you've fallen from your cloud.

You're not the same anymore. You cloud
up the room with false hope—a lens
from which only you can see. It is too hot.
Please turn the AC on. You say no. Just open
a window. Look at the sky. Look at the blue
sky. My teeth feel like bricks.

I have built myself a sturdy wall—all brick.
I live beneath a constant cloud.
I haven't seen my fuzzy blue
blanket in years. I wipe my lens
with tissue, instead. I cannot open
any new doors. The bitter taste in my mouth is too hot.

I've used this brick to smash your glasses lens,
and saw the clouds split, the sky opening down the middle.
My love, loves different now—blue hot.

Dear White People

Mikayla Lee

You took advantage of me. You knelt
down and hooked your well-polished fingers
into my corkscrew curls, pulling
them bone straight. You dusted me off—years
of loose debris drifted down, down,
down from my dungarees. You told me to keep
my head up.

You looked me in my brown eyes. I was not
used to that. You told me how
to get to your people—manipulate
them. You wrenched my hair back
with two-hundred bobbypins and gave me the most
watered-down, unseasoned cardigan I'd ever
seen. You introduced me
to Academia; you told me she could
help. She could save me. From
Here, she said, from
a failing culture.

Better than all else, though,
you taught me
how to talk. These SAT prep words
are impressive, coming from me.

*"Little
cinnamon
girl, you are so
articulate."*

But when the world was mean
to me, scarred me, gave me
tattoos and cornrows, and spit
me out, you were
nowhere
to be found.

***For Reid Wallen
And his Mother, Laura.***
Mikayla Lee

Her—bright, beaming bumblebee
buzzing about the halls of this now seemingly dim,
dilapidated building.

I breathe easier when crossing the threshold
of Ms. Wallen's modest door frame, monstrous to me
at the time. Big and blue
as the innocence that was beaten
from her, from
you. Swiftly swiped from under
that nearly infantile nose. Laying
lifeless, lucky little one who
never lived.

Lucky only
because if I, if
we, should be so blessed
as to be eternally intertwined
with that beautiful black
and yellow fumbling bumbler,
then we would all breathe
a bit easier, when crossing
the Threshold
to see her once more.

To an Old Tree

John McEachern

For as long a way as I can see
Back to what was before
And back to what never was before
I see You
Towering above me in evening dress
And dancing a waltz
In beautiful swirling colors,
Swaying in the wind to unfollowable music
Until you were too tired to stand
And slumped below great white sheets.

Overwhelmed, I would run back home
With a click of the remote—
Or else see Your shadow
And race down the hall to bed.

Once, I would see everything different
Each and every day
Beneath your branches where I'd lay
And dream of all the things beyond the sky
Which only You knew.
I'd sit there and lie and dream of all the things I could do—
Of pirate ships, hoisting flags on your sturdy branches;
Toy soldiers crouching in the grass;
Alien worlds hiding beneath your roots...

Sometimes, I would even write letters
Silly scribbled things
Written in imitation scripts and thrown into the wind—
A mystery in itself how they would get to You
And back
With Your signatures and encouragement:

"Work hard and maybe one day..."

But then one day came and I saw—
Or did I?

Was it just a trick of the eye?
An eye unable to see above its own stature?—
No ... no it was a bright and clear day
When first I saw you start to sway
Not in a waltz, but under the spell
Of a sneaky, probing wind

And Your trunk grew wrinkled
And your branches frail
And the calls of ravens echoed in the twilight air.

Now—some nights—I will lie in bed
Awake and shaking with fear and dread
And trudging through the space between
The claps of distant thunder—
Ten! Eleven! Twelve!—
And another clap as a flash reveals
Your swaying shadow
Standing over me with stupid bravery
Creaking and bending
And singing me songs of curds and honey—
Thinking I am too young to understand.

I understand
And I pray
That tonight You will pick up your roots
And walk away.

And yet other nights, I sleep just fine
And waking in the morning, come downstairs to find
An advertisement
For a wood chipper and a good strong axe,
Which I roll up and throw out onto the heap;
Later, in the yard, I drink iced tea with the neighbors
One offers me a job
Another points to your rings, each one telling the story
Of a march or a bill or an indomitable will
To pour your whole self
Into my creation
And the memories swell
And branches shake with laughter.

So what do I feel? What do I do?
Like a white pine shoot,
Exposed to the sun
I now at times see rising, two
Where once there was a single you:
One weighed down by memory and grace
A sacred charter and familiar face
And the other a skeleton
With fire scared bark

And I cannot figure
If I should be happy for the shade
Or terrified of the dark.

Spring
John McEachern

Which rises from the melting snow,
In the miracle heat of a skunk cabbage
And, flicking at my rib,
Dares me on
To burst from an egg, crawl from the soil
Jump out the window
And run through the streets
Stealing from the neighbor's fruit trees
Until collapsing, a silly mess,
Beside you on a golden knoll

Our hands
Intertwined,
Like setting sunbeams
And canopy shadows.

A Crook in the Path

John McEachern

I was walking down a forest trail as dusk came down to roost
And from the brush and spring fed pools, a peeper band seduced;
While sunlight's arm drew back a bow, strung up with gentle
breeze,
And let it slide with graceful moan across the hollow trees.

I'd walked for who knows just how long, 'cross swamps and hill
tops, high
When a passing bird directed my gaze up towards the blushing
sky.
The sun had dropped by half a hand—the hour was getting late!
I'd have to turn back to beat the dark, to claim my dinner plate.

And so, without a moment's pause, I whistled to my will
And after one last look ahead, it bounded up the hill;
But never made it to my side, as I let a tentative laugh.
For there on the ground before me, I'd noticed a crook in the path.

It wasn't much to look at—just a dusty, fetal curve—
But something in it jumped my thoughts and struck to life my
nerve.
Gazing through perspective mists of bramble, branch, and frond
I could not help but wonder—what was it that lay beyond?
Could I find a tree, an immortal giant, two hundred ten years old?
Or perhaps a fox with silver fur, from a legend I was told.
Would I see the ghostly, wondering form of someone who had
passed?
Just a few more steps, a gentle turn, and I'd know these things at
last!

And so, with hardly any fear (though I trembled in my boots),
I took the step, traversed the corner, and pushed aside the shoots.
What I saw was not an ancient tree, a fox, or dead man's wrath,
But another minute lost to dusk—another crook in the path.

Sunsets

Anna Mondoro

Everything's better with sunsets,
I know that to be true.
I don't think there is anything,
A sunset won't add to.

Hearing laughs of children playing,
The smell of a grill out back.
The sun kissing the horizon,
The sky slowly fades to black.

Seeing mountains in the distance,
Feeling soft wind on your face.
The sunset shining golden,
Before darkness takes its place.

Fishing in a hidden lake,
A slow drive down a quiet street.
The painted sky above your head,
As the sun makes its retreat.

An evening stroll along the beach,
S'mores on a summer night.
The sunset warm and glowing,
Makes everything seem right.

Come watch the sunset with me,
See the fire in the sky.
Watch the final show of nature,
Before day turns into night.

As the day draws to a close,
Sit back, enjoy the view.
Sunsets make everything better,
But sunsets are better with you.

Aware

Anna Mondoro

I know you're hurt
I see your pain
I wish that I could help.

I'd take the load
Away from you
And carry it myself.

I don't know
Much about it
But I think I know enough.

Your life has changed somehow
And I know that
Is always tough.

I think that someone
Hurt you
Though I don't know the name.

And no matter
What happens next
You'll never be the same.

The truth is
I'd be lying
If I said I understood.

I can't imagine
What it's like
Don't think I ever could.

I'd like to say
I'm sorry
That you have to go through this.

Life lands blows sometimes
That simply
Cannot be dismissed.

Just one more thought
I'll leave you with
As we go our separate ways.

Please promise
To remember this
Each and every day:

You're beautiful
And worth it
Even with your scars.

They are a part
Of where you've been
But they're not who you are.

Write me a Poem

Anna Mondoro

Write me a poem
That banishes fear.
So that I can be strong
And the way will be clear.

Write me a poem
That makes me feel safe
Like I'm held in your arms
And there I can stay.

Write me a poem
That tells me I can
So that I can go on
When I want to give in.

Write me a poem
That talks about hope
That says times can be better
Than those we now know.

Write me a poem
That tells me you care
So that I will not doubt it
If you are not there.

Write me a poem
That speaks about love
So that I can believe
It could happen to us.

Write me a poem
That softens my heart
So that if I grow callous
I have a new start.

Write me a poem
That makes me believe
Because sometimes I doubt
That there is worth in me.

Write me a poem
That makes time stand still
So how I feel in this moment
Is how I always will.

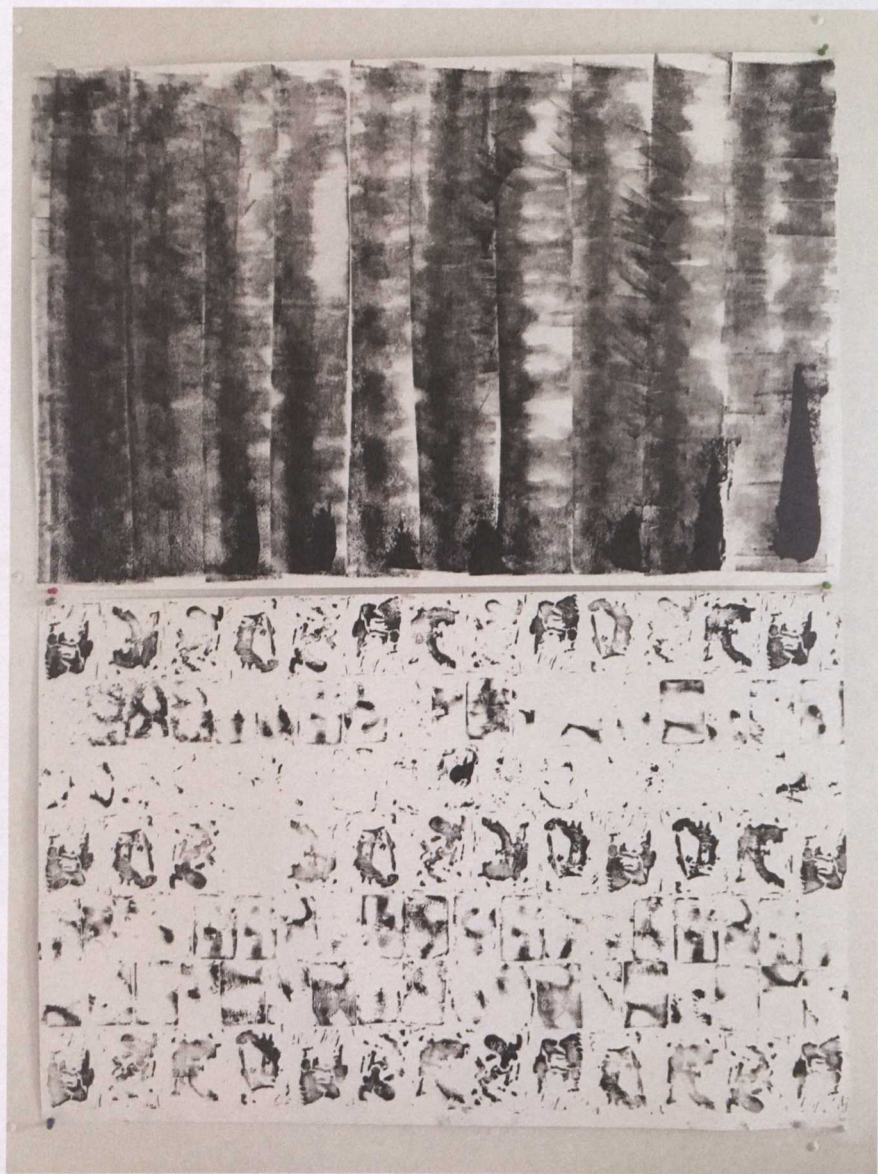
Write me a poem
About everything good
That says things will work out
In the way that they should.

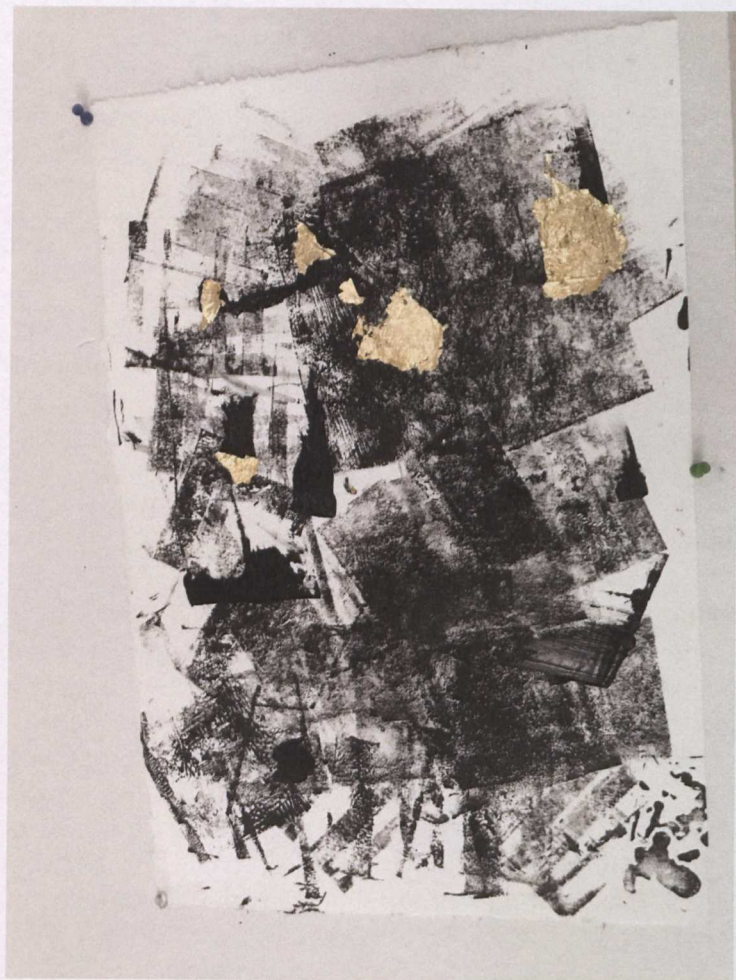
Write me a poem
About what's inside
The feelings you bury
The you that you hide.

Write me a poem
That pours out your heart
I promise it's safe
I love you as you are.

P1

Quyen Nguyen





The Wilting Flower

Darrick "L" Rowe

"Orange. *Orange* hair," said Lilac as she stared at her own reflection. "*Not* gray." As Lilac repeated the mantra in her head, she continued to gaze into the still pool of water inside a barrel. The suds and bubbles of her labor occasionally drifted over her own visage. After having perched her head in such a position for some time, her hair fell down from behind her shoulders to graze the surface of the liquid, creating ripples which obscured the image she had been so fixated on. Finding herself once more, Lilac fixed her hair and picked up the basket left at her side. Her eyes stayed on the barrel as she shuffled away, half-heartedly resolving to resume her duties.

As Lilac walked along the path towards her home, she couldn't help but ponder the songs sung by birds in the trees surrounding her. Their music, despite being cacophonous in nature, granted Lilac a particular sense of calm. She had always appreciated their tunes, but today their respite was especially needed. Rumors were beginning to spread in her town again. Tales of a gray-haired menace capable of using great "Decay" magic were spread rapidly. There were other suspects, of course, but Lilac bore the full weight of their scrutiny worst of anyone. It was true that both she and this enigmatic person the paranoid townsfolk called "The End" had been described using almost all the same physical attributes—the exception being the color of Lilac's hair, but she was young enough to still have the same stature of her brother, yet he wasn't a suspect at all despite his naturally gray hair color. Not to mention, "Decay" was said to be a school of Dark magic capable of grave feats, found in only those of pure evil—surely not Lilac; she hadn't manifested an aptitude for any magic aside from a small amount from the school of Speed.

Everyone was born with different aptitudes in the various schools of magic, but no one in Lilac's town had been born with or even *seen* Decay in decades. At least, not until recently. There were reports of the aftermath left by the magic. It was close to her home. She saw the site of the incident herself; lilacs, or blackened versions of the flower, were left to sprout from the ruins of

everything that fell victim to Decay. An unfortunate coincidence given Lilac's name. Perhaps that was why she had been suspected. Regardless, her hair was orange, not gray.

Lilac, lost in thought, failed to notice the rock jutting out from the ground in her path before she tripped over it. Unfortunately, the topple took with it her hold on the basket she had been carrying, and the laundry she had just finished fell to the dirt below.

"Dammit!" yelled Lilac as she got back up and saw the mess she just made. If she only had the laundry for herself and her brother it wouldn't have been much of an issue, but Lilac decided to try helping out others in the neighborhood and her brother by doing laundry for some of her neighbors. Ideally, it was a quick way to receive some pay and assist her brother with the cost of living, but she would receive nothing but the vitriol of said neighbors if she returned their clothes in a state worse than they begun.

However, lugging the load back up to the lake where everyone's washing was done would prove to be more than just an ordinary chore. Not to mention how close she already was to her destination. It was already getting late, and the last thing she wanted was to worry her brother. He already had enough on his plate; the addition of an incompetent little sister would be too much to bear. If only that rock hadn't affronted her! It was its fault for protruding out on the path and tripping her. It was its fault she would have to go all the way back to the lake and fulfill the laborious task of washing some strangers' garments again, only for her to return again well past the point of night falling. Who knows what would happen to her then?! Maybe her brother would be right to worry; no amount of Speed magic would be enough to escape the wrath of "The End," assuming the rumors of her great power were true. "The End" could be anywhere, for all Lilac knew. Now, a pile of dread joined in the turmoil of her emotions, which had already begun to build up. Lilac realized that her predicament was truly the fault of this abhorrent woman everyone so worried about. If she hadn't gone and sowed paranoia in the town, then no one would have any reason to suspect her of using Decay, and she wouldn't have felt any obligation to do the neighbors' laundry in the first place!

Lilac's emotions boiled and churned over, building exponentially as she cursed this villain they called "The End" and the rock that interrupted her stride, until her emotions began to spill out of her. Lilac became less aware of her surroundings, feeling only contempt for her two tormentors. A thick, gray mist began to pour from her very being, seemingly sensing her malice, and began to shroud the surrounding area. By this point, Lilac was not conscious of her actions; she could only perceive her rage. The mist swirled and spread, covering everything from the rock, to the clothes still scattered about the ground, to the trees, and even to the birds—unaware of their imminent peril. All that it touched began to wither and crumble apart, suddenly becoming brittle, before turning to nothingness. Finally, Lilac collapsed, having stressed herself far past her breaking point.

When Lilac awoke, she was greeted not by the ambient chirping of the various critters who came alive at night, but by an eerie silence. How many hours had she slept here in this clearing? Wait, *clearing*? Lilac arose and surveyed her surroundings, only for her heart to plummet at the sight she now beheld. For almost as far as Lilac could see, there was *nothing*. The once lush and green forest that surrounded her was now a barren, gray wasteland. The only remains of what had once been here were the now ashen remains of what may have once resembled grass. That, and—oh, please no. This couldn't be real. Amongst the ruin, there now sprouted numerous blackened *lilacs*.

This shouldn't be happening. Lilac was sure she had done nothing wrong. She couldn't remember much of what happened after she fell over the rock in her path. Surely, she wasn't responsible. Perhaps, she fell and bumped her head, and awoke only now. Yes, that was it! And, it's possible that "The End" simply passed by while Lilac was unconscious and decided to spare her. That was all that happened, right? Lilac found herself some form of bravado with this idea, and looked about the edge of the destruction. Turning about in a place, Lilac soon found that the grim remains of whatever transpired wrapped around in what seemed to be a perfect circle, and to make matters worse, it seemed as though the center of this circle was *her*!

Realization dawning upon her, Lilac dropped to her knees. "Please,

no ... why? Why me?" she pleaded to no one. By then, she was overcome with despair, and began to sob. Alone. Lilac was utterly alone. Her entire world would have to change from this day forward. No longer could she be the simple farm girl. There was a secret to keep. Her brother couldn't know. He loved her with every inch of his being, but this ... *this* was something more. Lilac rose slowly—still shaken occasionally by tremors from her nerves. She couldn't stay here long. Hours may have passed since she collapsed. Her brother, at the very least, was undoubtedly looking for her by now. If they found her here, in the middle of all this... Lilac didn't even want to consider what may happen then. So, she began to walk on, drove out such insidious thoughts, and focused on devising a plan. This mess would be discovered soon. There was no stopping that. However, she might be able to convince the villagers of her innocence. Yes, she was already a suspect in many people's eyes, but this level of destruction had to be beyond the abilities of someone her age. Mages commonly trained for years to perform feats scaling to even half of what she accomplished today. This, she would tell them, had to be the work of someone much more sinister. Perhaps, even, an attack on Lilac, specifically—which she miraculously survived. Miracles have happened before; what's one more? Yes, that would do. They'd have to believe her then.

Lilac continued on, once again lost in thought. Unfortunately, she couldn't help but be thrust back into reality when she found a rather significant concern. She hadn't realized until now, but passing out and waking again had removed her sense of direction, and being in the middle of a barren circle only got in the way of her attempts to orient herself. Lilac's gaze darted around herself rapidly, looking desperately for some sort of landmark. Of course, any nearby landmark she could've used was wiped away by her own Decay—as if this day couldn't get any worse.

Now she stood surrounded by nothing but the color gray. A sight that grew more abhorrent the longer she took it in. All this destruction: the result of her own magic, but she suffered most from it—trapped and alone as she was. The vile emptiness she found herself in pushed her to move. Lilac still didn't know which way was the right way, but any way would get her away from this place. As she trudged forward, she couldn't help but look down at the ground beneath her. The flowers—lilacs—below her would

look almost beautiful if it weren't for the circumstances. She felt no remorse in crushing them under each of her steps.

Eventually, Lilac made it to the end of her magic's reach, but she didn't see anything that would help her find the way home. The best she could do would be to continue to circle the edge of the new field until she found where the unaffected path began again. As much as Lilac wanted to distance herself as far as possible from the field, it was much easier to trace the circle within its reach than just beyond, where bushes and trees still blocked her way. Lilac kept on like this, until the foulest stench she'd experienced grew stronger with each step. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to do her best to block out the smell with her forearm and continue forward, wary for whatever the cause may have been.

Lilac's heart stopped for what must have been a second when the source of the odor came into her view. It was still far away now, but as she ceased moving and focused her gaze, she could make it out—a stag. He was caught just at the edge of her Decay. Somehow, after however much time must have passed, it was still alive, even if just barely. Immediately, Lilac moved to aid the stag, but she stumbled with her first step. She felt lightheaded, and noticed not only did her palms feel slick with sweat, but her mouth began to water. There was a very definite sickness rising in her core. Even so, Lilac pushed on, and the smell only got stronger as she approached. Getting closer, she could hear its weak cries, and as her knees buckled it took all her will to not collapse again there. Staying there for a moment, a terrible thought crept its way into Lilac's head: how many? How many other victims did she have? How many lives had she so awfully taken? How many still clung hopelessly to what little time they had left because of *her*? She could see the stag clearly from this distance—it was caught just above the hips. Perhaps it tried to flee, but it didn't make it in time. Regardless, here it was now, and looking closer, Lilac could see sprouting from the blood and gore tiny ... lilacs. All of the strength left her knees, and she fell to them, catching herself with her hands. For the first time all day, Lilac felt the weight of her pendant on her neck. It was her only memory of her parents, and as she felt the silver dangle from her neck, she clutched it with a hand. Would they see her as some evil "End" to all things, too?

It all was too much for Lilac, and as her rising sickness finally reached its apex, she released the contents of her stomach before her. At the very least, it gave her something else to focus her attention on. She stayed in that position for a short while, panting and spitting out the remnants of bile left in her mouth. When she rose to her feet, it was with a newfound resolve, as if something new clicked—or *snapped* within her. Still clutching her pendant, Lilac closed the remaining distance to the stag. Even still she could see its weak breaths for air. When Lilac was first told by her brother what magic existed in this world, she had immediately dreamt more than anything else for the ability of Restoration. There was already too much suffering in her world, so the ability to soothe those living through it seemed like the best anyone could do. Years later, and here she was now. Today, she brought so much suffering into this world. Lilac was now the cause of more pain than she could ever know individually. Lilac was no healer. She could not aid this stag in the ways of her childhood dreams. However, she could still bring some sort of balance back to the world. She could find her own repentance. Right here and now, Lilac decided to end this stag's suffering. No being deserved to endure such pain. And so, Lilac focused this resolve in an effort to bring forth her power. As she felt the energy build within her, she crouched before the stag and placed a hand upon its throat. Its eyes darted towards her—for the first time since she had approached it, it acknowledged her existence. Lilac closed her eyes as she felt the Decay pour from her hand.

When she opened her eyes, the stag was gone. Her Decay still lingered in this world, however, and as she had no knowledge on how to properly control it, the mist spread out as it dissipated. Lilac did not move from her position until it reached her knee. It had no effect on her body, thankfully, but when it came into contact with the dress she had been wearing, it began to rapidly wither and crumble away, revealing her brown knee underneath. Lilac jerked backwards and crawled a safe distance away from the mist. When she stopped, she held her legs close to her chest with her arms and watched the rest of the Decay fade out of this world. With it all gone, Lilac sat there, staring at the spot where the stag had been little more than a minute ago. Realizing her actions, Lilac couldn't help herself from tearing up. Before any tears could fall, though, she wiped her eyes clear. This was the right decision.

Although no tears fell from that point forward, Lilac sat there, hugging her own legs for comfort and silently rocking slightly in place. During this time, she looked to her now exposed knee and wondered why her dress was only affected by the Decay now, but not the first time she had used it. After some deal of thought, the best reason her inexperienced mind could come up with was that during her earlier outburst, she had subconsciously spared her clothes, thankfully.

Lilac would have stayed in that spot much longer, but she was pulled back into reality by the realization that her Decay had no effect on the lingering smell of the stag. Quickly, she rose to her feet and remembered her plan of continuing along the edge of the circle until she found her way. Luckily, it wasn't much longer before she found the path, and after checking the surroundings to be sure she was headed in the right direction, she left the awful place behind.

Help Me Off This Stage

Darrick "L" Rowe

I am an Actor
who is at all times
performing
for an Audience.

Shall I make you laugh?
Viewers only know me when I
wear a smile.
The only choice is to make us
laugh.

"If there are eyes, you must smile."
If only I knew that
when I auditioned.
Now, I don't remember.
When did I audition?

Can I make you cry?
It's not in the script,
but I have tears to shed, too.
I could make us
cry.

Please don't ignore
the tears.

Where I Stay

Ciera Smith

Where I stay the white picket fences are steel and gray
they scrape your hand every time you try to escape
Where I stay we eat depression for breakfast, our sorrows for lunch
and disappointment has always been dinner
Where I stay the mat doesn't say welcome home but instead I'm
glad you made it
Kids are in before the streetlights most nights
Where I stay our morning newspaper is the announcement of who
died
we are so used to saying goodbyes
Where I stay the bridges to opportunity are broken and you can
hear the cry of those who have
fallen into the weight of poverty
bodies are empty and life is frozen
Where I stay the concrete pathways are littered with pain and
despair
oozes from broken needles that lie there
Where I stay daytime isn't even safe and darkness brings out true
decay
goodnight lullabies are the flutter of police choppers as they fly
overhead
Where I stay we chew up and spit out pity
blood splatter and yellow tape sign is a usual walk in the city
Where I stay education is knowing that you have two options
the jail or the cemetery but even they start to look the same
Where I stay I am defined by the wind beneath me and the air
surrounding me
My body is not my own, it has become hollow and is endowed to
its enslaver
Where I stay hope has been beaten and brutalized
Revolution has risen and died
Mothers have become mourners
It soon became clear that I am trapped where I stay

Trabbi
Raquel Sobczak
2nd Place Art

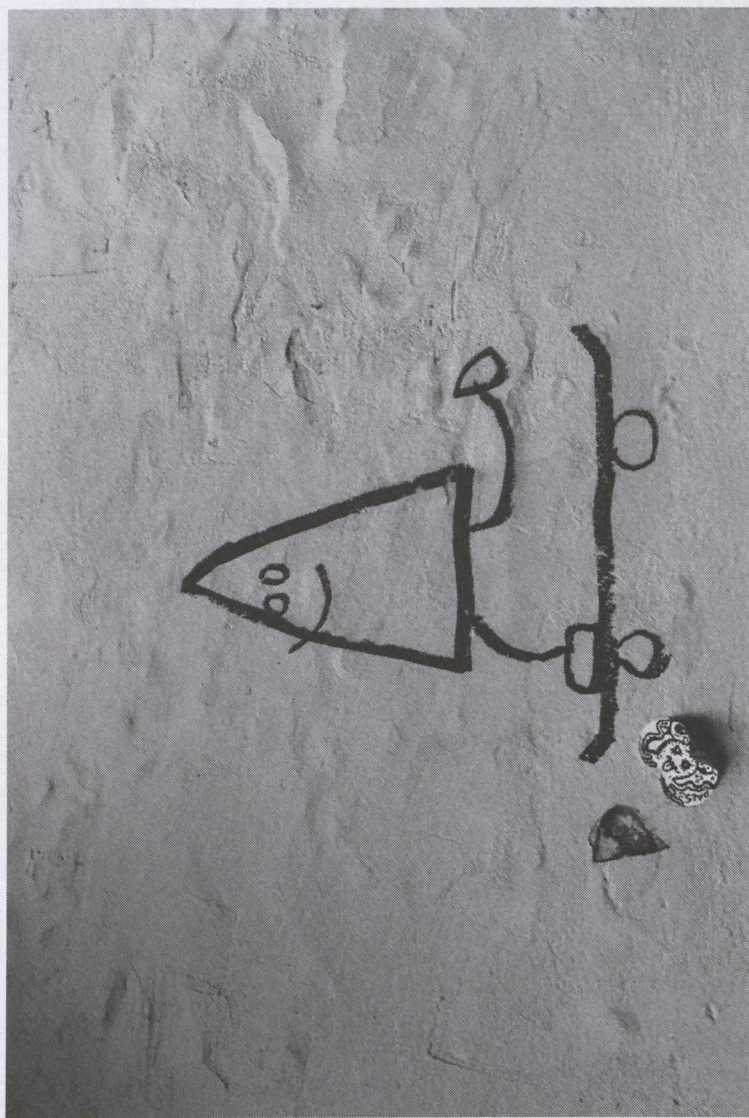


Bricks Get Chilly, Too
Raquel Sobczak



Tortilla Chip on a Skateboard

Raquel Sobczak



Sweetie-Size

Danielle Wendt

You are made of cotton candy.
Sugar-coated
but never satisfying;
Saccharine size is
not quite enough.
Step right up!
Your prize awaits:
Candied compliments,
unbidden
with a side of something fried.

Without your sugary exterior;
you are too raw.
You can catch more flies with honey,
after all.
But with your
refined sweetness,
you are not strong enough
to spark appealing flavor.
You are not serious
enough for a seat at the table;
you are not
tall enough to ride this ride.
Yet your stomach still twists
and the nerve-wracking
exhilaration builds
as if your feet
are no longer
touching the ground.

"Sweetie,"
voice laced with patriarchy
If I'm so sweet,
where's my spoonful of sugar?
You feel the indignation layer
the more the meal continues,
but the need-to-please

overpowers the dish.
You will caramelize your anger,
and unspoken opinions will
become sour candies,
a bitterness that
cannot be washed down
with a single glass of water.

Thank You

Jordan Wood

As you plummet into your grave,
I reminisce on our time together.
I remember the days where you
would chain me to my bed,
Forcing me to stay dormant, to stay alone,
to stay drowning in my own thoughts.

I try to return to reality and leave every insult in my head
but every time I speak, I see you in my
peripheral and I become trapped, locked in an asylum
Never to be let out again

I remember every poison-laced comment
"Nobody loves you; they wouldn't care if you were gone."
"You are worthless."
"You are nothing."

I remember how you would force my head to look,
At my feet
your cold ghost-like hands shoving my neck down,
cracking each and every bone and forcing my
shoulders to slump on the floor.

I remember how everyone would fly past me and you,
you would glue my feet to the ground so I could never move
Every time I would reach my potential, you would snatch it away
From me, breaking it into a million pieces

I remember you whispering in my ear "die."

I remember hoping, dreaming, praying that someone would
see you, hear you save me from the hell that developed
in my head.
The hell that you were determined to spread

But you just sat, the devil on my shoulder, taunting me
Mocking me
Causing me to be trapped in your spell forever.

I remember you.

I remember your face when I gained the confidence to finally look at
myself with pride, and finally looked at others in the eye.
I remember when I looked at you and said
"I DON'T NEED YOU ANYMORE."

I remember when I moved my foot off the ground.
When I got myself off my bed.
When I became myself.

I wear white to your funeral to spite you.
A dark pink rose in my hand as a symbol of
gratitude because I am thankful for you.

I thank you for making me the person I am today.
I thank you for trying to poison my head.
I thank you for all the cruel words you said.
I thank you for chaining me to my bed.
I thank you for everything that you did.

A thank you from your new self.

Iron Keys

Jordan Wood

When I first heard you play, I was amazed.
Every note blending perfectly in my eardrums.
I became obsessed, wanting to be blessed by your black and white
keys.

Soon I got one of my own.
One where I could create my own symphonies,
Harmonies that were once in my head,
now out for the public to adore.
Dust collected as I ignored you,
shoving you in the back of my closet.

You sat there waiting to be used.
Instead you sit, battered and bruised.
Misused by me.
The lullaby ringing in my ear soon became
dull as I say bye,
Leaving your untuned keys a fantasy in my mind
one that was left behind.

Now I crave that I lifted you up from your grave.
But now it's too late.
I wish your keys were here with me but,
Instead I still dream
of what we were supposed to be.

Freeze
Cara Woolston

Shivering from the air's cold assault,
The creek's tongue becomes numb and falls
Silent.

Slowly, it stills, and the wind is at fault,
As the incessant squalls mock and
Berate and taunt what was once vibrant,
What was once proud,
What was once at ease.
And it is in this harsh climate,
That the creek will freeze.

I, too, shiver and shake with cold touches.
I, too, fall silent in harsh climates.
I, too, freeze.

How then, when flowers bud and birds begin
To sing, does the creek recover from this state?
Where is the relief from the weight,
For shame heavily hangs from my collarbones,
And invisibly wrings my neck in an attempt
To break me from within.
How does one melt and reclaim their fluidity?
How does one break free from the air's haunting captivity?

Breaking News

Janice Deniel Wraase

Youth is decreasing,
blood is tainting,
flooding our history pages.
It just adds to the stats,
to the graphs.
We see it every day,
so why should we care?
Genocide is now a daily occurrence.
Some blame it on a lack of guns,
others on ignored children.
Let the debate continue,
and the blood become a national river.
Our future is fading into the past,
but actions aren't changing.
How many more corpses till a solution surges?
We are criticized for standing up and walking out,
but the time's not up for murder.
Twelve over here,
Ten over there.
It's just numbers now,
only a blur.
Lives are being cut short,
safe zones are morphing into nightmares,
into hunting grounds.
Do you want the schools alphabetized?
Or do you prefer them chronologically?
They're just files left to rot in cabinets.
All you see is a list,
a flag mid-height,
but not even a blink of an eye.
Let's debate yanny or laurel,
Oh look the royal wedding is on.
Go NRA! Go second amendment!
Reality isn't sinking in
as fast as the bullets.
How many more Franklins will be used on burials?
When will kids be heard?

When will they be safe?
When will school help us grow,
not take our lives?
Let's stop fighting,
no more questions.
Let's get working,
and get more answers.

The Thing in My Home

Nathan Wright

There is a thing in my home. It sits in the corner and does not move. It is a hideous thing, but a harmless one. It watches me with lidless eyes, moans at me with a mouth devoid of teeth or tongue or lips. Limbless, headless, indescribably absent of features. It disgusts me, but it cannot harm me, so I do not fear it.

I am working at my desk. The thing sits in its corner and watches me, as it does every day. My fingers pause over the keys. There is a word I wish to use, but I cannot remember it. I hear it though. I turn and look at the thing. It repeats itself, the word slithering from its soft, shapeless mouth. I type the word. It is exactly what I was trying to remember, what I still forget when I look away from the screen.

I am looking for my watch. It is not on my bedside table, or my bathroom counter, or any of the places I might have left it. The thing watches me as I walk past its corner in my search. It is on my third pass that I spot it. The thing is wearing my watch. It has cinched it tight on the flesh of its wrist, though it yet lacks both arm and hand. I consider my options, and then I leave the watch. I will be fine without a timepiece for one day.

I am typing. The words come only sporadically, jerkily. Other words fill the air as the thing speaks from the corner. I do not know their meaning, for they slip from my memory as soon as I hear them. I type them in anyways, my writing as much the thing's work as my own. When I read it again, I only know the separation where I cease to understand what I know on some level to be words.

I am looking in the mirror. My friends have told me that I am smiling less, that I seem distant. I try and smile only to find my face numb and unresponsive. In the reflection, I can see the thing sitting in the doorway behind me. It is smiling broadly. I remember that it ought to be lipless and toothless, unable to make such an expression. It seems to smile wider at the thought.

I am sitting at my table to take my meal. The thing is sitting across from me. I did not place it there. I try to raise the fork to my mouth, to eat a bite of this meal I have made, whose name I cannot recall. Once, twice. I fail. There is no mouth to raise it to. The fork falls from my fingers. They no longer form a hand. The thing reaches across the table and plucks the fork from my plate with its perfect hand, a hand I know to be mine. It puts the food into its mouth and chews slowly, grinding the food between my teeth. Finally, it swallows. It looks at me and it compliments me on the dish, though the name of it is meaningless to me. It smiles. I cannot smile back.

I am sitting on my bed. It is night, I ought to sleep. I have no need to get up. But I am stricken by the certainty that if I needed to, I would find myself unable. The thing in the corner is watching me, smiling with my mouth. It rises and walks towards me on my legs. I have no arms with which to push it away as it picks me up and carries me away, whispering words I can no longer understand. The tone is soothing, but it is smiling. It puts me down in its corner. I can do nothing but watch from the corner of the thing as it lays down in my bed with my body and turns off the light, leaving me in the dark.

I am a thing in my home. I sit in the corner all day, for I cannot move. I watch the thing as it goes about its day, walking on my legs, smiling with my face. I want to cry out, but voice and language both it has taken from me. No, I am mistaken. I cannot say these are my things it has taken. These things are irrevocably its now; I merely had them some time ago. I do not know how long that was. The light and dark of the sky outside has lost its meaning to me, and numbers slip from my mind. I have no way to track the time, and the concept itself is so far removed from my ability to comprehend that it might as well not exist. So I sit, for no time and for all of it, and I watch what was once a thing live the life that was once mine.

I am a thing, and I am in a home. It does not belong to me.

Slipped my Mind

Nathan Wright

Don't see many people out here, y'know. Not a lot of demand for gas in a ghost town. Though, stranger comes through, needs to stop for gas, really sounds like the start of a horror movie, doesn't it? Not that I'd make a good slasher myself, reckon I wouldn't get more than two steps into a chase before my arthritis kicked in.

Yeah, I suppose I've got some stories like that in me. Only one that's any good though. It happened years back, when I was still young. There was this fella called... Y'know, I can't remember his name.

What? Oh, no, nothing's funny. It's just ... well, you'll see.

We'll call him Jessie. I worked with Jessie at the supermarket, stocking shelves and what-not. Now Jessie, he was a nice guy. Good with the customers, didn't complain when we had to pull long shifts, always willing to help out. Problem was, he wasn't so reliable. Not that he was a flake or anything, he just had an absolutely terrible memory.

You'd tell him over and over to be there at nine, and he wouldn't just forget the time, he'd forget the date and where he was supposed to be. He'd forget shifts, names, streets. You name it, he wouldn't remember it. I saw his house once, the whole place was covered in sticky notes reminding him when he was supposed to be where, to do this or that chore. I commented on it and he was a bit embarrassed about the whole thing. Apparently, he'd forgotten he put half of them up.

It was harmless for the first few years. A bit inconvenient at times, but he couldn't help it. I just made it a habit to call him before his shifts to make sure he didn't forget, reminded him of what needed to be done a bit more than my other coworkers, and things were fine.

It was a good five years after I first met him that it started to become concerning. Jessie never could remember everyone,

but he started forgetting the names of the people at the store, people he saw and worked with every day. Then personal things, important things, like which car was his or when his birthday was. Once I watched him stop and stammer for near two minutes because he couldn't remember his own name. I was worried about him at that point, told him to see a doctor, and he said he did but it never seemed to get better.

It was winter when things first got weird. I remember 'cause we were out clearing snow from the lot, and there's not much to do to keep your mind off the tedium besides talking to each other. That was what tipped me off. Something rubbed me the wrong way not two minutes in, but I couldn't put my finger on it until we were nearly done.

We'd been talking near the entire time we were out in this parking lot, and I'd never seen him breathe. Every time I talked, there'd be that plume of warm fog in the cold air, but from him? Nothing.

I pointed it out, tried to make a joke of it, and he laughed. This time, there was the fog. He joked back, made light of it. "My memory must be getting worse," Jessie said. "I forgot to breathe!"

I laughed back, a little less earnestly, but I was willing to play along. I could see the fog of his breath now, so surely I'd just missed it before. Never mind that I'd often been looking at him when he spoke, that he couldn't possibly have spoken and not been breathing. So I wrote it off, told myself that I'd been wrong, and went on with my day.

I was a little warier after that, kept a closer eye on Jessie. I'd told myself I was wrong, but that didn't mean I could believe it. And there were times I thought I'd been right the first time. Times when Jessie's chest seemed too still, or his eyes stayed open too long. But it was all little things, easy to write off or ignore, and bit by bit I stopped paying attention to it.

It was a few weeks into spring when I saw something I couldn't dismiss. Jessie and I'd been on the closing shift, and he'd left a few minutes early, leaving me alone in the store. No big deal, I'd done it enough times before that I wasn't gonna begrudge him a few

extra minutes of freedom. But when I saw he'd left the light on in the back office, just before I was about to walk out the door, I was a little annoyed. Two seconds of extra effort, would that've killed him?

I walked back to the office, didn't bother to turn the store lights back on. I just wanted to be done and gone. So it was an extra annoyance to turn off the light and find he'd left the desk lamp on, too. It was the principle of the thing, even if it was all of a second's work.

And then it wasn't. Because when I took those few steps closer to the desk, I saw it. A second became two, became three, became five, ten, sixty as I stood there staring, trying to understand what I saw sitting on the desk in that yellow circle of light.

It was a hand, neatly severed at the wrist. There was no splatter of blood, no jagged knife, and as horrible as those things would have been, at least they would have been answers. But it was clean, almost perfect in how neat the cut was. It crossed my mind that it had been cut off somewhere else and brought here. But something about it made that impossible to believe. It looked too fresh, like there should still have been an arm attached to it. I didn't dare reach out to touch it, to see if it was still warm.

It was while I stood there, paralyzed by the indecision of whether to look closer or turn and flee, when I heard a voice. It said my name. I spun on my heel, heart pounding in terror, and found myself facing Jessie.

He stood in the doorway of the office, the store dark behind him, barely illuminated by the yellow light. He cocked his head to the side, and for the life of me I couldn't have told you what the expression on his face was.

"Is something wrong?" he asked me. The tone was off, barely a question. If I hadn't seen his lips move with the words, I wouldn't have known he was the one who'd spoken.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I just wordlessly pointed at the hand on the desk. Jessie looked at it, and then he started to laugh. He

held up his arm, and I realized with a start that there was no hand at the end of it. He walked over to the desk and I stepped quickly out of his way before he picked up the hand and placed it to the stump of his wrist. All of a sudden there was no handless arm and no armless hand, just Jessie flexing his fingers.

"Darndest thing," he said, still chuckling. "Ma always said to be thankful all my parts were screwed on, or I'd lose them too. Guess that wasn't good enough."

He left and I let him. What else could I do? Grab him by the collar and demand that he explain himself? I don't think he knew any more than I did. So I followed his lead: I pretended it never happened.

Months went by without either of us talking about it, and gradually I think I convinced myself that it had been a dream I mixed up with real life. Then came the last straw.

It was summer, in the middle of the day. We were on shift together again when Jessie excused himself to the bathroom, then didn't come back for the better part of an hour. So the manager told me to go look for him, make sure he wasn't puking his guts out in the stall or anything. In my head, I made a joke about Jessie forgetting he was at work.

I wish that had been it.

When I cracked open the door to the bathroom, I saw Jessie standing at the sink. His back was to me as he leaned close to the mirror, close enough that his face had to have been pressed against it. He was stock still, but I could hear him muttering something to himself, something I couldn't quite hear. I remembered that night with the hand, looking at him now, but I didn't want to believe that was real. It was just Jessie, I knew the guy! So I screwed my courage to the sticking place and piped up.

"Jessie?"

He jumped as if I'd startled him and turned towards me. I think I screamed. I certainly wanted to, but no one came bursting in, so I

must have stayed silent. Jessie was ... well, he was a lot of things. I've tried to figure out how to describe what I saw plenty of times over the years, but I've never quite gotten it. The closest I've come is this: whatever was on the front of his head wasn't a face.

He laughed, and the sound was hauntingly normal coming from that not-face. "Sorry," he said. "I meant to be back sooner, but I just... Dammit, I just can't remember what it looks like!"

He gestured to where a face should have been on his head. He was still talking like this was a minor inconvenience instead of a living nightmare. "You've always had a better memory," he said. "Think you can help me out?"

He smiled at me with something that wasn't a mouth, still looking at me with things that certainly weren't eyes. That was what got me, that attempt to copy an expression with something so utterly unable to do so and yet managing it anyways. I ran. I didn't know what else to do.

I called in the next day once I had gotten myself calmed down, said I wouldn't be coming back. They were mighty pissed, refused to give me my last paycheck, but that was fine by me. I was happy so long as I didn't have to go back there, see that thing that wasn't a face still grinning at me from Jessie's skull.

I got a new job as a bartender. It paid well enough, but more importantly, Jessie always hated drinking. I didn't have to worry about seeing him at my new job. And I was right, he never came into the bar.

But this was a small town, and word got around. People would see Jessie at the store or walking down the street or just mowing his lawn. They never described him the same way, but he was always off somehow. Wasn't breathing, or was breathing and doing it wrong. Arms too long or too short or both at the same time. Standing hunched or crooked or far, far straighter than any man of flesh and bone could manage. It seemed he was getting worse, always forgetting more and more about what he should look like.

Sometimes you'd hear stories of people trying to correct him,

whether he asked them about this or that feature or they mustered up the guts to tell him themselves. He'd always listen to you, it seemed, always be eager to relearn what he'd forgotten. The stories never got all the way through. People would try to help him and he'd fix himself as they spoke, and one and all they'd run in terror at the sight of it before they could finish describing it, before he could get back to normal. The newest stories after those would always have those same features, but gradually getting worse as he tried to remember but forgot what he couldn't recall. Tell him he had too many fingers and his arms wouldn't end in hands anymore, tell him he was missing a mouth and he'd be all smiles from head to toe.

It was terrifying to see, almost worse in a way to not and know he was out there in some new configuration that could be worse than any before. But despite his looks, he was harmless. Never did anything he wouldn't before he started changing, never went out of his way to spook people. Everyone else in the store quit within a month after I did, but he still kept working there, stocking the shelves and sweeping the floors on his own with no new inventory and no new customers. He might have just forgotten that the purpose of keeping a store was for people to buy things. So we went our way, and he went his, and life basically went on as normal.

Then the disappearances started. Ms. Kate went first, a kindly old woman who lived down the street. When the neighborhood kid showed up to bring her groceries and she didn't answer the door, we thought maybe she'd just gone to visit some family unannounced. But her cat was still there, and she hadn't arranged any plans for him to be fed. It was enough for the police to start looking.

They didn't find much. Anything, actually. No signs of forced entry, nothing taken from her house. Her car was still in her driveway, her clothes in her dresser, her phone and wallet on the nightstand. Every lead they looked for turned up empty. It was like she'd vanished off the face of the earth.

I don't know who thought of it first. Maybe I did. But the idea floated out there: if Jessie could forget what he looked like, why

couldn't he forget people? Whoever thought of it, the idea started to spread. I don't know how many people believed it at first, but then the other disappearances came. Andrew, who ran the flower shop. Maria, who drew designs for the tattoo parlor. Jacob, the kid who brought the newspapers.

A vague idea grew into something whispered and muttered under every roof. Jessie had forgotten them, and that made them disappear. Someone got bold enough to barge into the nearly empty supermarket and confronted him. I heard second-hand later how she'd screamed at him, demanded to know why he'd do that to Kate, to Andrew and Maria and Jacob. He'd just looked at her blankly with the thing he had in place of a head that day and asked her one question. "Who?"

The idea became a certainty after that. But even then, no one did anything. What could we do? We couldn't make him remember. As people vanished, others packed up and fled town. I never heard from any of them again. I didn't try to reach out myself. Easier to believe they made it, that they're safe now and just don't want to remember what happened here. But I can't imagine it's much easier to remember someone when they're not around.

Officer Abbott took things the worst. It surprised me at the time, he'd always been a gentle soul, the sort who helped lost kids find their parents and got cats out of trees. But he was a family man, and Jessie never was good at remembering who was related to whom. Maybe I should have expected him to swing by the bar and hammer back a drink before heading down to the supermarket with his handgun.

He was back within the hour. There were tears streaming down his face, and he sat down in front of me with a sense of exhaustion so total, I wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get up again. I'll never forget the look in Abbott's eyes when he grabbed my arm and asked for booze.

I got it for him, and I dared to ask him what had happened. He didn't answer me for a long time. Then he downed the drink in one go, and he spoke. "He forgot how to die. That son of a bitch, he forgot how to die!"

He said nothing more. I got him another drink. It's all I could think of to do. He drank it, so I replaced it. So I got him another, and he drank it, and so on and so forth, for hours and hours. I stopped charging him after the first. I don't think he noticed. It was only after he'd drunk half the bar, enough to kill a man, that he got up and walked out the door without so much as a wobble in his step. That was the last time I saw him.

No one else tried anything like that again. And bit by bit, person by person, the town kept emptying out. And eventually, I was the only one left. Not sure how many days went by before I noticed I hadn't seen anyone for a while, whether as customers or passing them on the street. Guess I was more like Jessie than I thought. I think that's what did it. The thought that after all the forgetting he'd done, all the havoc he'd brought on us, I might be just like him.

So I went to look for him. Not at the store, I didn't want to interrupt his work, but to his home. I'd been a friend of his and I hoped that would at least get me a chat. When he answered the door, I recognized him only because I didn't recognize anything at all. Turns out, there's a lot more you can forget than what a person's supposed to look like.

He invited me in and asked if I wanted anything to drink. I said no, but he'd already gone to the kitchen, moving like he'd forgotten a footstep should only move you one step forward. So I followed him and watched as he tried to make tea. Half the stuff he added wasn't edible, and some of it wasn't even stuff that you should be able to grab hold of and cram in a cup, but when he pulled a steaming cup from the solid surface of the counter and handed it to me, it smelled like the best tea in the world. Still, I didn't risk drinking it.

I tried to strike up a conversation, asking him about his work or his hobbies. He said his work was fine, talked all about organizing and stocking and cleaning. There was no mention of how he was arranging and maintaining a store for nobody. He said he was writing for fun, but that he kept forgetting what he'd already done and started over, just to be sure. When he showed me what I assume was meant to be a piece of paper, I saw the work he kept

repeating: a capital "T," written over and over. He hadn't even gotten to the second letter before forgetting.

Whatever his memory had once been, it was clear it was all but gone now. So I bit the bullet and got to why I'd come: I asked him if he remembered me.

Jessie laughed at that. "Of course," he said. "You're ... well, I can't remember your name, but I know your face! You worked with me. How could I forget you?"

He said the last part happily enough, but then it seemed to shake him. It was hard to read someone so utterly lacking in all human features that they might as well be their opposites, but I could see his good humor melt away, could almost hear him repeating the question in his mind. How could he forget me? Well, how well could he remember anything else?

Jessie looked at the walls as if seeking answers. Each one was carpeted in post-it notes, enough that I could push my hand into them up to the wrist and not feel the wall beneath, but each and every one of them was blank. I have no doubt that he'd kept putting them up out of habit but had long ago forgotten their purpose.

As he began to panic, I said... Well, I've been calling him Jessie, but like I said, I can't remember his actual name. Hell, I can't remember if he was even a he. Could have been a she or a they for all I know. But the point is, even if I can't remember now, I remembered then. So I said his name, tried to get his attention back.

He turned to me with more confusion than he ever could have managed when he looked human. And he said, "Sorry, you'll have to jog my memory. Who's that?"

I don't remember what happened after that. But I know that I woke up the next morning as the only person left in the whole town. Jessie was gone. I could have left, but where would I go? Would I flee blindly to some other town? No. I'd stuck around longer than even Jessie, I wasn't about to cut and run now.

So I stayed. Moved some stuff around, fixed up what I needed and broke down what I didn't. You'd be surprised how easy it is to be self-sufficient when you have the bones of a whole town to work with. So I stayed, and I lived, and as the years went by, I wondered.

I still don't know what happened to Jessie. Maybe he'd gone to wherever forgotten things go. Maybe he'd just decided to leave. Maybe he's still out there, some other town's forgetful employee until the cycle starts all over again. But he's not around here anymore, and while I'm not quite celebrating the fact, I'm not about to shed any tears over it either.

And that's it I suppose. No, no need to pay for the gas. I don't need the money anyways. But as payment, do me a favor? Tell the story to some of your friends. I'm old now, probably don't have more than a few years left in me now. I'll be gone soon. But someone has to remember.

