



Contrast

Contrast Literary Magazine

Contrast Literary Magazine

McDaniel College
2020

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Editor's Note

*"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

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.

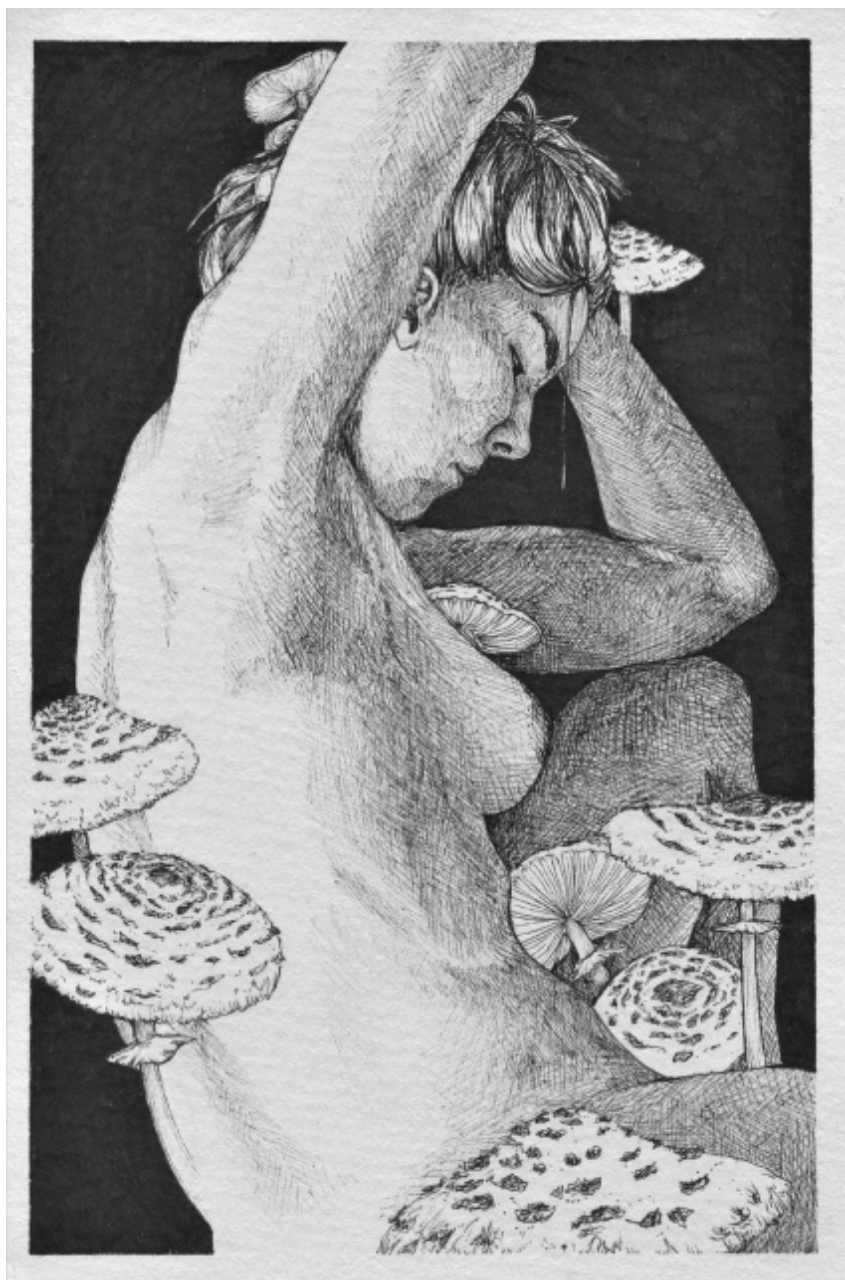
My only solace from the box comes when I return home to my dark and empty apartment each night. I leave that monstrous cube at the door and embrace the darkness of my home which obscures the machine from my sight. Wrapped in this darkness, I can almost forget about the box until the morning light thrusts 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

Flannery 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

Flannery 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

Flannery 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

Flannery 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.

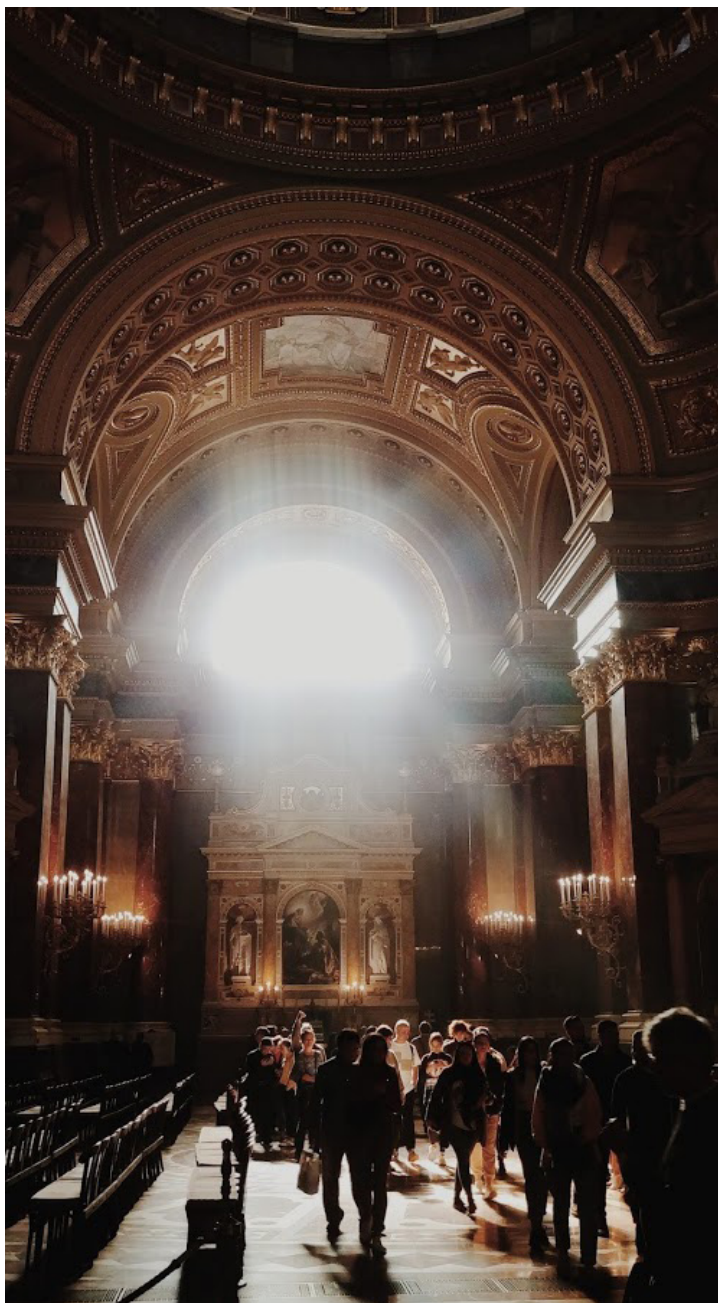
Sorry Not Here RN Maybe Try Later

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.

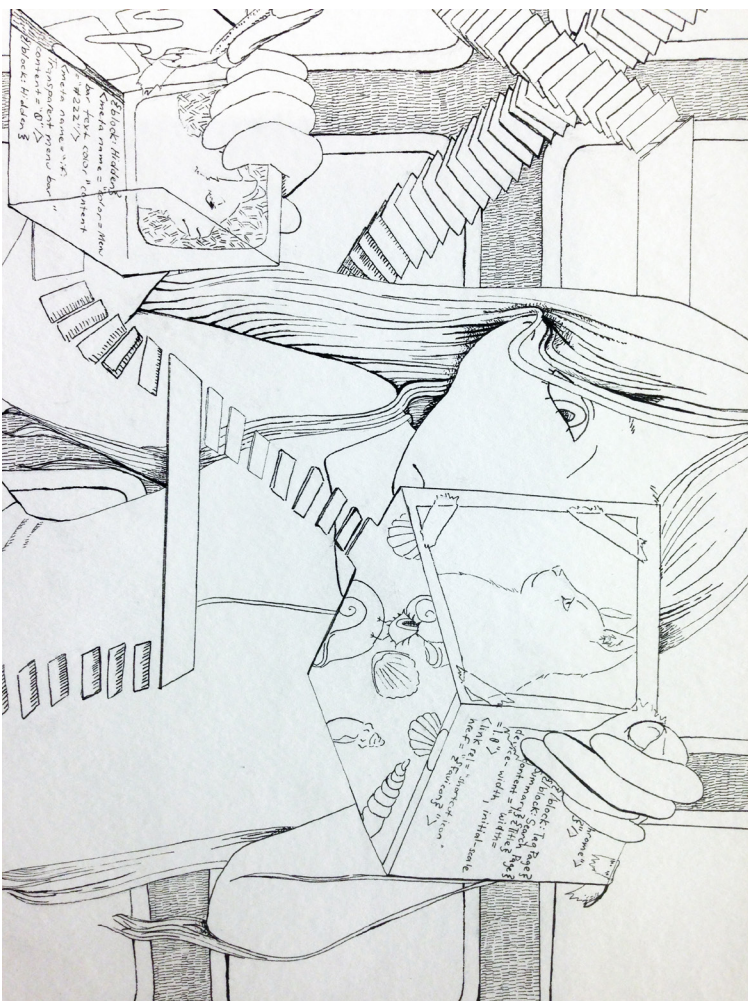
The girl notices Abha and sends a genuine smile her way.

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

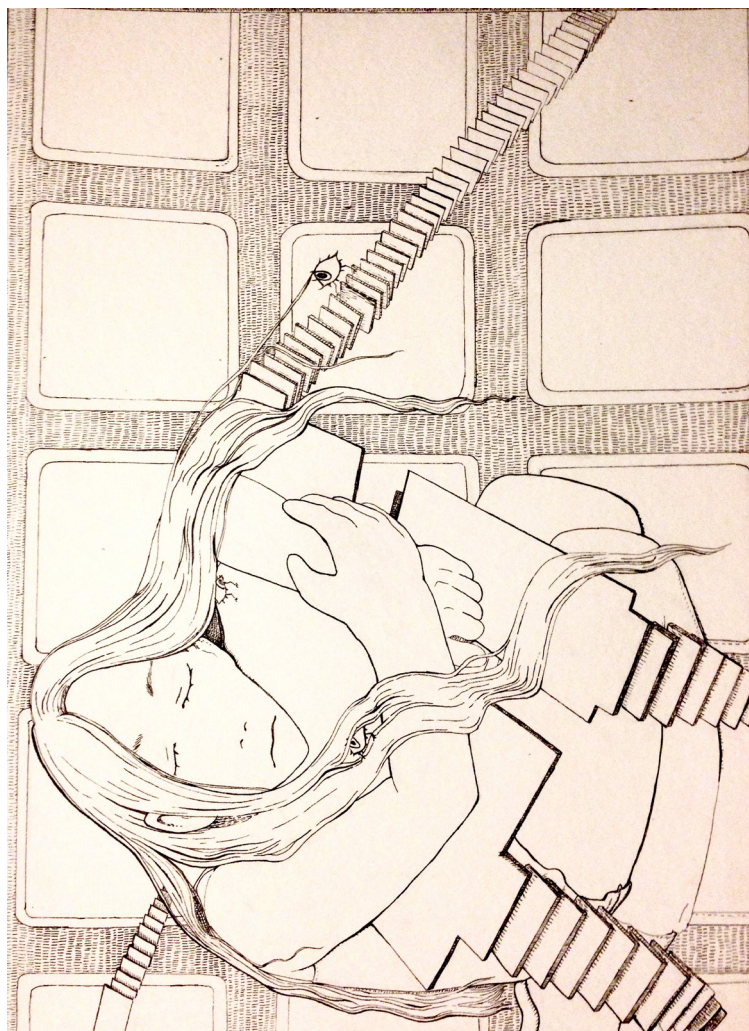
The girl's name is Amira. Amira is starlight to Abha, and the only starlight around in her life.

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.

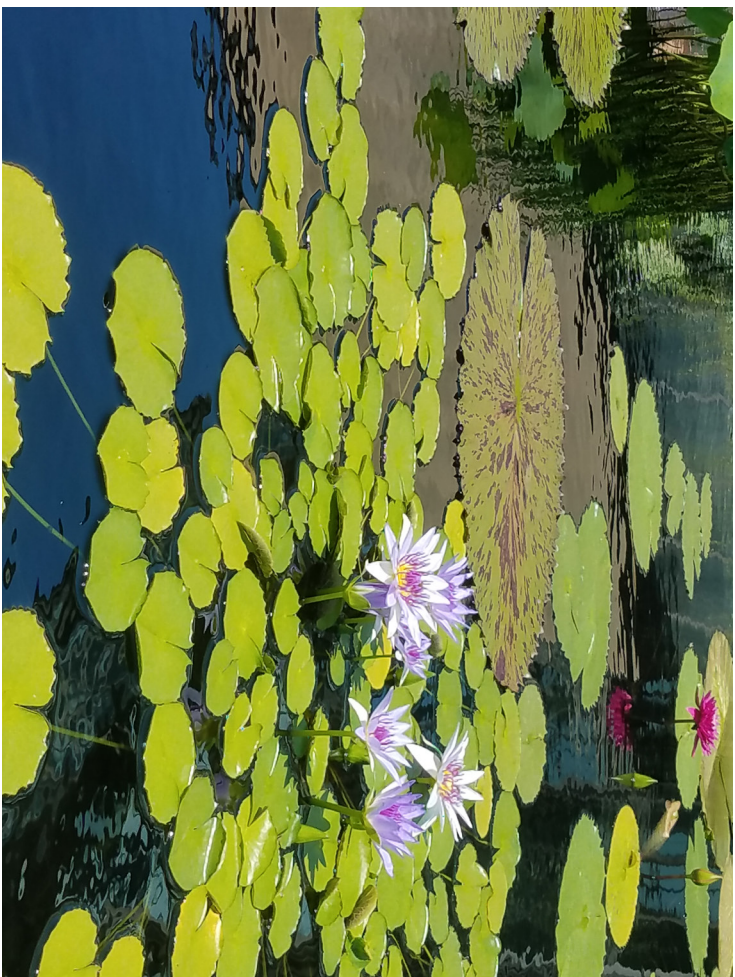
I found over the course of the evening I loved to watch her work. Her sure hands, mixing and running along the pages of her books, her eyes darting across her work station intently, her bitten lips twisting into the occasional mischievous smile once she looked up from her table to track my movements. 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 kneeled 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 steeped 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.

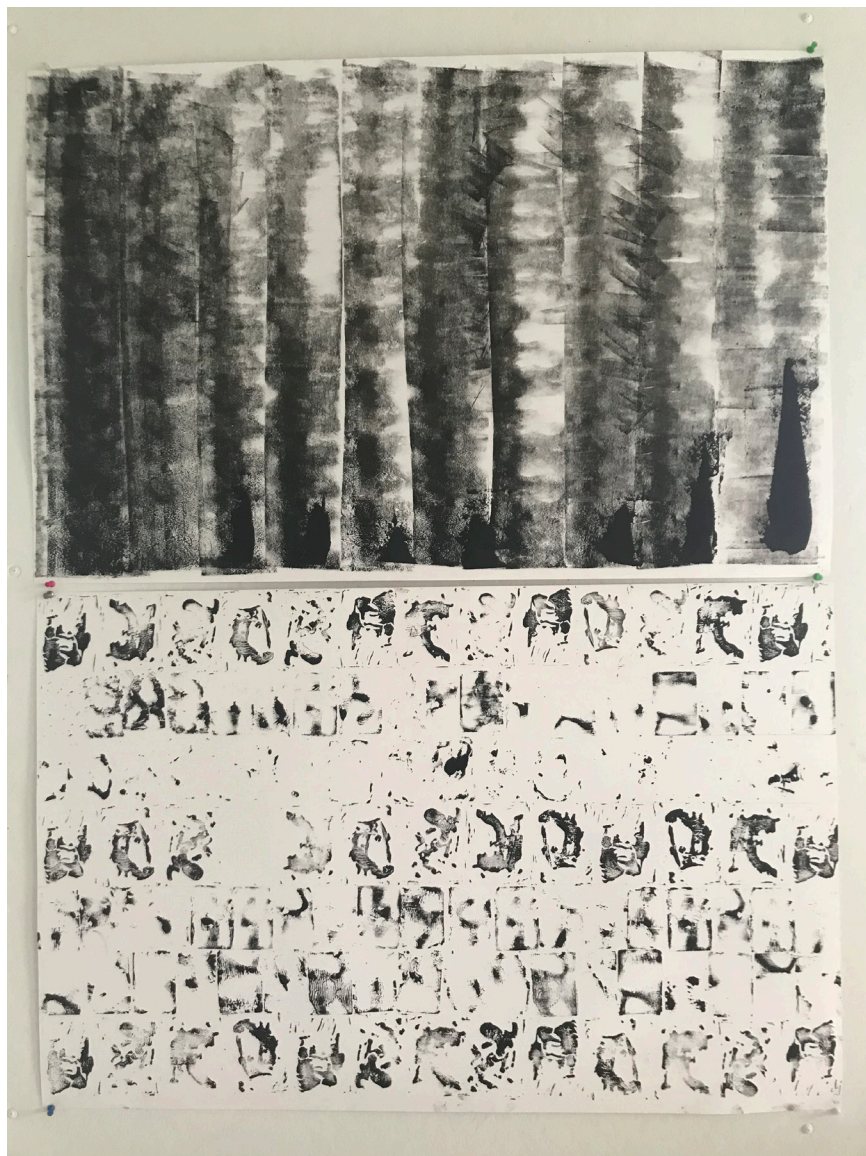
Write me a poem
About everything good
That says things will work out
In the way that they should.

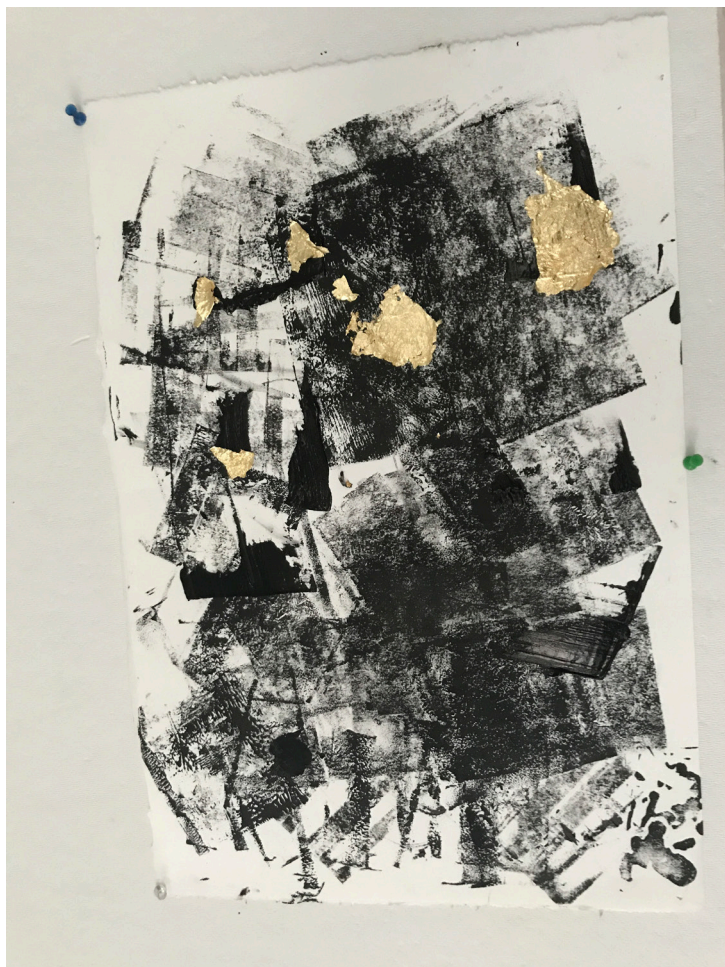
Write me a poem
About what's inside
The feelings you bury
The you that you hide.

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



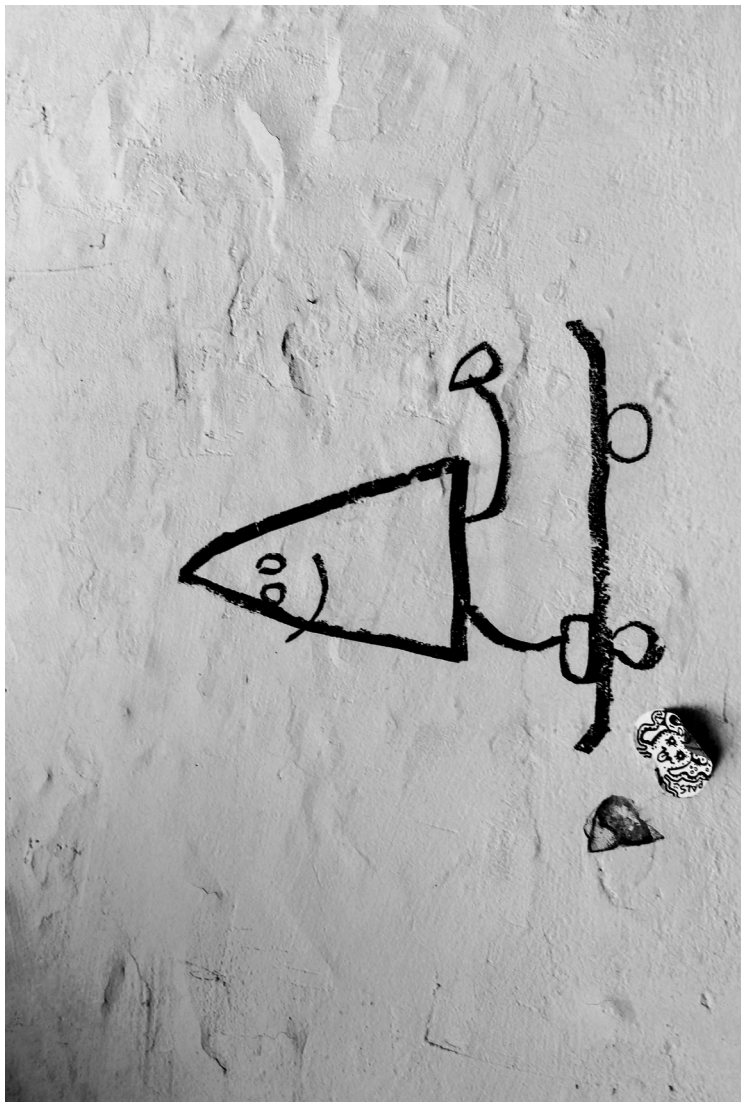
Bricks Get Chilly, Too

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.

