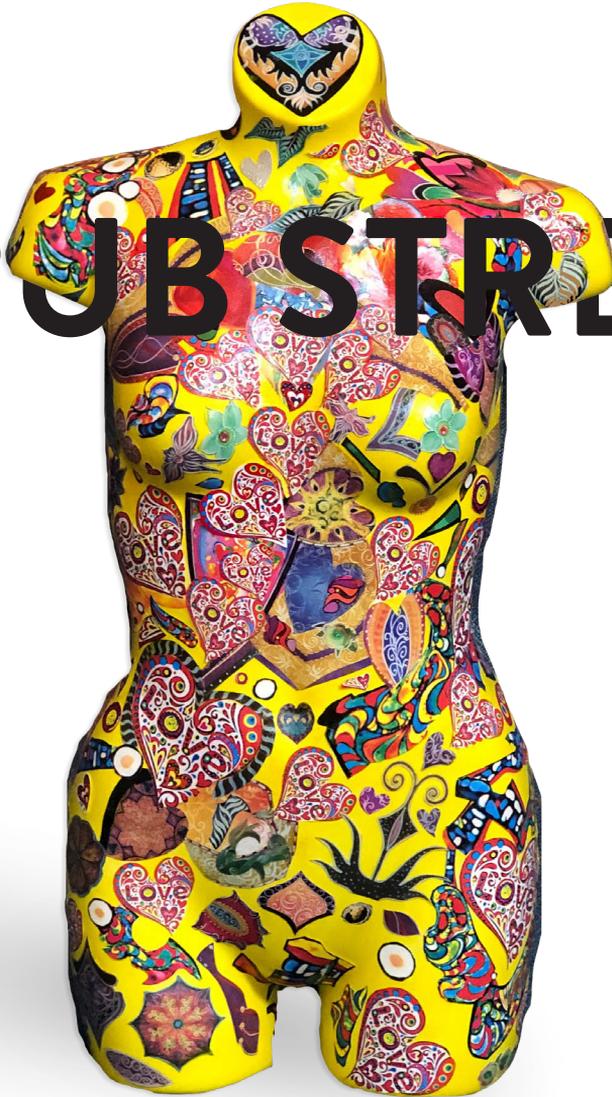


GRUB STREET



VOLUME 73
TOWSON UNIVERSITY
LITERARY MAGAZINE



VOLUME 73

GRUB STREET

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@GrubStreetTU, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson.

To contact Grub Street's editorial team, write to grubstreet1952@gmail.com.

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Editorial Mission & Submission Guidelines

Send in your best work.

At Grub Street we look for works of outstanding literary merit that are in conversation with the current cultural and literary landscape. We accept submissions in the usual genres (fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction and visual art), as well as submissions that are less easily categorized, including, for example, graphic stories, comics, one-act plays, collage, and visual poetry.

We read all submissions with care and attention, and we read blind to ensure a fair and impartial selection process. We welcome established and new writers, and we hope to create a diverse journal in which we showcase the voices of underrepresented and undiscovered writers alongside more established writers.

All submissions must be unpublished. Please follow the submission guidelines, below, to ensure that your work receives a place in our review process.

Only previously unpublished works (either in print or online) **will be considered for publication.** Please submit **one** work per file. **Do not** submit group submissions (i.e., if you submit five poems, do not put all five poems into one document. Please create five separate documents for each poem.) We read submissions in a blind-review process, so please **remove all identifying information from your works.** (i.e; title pages, headers, document file titles, etc) Genre-specific guidelines are as follows:

- **Poetry:** Up to **five** poems may be submitted for consideration. Please submit one poem per document. Documents should be .doc or .docx files only.
- **Fiction:** Up to **two** pieces of fiction may be submitted for consideration. Please submit one prose piece per document. Documents should be .doc or .docx files only. Please keep each fiction submission under 6,000 words.
- **Creative Nonfiction:** Up to **two** pieces of creative nonfiction may be submitted for consideration. Please submit one prose piece per document. Documents should be .doc or .docx files only. Please keep each nonfiction submission under 6,000 words.
- **Visual Art:** Up to **five** works of visual art may be submitted for consideration. Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw or high-quality .jpeg file with at least 300dpi and a size of at least 1MB.

If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines that are not addressed in our FAQ, please contact us via email at grubstreet1952@gmail.com.

Grub Street, London, 18th C.

Dr. H. George Hahn

Professor / Past Chair, TU Department of English

Home of butchers and foreign manual laborers, Grub Street was not a fashionable London address. In his Dictionary of 1755, Dr. Johnson noted further that it was also a place “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called grubstreet.” Hard living, hard drinking, half starving, Grub Streeters turned out biographies before the corpse was cold, poems during the event they were watching, ghost-written speeches and sermons to order, and satires to deadline. First draft was final copy. They walked with pistols or swords to defend themselves from creditors and angry satiric targets.

Yet however poor, low, and scorned, they were the first fully professional writers to whom “publish or perish” was not a hyperbolic metaphor. Forgotten today, they nevertheless throw a long shadow over us. With them the modern periodical press can be said to have been born with its interests in live events and lean prose. Their plagiarisms led to copyright laws, their defamations to better libel laws. Their work encouraged a free press. Their writing to a newly but barely literate public doomed the long, aristocratic romance in the hard language of realism. Their work helped to produce a mass market of readers. Freelancers no longer under pressure to praise patrons, they showed finally that a writer could be independent.



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Letter from the Editor

Holden Schmale

When I was 18 years old, a freshman in college, I attended a small private university in the cold and beautiful mountains of north-eastern Pennsylvania. I studied Business Administration with a specialization in Marketing. I was being incredibly practical, but I was incredibly unhappy.

When I was 19, I left school. I moved home. I joined the workforce. I had no clue where I wanted to go or who I wanted to be.

From my childhood bedroom—Ravens purple walls covered with peeling, faded posters displaying my lifetime’s accumulation of interests—Star Wars, The Titanic, small dogs—I wrote a story. I wrote it over a few nights, scribbling with a pencil into a blank, black notebook.

It concerned an apocalypse of super-volcanic nature, wanderers left in a barren, abandoned North America. They scavenge for food and survival and try to find meaning in a dark, scary world. In retrospect, I can say a couple of things:

It isn’t very good.

It’s the story I needed. As I searched for something to grasp onto in the cosmos of my existence, an answer to questions I could barely make sense of in the first place, the story made them concrete, gave them a face, a name.

Could I, searching for light in the darkness of my own experience, have sat down and read Samwise’s speech to Frodo in *Return of the King*, or Sonny’s performance at the end of Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”?

I realize now, as much comfort as I may derive from these tales, Samwise knows only of the evil facing the free peoples of Middle Earth. He couldn’t know what I felt, my experience. I had to write that myself.

If we as artists didn’t try to capture our own experiences, our fears, our doubts, our questions, and our feeble attempts at answers in stories and poems and paintings, then we rob the world of our perspective. This isn’t to say or suggest that anything from my mind would touch the weakest of the literary gold that spilled out of the minds and off the pens of the icons and gods of the written word that I’ve mentioned above. It is to say, the job of the artist is simple: to try.

Few have read my super-volcano story, titled “Light,” and I strongly doubt many more eyes will ever come upon it. It lives in my memory now, reminding me of why the stories we tell from the heart matter, no matter where a piece ends up and whose approval it wins in this giant world of diverse and important experience.

The first time I was published (I had returned to school and gotten some much-needed craft and grammar instruction) was a feeling I will never forget. My parents surprised me with a framed version of the physical pages, the six of them side by side. It was the first time I'd felt not ashamed, at peace with my decision to drop my high yield four plus one M.B.A program and pursue a bachelor's in English and Creative Writing.

I have somehow, humbly and undeservedly, found myself lucky enough to be Editor in Chief of Grub Street. As I've gone about the task of becoming lost in this plethora of stories and poems, artwork and essays, each with its own heartbeat, soaked with the experiences of artists I've never met, I've tried to keep my experiences both writing a story and publishing a story in mind. We tend to think of the latter as the endgame of the former. For some art, maybe this is the case. I'd challenge that. As hard as we can try to find the worthy pieces, no group of strangers could know the depths of courage it took to create the work we were tasked with handling. We did the absolute best we could. To all who sent their work in, just know, sometimes the most important art is the piece that lives in our memory alone.

This task would have been impossible had it not been for the team we were lucky enough to assemble. Balancing school, work, and bills—maybe even a social life—these wonderful people happily took on the task of engaging with more than 1,000 submissions over a five-month span. We treated this nearly impossible task with care—taking these pieces of artists' souls spilled onto the page or the canvas, and somehow paring them down into our own piece of art.

When the fall semester ended, a group of Grub Street editors, after enjoying a relaxing holiday, got back to reading. Without pay or school credit, this group spent January finely tuning our journal. They made sure every single submission got the attention it deserved. I could not be any prouder of what this group accomplished, and what they put into this collection.

These are the pieces that spoke to us, grabbed our attention, haunted our minds for weeks or months and wouldn't go away. We argued over pieces, we fought for pieces, we grew connected to these pieces. Work published in this journal is here because it spoke to a real human being enough for them to grow passionate about it, to fight for it. I fought hard for my favorites. "First, Do No Harm" and "If bella swan was born in 2006" stuck with me for months, until I couldn't possibly envision a world where I'd let them get away from this journal. But don't think for a second that I've curated this journal. What you witness here is the ultimate collaboration, a testament to teamwork and finding solutions. I'd be remiss if I ended this letter without thanking, with the deepest and most genuine gratitude, Leslie and Charles—my partners on this journey.

In this lonely world that we writers, poets, painters, and artists inhabit—a world of lamp-lit desks, blank pages staring back in our faces, begging our solitary minds to create—a literary journal is quite remarkable. Of the 61 artists published in this edition, each of them had to live their life in such a way, experience things in such an order, to lead them to create the piece that will appear for you here. When the first boxes of journals roll in, we will have been working for nearly a year. All of the thought, the effort, the passion of so many separate individuals, from so many different walks of life, will be bound into a physical embodiment of that passion.

Few labors of love bear fruit like that which you hold in your hands here. These pages are marked by the hearts of artists, a creation made possible by those who had the courage to try and capture their experience on the page, even if for only a moment.





Long Story Short

Meredith Davies Hadaway

He was a boat riding the rising tide,
a harbinger of spring, coals stirred

back to flame, deep woods glowing
with fireflies, the smell of ozone

before storms rattle the sky.

She was a steady humming, a not-
forgotten song, a long to-do list,

hospital corners on the bed, an open
book with folded pages, the warm light

of autumn turning toward darkness.

Theirs was a love story, a long story,
a sad story, one best told at sundown

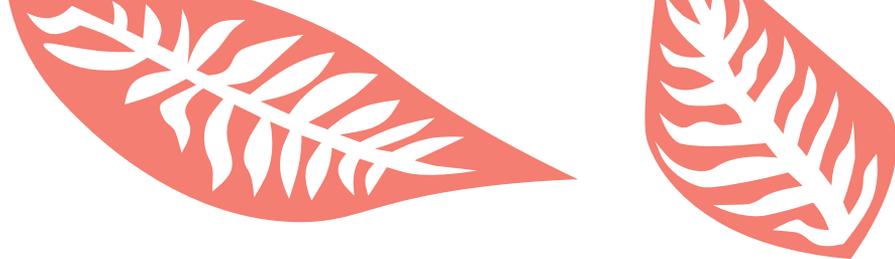
to the soft music of ice cubes
shoulder-to-shoulder in a glass of gin.





Ghosts in Headlights

Benni Rose



A Treasure of Whispers

Eric Hackler

Excerpt from a letter discovered on the beach near Hammerhead Cove in Adak, Alaska. The pages had been tightly rolled and sealed in an empty bottle of whiskey from the Brusna Distillery in Ireland. Candle wax and pitch had been pressed around the cork. Some of the text, including the date had degraded, but from what remains, I estimate the letter was written in the latter eighteenth century. No record of 'The Quenchless' nor the expeditions mentioned has yet been discovered. Below is the complete, translated text as near as could be replicated.

*-Dr. Cassandra Smith
Anthropologist, Anchorage Museum
Anchorage, Alaska*

I can only hope these words are found. Such would prove the impossible wrong and say my whisper has been heard. I cannot know in what form this reaches you, whether scrawled or uttered, and as I am most certainly dead by this time, I do not expect to be in a position to correct any errors. Though as you are here and have some semblance of my story before you, I suppose I may ignore the Captain a little longer and continue my tale.

The most important thing to know of me is that I am scared. In the physical, present world, I am drifting on the wreck of *The Quenchless*, a two-masted schooner, off the coast of some northern Pacific island. The moonlight miraculously shines through the clouds and the thin slats of my cabin walls so that I may have light to tell you my story. That is enough providence to push my pen to motion. Lacking it, I am not sure I should have the courage to write on. But as the

world allows, I am here, my pen is inked and the sky provides me with light, and thus I write my account.

My name is Nathaniel. Our journey began from Porth Navas in England. There were seven of us to start. William, Edgar, Herman, Emily, Sylvia, Jane, and myself. Of course, we were not the only ones aboard, but it was our little gang that remained close after the events of that first voyage. The Captain told me once that searching for treasure brings the kind of person who will never find it. We always want more, want to improve our find, and for that we will [never be] gratified. I cannot know if the others feel this, but it has certainly afflicted me.

Our first expedition was a success. I find no issue in stating that. We set out with what we wanted to accomplish and by the end, we had found the satisfaction we had sought. It is not hard to imagine that is why we all signed on for the second voyage. We learned such tales of each other on the first trip that we jumped at the chance to find out more and further cement the friendship. Whether we knew and denied it or were simply foolish, none of us suggested that we were surviving on water from a finite well and sooner more so than later, there would be nothing remaining to discover.

I can never forget the uneasiness in the air when we found that second treasure. Edgar and Herman felt it more than the rest, I think—though knowing what I know now, thanks to the Captain—I am more certain the paleness in

the air was due to the presence of the unearched, rust-tainted sword at our feet.

I will try to explain it to you as the Captain did to me. For most of our lives, we exist in the world of the physical. We touch real things, eat real food, love real people. But we all have moments when we pass the mark and touch the world beyond the real. And when we do that, we leave a piece of ourselves behind. It is the reason children believe all things are possible while life's veterans grumble into decades-old tankards. The Captain says to imagine a cloud of smoke moving through an empty castle. As it goes, little bits of it will break off and linger in other rooms. Wisps, imbued with intention. Harbingers of the end of fantastical eras. Some clouds have larger wisps than others. Some reach out and share themselves so rarely that they never pass on their drifts. They end up old, still believing in the impossible without the ability to attempt it. The Captain is like this. I believe I am the only thing his cloud has ever touched. I am sure he has his reasons for choosing me and I am sure he will never admit what they are.

But this story is not about the clouds. It is about the wisps. The objects and ideas left imprinted by the past. The sword we found on our second journey was one. As soon as we touched that sword on that icy, southern beach, we felt it. The anguish in its wake. The shadow of the blood it had spilt. The seemingly inevitable loss seared to its soul. I think William got it the worst. Before our first trip returned to port, he was worried about our band's departure. I will admit, I felt it much worse than I let on. Emily and Sylvia almost certainly felt it, but being of a naturally sunnier disposition than the rest of us, I feel they mostly dismissed it as an impossibility. Jane seemed not to have felt it at all. So, there we were. Standing in the sand and snow—listening to the waves and whales splashing in the distance, each letting the wispy history of that sword wash over us. That invaluable sword which no one wanted. Alone in that moment, humbled by the enormity of the bloody past, even together, we all felt abandoned.

I do not fathom I shall ever be able to articulate what those first few excursions meant to me. I had never been a full member of a crew like ours. There had certainly been times when I had worked alongside others but never as an equal. I had lived slightly over or slightly under, but always to the outside of the groups to whose ranks I most desired entry. That secret desire, more than anything else, fuels my hope—belonging. The treasure I seek most above all, and—as the Captain assures me—the one I will never attain. From here forward, you will see how I tried to hold fast to that kinship only to find my efforts pushing me undertow-like, further away. It is most likely that these very pages are seditiously working to do the same—to remove yet another vital piece from me and leave me more alone even than I am now. But that is all I can do. I have my memories to show me what is possible. And I have my hope.

“We touch real things, eat real food, love real people.”

The seas behind and before you always shine with a different color than the ones you currently sail. All the same water, but from the mindset of a treasure hunter, nothing is ever as fulfilling as what has passed before you, nothing as promising as the offer of the waves ahead. As I think back on that beach now, the colors, bleak as they were, have not faded. That was the last time we were all truly on the same journey. From that moment onward, we carried each other only in our minds and our affects.

William and I began exploring together. Our first quest took us over land from Nova Scotia. My uncle and grand-père often spoke of monsters off the edge of the sea, but it was on solid ground that William and I found ours. This time it was a ring. Not our first treasure since the sword, but the first time since we encountered a wisp of such intention. This wisp was one of love, of companionship, of trust. And yet this made me feel even sadder and more alone than the sword. Even with all the love coursing through it, this ring had been

left behind. A sword abandoned leaves a history of blood. A ring leaves loneliness.

As I write this, the Captain is naturally suggesting perhaps the ring was left so the intention imbued within it might strengthen others. He often has such suggestions, but only when the thought of changing the matter is already lost to the seas.

He is a strange man, the Captain. I did not begin sailing under him until our group had parted and I was joining crews on my own. Over the years we have made many voyages together though we have parted company on more than a few. He possessed – or is possessed by – I am not sure – an atmosphere of endlessness. When climates are at their bleakest, he reminds me of worse. Yet when the sun shines on our cause, he is the most jovial of the lot. To date, I can remember only one other time when he gave me hope when I had none. I can never remember him calm.

I cannot know if William felt the way I did about the ring at the time. I am certain he has felt it since as we both carry the memory and the physical futility of what we did to ensure the wisps' longevity. Seeking to preserve our friendship, we struck the ring in two and each took a piece. But desperation is a strong intention, and it could not be long before the memory of our adventure was the only lasting connection. The love imbued in the ring had been replaced.

It is many years since that expedition. The fragment of the ring still sits by my bed. Some days, when the moonlight hits it just exactly, the metal seems to blaze as gloriously as ever. And for a moment, I am allowed to hope that the love it was once blessed with still lives in its silver. Most days, it sits there, tarnished and dusty, a reminder of the mistakes we made. Sometimes people ask what it is. I cannot answer. I no longer know how to explain. And there is enough smoke enshrouding it already without adding more intentions to the fog.

Years passed. Countful years and countless wisps. Some taken note of, some not. It is a curious truth of most lives that we only see the profound when

we are expecting it. The Captain has told me, as he stares unblinkingly into my eyes, that the grand secret to finding the beautiful intentions of the lives others lead is to simply be open to finding them. Some are more noticeable than others.

And the final wisp of my story is the most noticeable of all. A sketch from the last time the seven of us were together. Home from our excursions and for no other purpose than to remember the journeys and to pretend for a few shining hours that we were still the strangers we once were. On that night, we created the sketch and in the seeming ages since, I have come to understand how many intentions surround the single portrait. As I sailed on my own, as I met the Captain, as he began advising me to open myself to the objects and feelings most either do not notice or deeply fear, every time a new wisp filled me, the strength of that sketch grew stronger. In that image, we had attempted the impossible: to undo the intention that sword on the beach had left us with, to win a centuries-old war against abandonment. I could not see it at the time, I am not sure any of us did. And I do not know if we do now. Maybe I was too late to realize it, maybe I am the first and the others will feel it too one day. But into that sketch we poured our companionship, our fulfillment, and our newly entwined histories. And picturing our sketch now, one thing holds true in my mind and gives me my hope. We are not condemned only to find the wisps left by others; we have the power to create them for others.

This thought has echoed through my body every day for the past year. Every hour of this derelict drifting. The thought that made me reach for my pen every day, even after the failures of the days before. But tonight, as the cold wind whistles through the shredded sails and even the planks of the ship and long mourning cries of lost gulls make me yearn for moments of the past, I have found myself standing at the edge of the map. There are monsters beyond this. And whether I am a strong enough writer to exist with them, I do not know. But I have too long been under the rope of my own fear and it has come time I take

that step and let the hope that has festered inside me all these months have its turn at the helm. I have spent my life receiving wisps. Being changed, loved, bolstered, and abandoned by their power. It is time I whispered back.

Here is my hope:

I hope that this yarn has reached you in its entirety. I hope that somehow amidst my rambles of mis-strung words, something of my intentions broke through.

I hope that whoever you are, you open yourself to my story. Having only ever been on the receiving end, I do not know if this is true, but I have never known a tale imbued with as much intention as the one you now hold in your hands and eyes and heart. An intention that you do not let your friends go. That you finish this page and immediately draft a letter to those you hold dearest—the ones who have witnessed your wisps and the ones who will understand what you mean when you tell them they have made you meaningful—and you pass the intention on to them. So that you might have the kind of enduring adventure that I was offered and passed up.

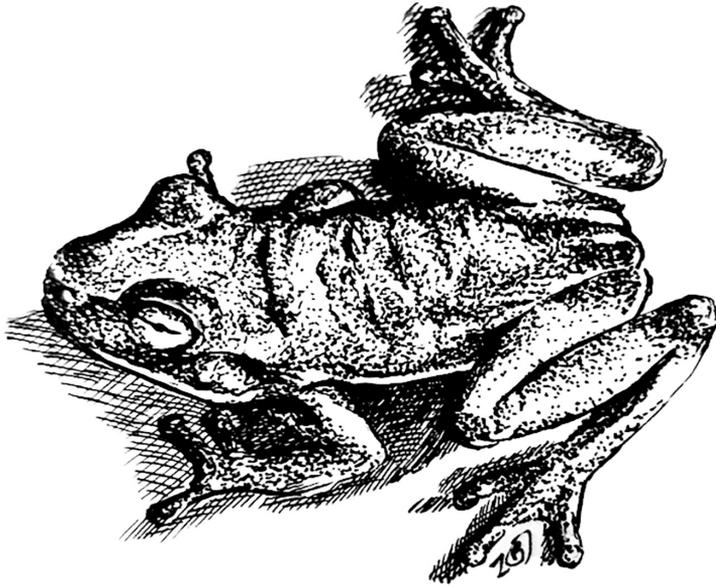
The map is full of stories and sketches and rings and swords. A life surrounded and equally full of intentions—some only echoed on the faintest wind, some screamed like a siren upon the rocks. They are unbearably easy to overlook but if you do, you may find yourself where I am, where the Captain is, alone and abandoned. Perhaps not physically. But a life not intentionally shared is not a life worth living. I only wish I had known that before I lived mine.

There are monsters beyond this. And whether I am a strong enough writer to exist with them, I do not know.

The deck of the ship is cold against my bare feet. I step towards the bow. Having bared my soul to you, clothes seem less necessary than they have in the past. The air chills its way across my skin in a disinterested attempt to pierce me, but the feeling

stops at the surface. I have too much practice at not feeling. I look down at the water and meet his eyes. The Captain, my murky reflection. Everything I love and hate, long since pulled from me and now only accessed in shards. He tells me that it cannot work, that I have wasted ink on nonsense. But tonight, I can ignore him. My tale was written by hope, not by doubt, and all the loneliness and solitude in his eyes cannot stop the intentions of my words as they are carried away around us on the whispering wind and waves.





Stippled Frog

Isabelle Bartolomeo



After a Still Moment

Charles Hollobaugh

After Eudora Welty

The snap-bang of the rifle,
like a stroke of thunder,
calls them up into the clear
evening. One, two hundred birds
rise up from the black swamp.
Their silhouettes blend together,
a mass to show Heaven's fear, and Hell's fury.
Back in the muck, under twilight's cover,
a man gathers up the body of a snowy heron.
Two more men, a preacher and an outlaw,
ride out from him.

No one watches as they leave;
no one cares.





Villages

Judy Lewis



Elegy with a Lump in Its Throat

Aliyah Cotton

Once when I was alone Once when I was nowhere & cold
an echo in the bleak midwinter swam in the windows below
Boston's frostbitten glow & the windows all longed to be a cirrus sky
 & harbor the chirrs of wind-tired birds through flooded night
 & the frost laid low on the loam & the fields all begged to be barren &
the moon to be anything but the moon & the cold longed to claim his carcass

& fertilize the fields with the knell of prayer & plant a strange thrashing crop

in hopes it'd bloom there





Bridge

Michael Wilcox

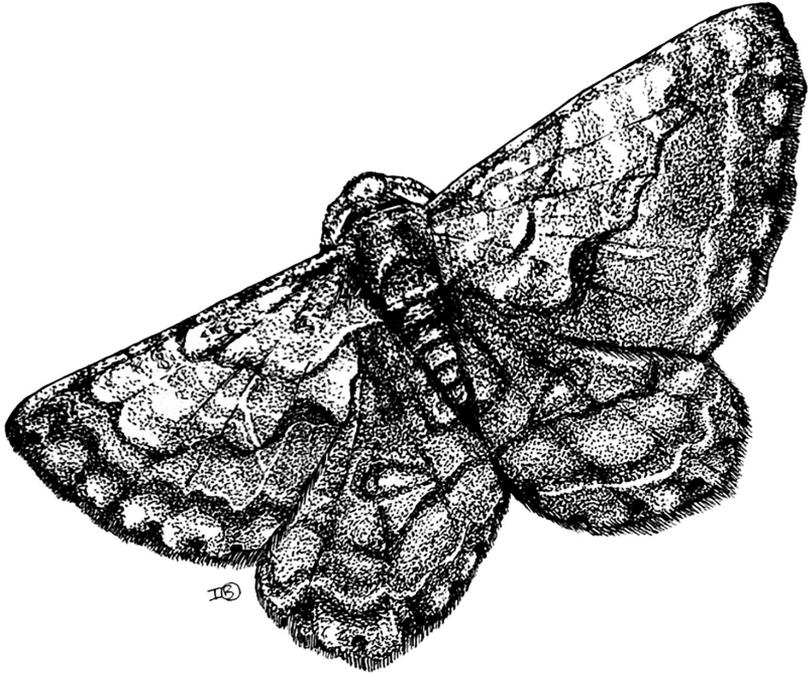


I'm eating breakfast in a cabin in Appalachia

Ashley Wagner

oppressed by the thought
that these hills rose
from the toil of the earth
nearly one hundred
million tortured years
before Saturn's rings
reeled into existence.
Eons of magma
and grasses
and strange fruit
and even stranger animals
erupting from clay,
all culminating in this
patch of ivy, this
Anthropocene nightmare,
this hunk of rye
crumbling on my plate.





Stippled Moth

Isabelle Bartolomeo



Wild Beauty Seen from the Train

Lisa Meckel

Outside the glass pleasure dome
moist spring grasses grapple the down-falling hillsides
a fevered psalm of mustard flowers
laces the high hills meddles the meadows yellow &
across the sky leaden clouds release sheets of water
down raining the dome while wind
gouges out earth's pores
water boils away deep into the soil
and over all—

colored splintered light breaks
into doubled rainbows arch across the sky
& on this train speeding north
who sees
who joys
in April's amazing maelstrom?





Ode to a Lisbon Garden

Kimberly Nunes

The way the parrot
over the pool
from thick florid trees
flew—
 then swooped
another, and now

a flurry of yellow.
Startled air and sun,
trinkets
winged and flung.

I am wild.

Another time,
behind the bar
near the changing rooms,
I came upon
their cage, a building, really,
ornate, pointy roofed,
hidden
on a tranquil lawn.

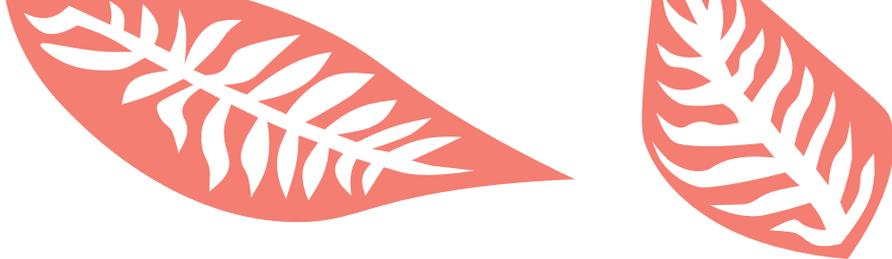
They quieted
when I approached them.
Clustered
near their ceiling,
feeding bins and warming lamps.
Eyes exacting—
on me, an opening.

You are living here.
I chirped
into their swelling
song—
sweet—our bond,
sweet as pastéis de nata
with a glass of vinho doce,
in the garden
of the Lapa Palace Lisbon,
its small sky.



On to New Beginnings

Jasmin Thames



Shots of Adrenaline

Michael Woodruff

It's the brown medicine bottle with an eye dropper. Blink. The burn in the eye. Iodine into an open wound. The prick of a thin needle. The ice in your veins competing with the cold that surrounds you.

The first time walking to school in the rain, the smell of the rich earth in the air...petrichor. The drip of water off the edges of the buildings. The hint of lit fireplaces on this cool fall morning. The heaviness of fresh cut cedar...a sweet wood surprise. Bacon and morning coffee. What could go wrong today? Nothing...absolutely nothing but the loss of innocence.

•

Your first fist fight...the fear of getting pummeled. Your classmates circle, a Roman arena, encouraging anyone's death. It's thumbs down all the way. You almost fall, not from the fight, but from the world that strangles. You feel the pressure to perform. You are on top of your friend...yes, your friend. His body is pushed into the spread of ivy...and you swing...and you swing...and you swing. The night before, you lay on the slope of the roof watching the stars until your eyelids dropped...together. Now, because of a single incident...a misunderstanding, something forgotten...you become strangers. How did this happen? It's strange how the irrational always rises above everything else.

•

Learning masturbation like it's something you invented. It's the sin that completes. You can't

believe your good fortune. You have to keep this hidden...no one can know your secret. You believe you have fallen into a twisted revelation. There's a different smell in your bed. You don't want your mother to catch you, but she's the one who washes the sheets. So how are you going to keep it from her? You find a big furry sock and you hide it. You begin to fantasize...thinking about all the girls you want to see naked. There's no way you're going to trade this experience for a belief in Jesus.

•

The first and only time shoplifting, getting caught...your clothes bulk with rock and roll CD's as you walk out of the department store. There's a surge of accomplishment...you did it, until you hear the store detective call out...*Hey you, stop!* Yes, you can run, pretending you didn't hear him. You can flip him the bird...shout obscenities. What's he going to do...shoot you? He's an old and fat man; you can run faster and farther, but instead you freeze like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. The Holy Ghost has you in a headlock. The next thing you know your mother is there. It would have been better if the cops showed up instead.

•

Throwing firecrackers into the lobby of a Walgreens drug store. It's much louder than you imagined. This was all intended to be fun...a night filled with restless energy. But try to explain that to the people going through the checkout

lines. There's a clapping echo. A scream. Your heart skips beyond its regular rhythm. You hear a siren. Damn it, a police car is in the parking lot. Everyone splits off in different directions. The police can only chase one of us...so you run... and you run...harder, until you are in an undetermined neighborhood, until there is nothing but the sound of cicadas. You used to think the sound of cicadas was the electricity flowing through the telephone wires. The street has the hum of science being born. Wisdom comes in small doses.

•

An amusement park ride that spins, going up and then quickly down; your cheeks flutter...pushing in. The wind blows your soul right out the back of your head. It lasts seconds...maybe many seconds, more than you can handle. You feel nauseous. You don't see the fun in this...the bottom drops out of your world. Your toes point down. The floor is gone. Everyone is doing it...everyone is laughing... everyone is having a good time...except you. You must try this again. You are missing something. The pin prick of white lights in the cylinder are sharp razors. Small mirrors are everywhere. You're nothing but a squiggly line.

•

A midnight horror show at the old Emporium, a gory Hammer film...*The Oblong Box*. A walk down a dark and ominous alley. The crack of gravel beneath your feet and the sound of something moving. Trash cans ting. Something you can't see is out there. You feel stalked. Locked in an attic by your friends...a joke. *Come on, guys. This isn't funny.* Then they turn off the lights. For the first time, you are aware of your own mortality. You don't want to look weak. So you sit on the stair steps near the door and wait. You are silent. Never let them hear you panic...and, whatever you do...never, never cry. You will die for sure.

•

The first time you reach between the legs of a girl you like and touch the welcome of wetness. *Oh*

my god! This is much better than masturbation. You are convinced this is the one. Only because you believe the feelings are mutual. But how can you get married when you can't even drive a car... or are too young to hold a full-time job? Love only happens when you have a vested interest in the economy. Something is definitely changing. You are more aware...have reached the age of accountability. All of a sudden the days grow longer. You notice the late afternoon shadows. They traverse the length of the driveway. With each passing day the sun grows stubborn.

•

You hear a noise...the sudden jolt of being hit by another car. The screech of brakes...or was it the skid of tires? Thor's hammer against the metal of the car. The pop of the air bag. The bitter taste of talc. You are still alive. You smell steam. Damn it, you just bought this car a month ago. It took every dime you had. This is all going to be a pain in the ass. Being alive is almost a letdown. You expected the worst...and it comes when you hear a voice say...*I hope you have insurance.*

•

From a small town, moving to the east coast, standing in the middle of the Cornell University courtyard. You don't belong here. Ivy engulfs the stone walls. The windows are opaque. The campus is strangely empty. The spiderwebs of walkways intersect the thin grass like a Kandinsky painting. The place is filled with ghosts from ancient times, silent and watching. You can see the vague white line of a Greek statue through one of the windows. You've never read the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Your glass is half full. You feel yourself lacking in something. It's an acute sense of history that grants tenure to a place like this. You have nothing but paperbacks in your library...all contemporary novels. The pages are yellowed.

•

The transition between jobs without a paycheck. You keep your cell phone with you all the

time, always waiting...always anxious...always hoping you do not get stuck in some shit job. The constant interviews...money running thin... eating ketchup sandwiches. You finally get a job... selling ads...at least that's what you think you're supposed to do, but you're not sure. The supervisor sits you at an empty desk and tells you...and I mean tells you to read the literature...not the company literature, just stacks of random magazines. You are not sure what the point is. Halfway through the day you go home. *Fuck this shit!* The first time fired, the kiss of a pig without mercy.

The feeling in your gut after being dumped by the woman you thought you loved. The promises that were made in those months of passion are now forever gone. You discover that love is the substance of things not seen...or understood. If you could see it...or understand it...you would buy it. Amazon sells everything...why not love. You'll never get laid again. You might as well become a monk. You think about giving up masturbation and truly giving your heart to Jesus this time. He stands at the door of your heart, tapping his right foot, his arms folded, just waiting for you to open the fucking door. The mulling over in your head... *What went wrong? Was it something I said? Was it something I did? Is it something I am? She'll come back. She'll come back.* Love finally tapers and heaven pends.

Sweat on a hot summer day, hiking in one of the deserts of New Mexico...Quebradas, to be exact, arroyos all looking the same. You run out of water and electrolytes, wondering if you will ever make it back to the truck alive as heat exhaustion grips your body. Not thinking straight...walking without a stitch of reason. You cross the clay scenic road where your truck is parked just twenty yards away, but you keep on going. After about a quarter of a mile, you start into a new arroyo...you stop, take inventory of the sandstone formations populating the desert...and ask yourself...*Did I*

just pass my truck or was it someone else's truck, or did I even see a truck at all?

You sit for what seems like hours...at a picnic table, sipping on a forty-four ounce cherry-lime slush at the Sonic Drive-In. When you finish the one, you order another. You look up. It's a dog day afternoon...not even the hint of a breeze, just sun and more sun. It's a fried sky. The Sonic Drive-In workers just stare at you from behind the dusty windows of the kitchen. You look desperate, sunburnt, and homeless. The workers have distant eyes. They are kids who have never fitted hiking boots and set out into the desert on a hot day. Your mind floats to the cream-colored sky above... are you dying or are you shuffling through your many rebirths? It does have the taste of second chances.

Being at the top of a 12,000-foot mountain, your legs tired, your lungs craving more than the air can provide...thinking: *How in the hell am I going to get down.* You sit with the silent others, stoic hikers, staring out over the Indio Valley below... not far from Palm Springs. The landscape looks vast and empty. *Damn straight I'm putting my name into the rusty can...I am here; I am known.* You lilt down the trail...a lazy snake, surrounded by silent rocks and laughing trees. It's a mescaline rush to the bottom. Your feet are heavy feathers. Along the way you run into the comic Paula Poundstone, her hair is dyed dark black...unnatural. She is backpacking with her son. And you think...*Well, shit!* Maybe the rumors are true.

The shock of a rattlesnake encounter on the trail. You take inventory of your luck...thirty-five fucking rattlesnakes. It's truly a miracle you've never been bitten. The Western Diamondback doesn't pursue. It only defends. At least that's what you were told by the curator at the Rattlesnake Museum in downtown Albuquerque...words you

reiterate, standing with your back to a nervous rattlesnake in Tapia Canyon, in front of other hikers...your friends, teaching them about the behavior of the Western Diamondback...but what you're really thinking is...*That son of a bitch from the Rattlesnake Museum had better be right.*

•

I like to hike stoned. It lifts the sky.

•

It's going to the emergency room because you are pissing chunks of blood and the doctor on duty tells you there is malignancy in your urine. Going home afraid. Dwelling on it...having multiple deaths. Finding out four weeks later from the urologist it's only a bladder infection. It's the day to day fear that drains. It's the feeling you get every time one of your younger friends—or family members—die, the constant reminder of your mortality. The fly about the face that refuses to go away. Death teases daily.

•

I have a dream that there is a box filled with people on the beach...all just standing there, looking up, as stiff as statues. It's a translucent box. I can see only neon edges in pink, a flare in the dusk, and a flock of seagulls converge on these people, pecking and scratching at their bodies until they disappear and there is nothing left in the box but the wet sand and footprints.

•

You wake up in the morning, your body wrapped in the damp sheets, the blur of a new day. The soft thump of guitar chords... lambent, drifting through the open window of your neighbor's house, the whisper of a song... "*Sweet little babe, oh don't you go. You're not so innocent, I know.*" You believe you are in heaven.

•

Coming to the understanding that somehow you made it. You touch your face and your chest. You

consider the texture of your skin. Everything is still warm. You touch the hair on your forearm. You take a big breath. You're a masked lamb in the middle of a field of green. You feel tested and anonymous. The color green creates calm. Each day is the brown bottle with an eye dropper. You use it. Blink. It's filled with shots of adrenaline. There are new names to encounter...new circumstances to confront. The sun is up. Your world expands. The morning is beautifully dulled, the color of egg yolk. It has the taste of fresh cornflakes.

Lyrics: *Rock Me* by *Great White*.





Ode to Mom and Pop Motels

Willy Conley



Speaking Only of Good Fortune

Alina Cantrell

adapted from Lou Gehrig's "The Luckiest Man on the Face of the Earth"

For the past two weeks **you have** been reading about a **bad break**. Yet today **I consider** myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but **kindness** and encouragement from you fans.

When you look **around**, wouldn't you consider it a privilege to associate yourself with such a fine looking men as **they're standing** in uniform in this ballpark today? Sure, **I'm lucky**. **Who** wouldn't consider it an **honor** to have known Jacob Ruppert? Also, the builder of baseball's greatest empire, Ed Barrow? **To have spent** six years with that wonderful little fellow, Miller Huggins? Then to **have spent** the next nine years with that **outstanding** leader, that **smart** student of psychology, the best manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? Sure, I'm lucky.

When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to **beat**, and vice versa, sends you a **gift** - that's something. When **everybody** down to the groundskeepers and those boys in **white** coats remember you with trophies - **that's something**. When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter - that's something. When you have a father and a mother who **work** all their lives so you can have an education and **build your body** - it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a **tower** of strength and **shown** more **courage** than you dreamed existed - that's the finest I know.

So I close in saying that **I might** have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for. Thank you.



If No One Else, I Do.

Ivy Choe

To Nella Larsen

Is this why you tugged at my hand?
Why you had pulled me into that head of yours?
Whilst, at the time, I had assumed it was of
malicious intent,
only to realize you'd
invited me out of a yearning
and out of a love,
a simple tourist into your
kaleidoscopic home.
And with what reserved blunders those
thoughts drown in,
I sometimes pity them.
Can they only take on the passive role of poignant fools?
And with that curious contemptuousness,
Am I wrong to think you've gifted my same
astuteness the permission to have you seen?
I've yet to put down the rose-tinted shades that
indent onto the bridge of my nose,
fascinated, but even then, I see you.
And I do,
If no one else,
I really do.





Eating My Daily Bread in Hell

Hannah McBride

It was a job at a greenhouse, many greenhouses lined up in the backyard of the owner's property & it was a revolting job, every day ending with a thick layer of dirt & sweat & pond scum caked onto my body & not to mention that the bathroom was a porta-potty & the hand sanitizer was expired & every male worker deliberately took the nastiest shits & never covered it with toilet paper just to watch our faces crinkle in disgust & the pay was godawful & the summer heat unbearable, a relentless cycle of hot-to-muggy like an angry ouroboros & every day was a war of the sexes forced by the men & it was rigged from the very start & I swear none of them had ever spoken to a woman before & yet despite all the shit around us, we created our own little haven the three of us & we'd get the privilege every so often of working by ourselves & it would feel like a miracle & we'd lift up the others' spirits as our own were slowly rising & we'd talk shit about those deserving of it & we discussed faith in the modern world & within the mass of spiritual pollution, we molded a covenant of understanding, free from judgement & even if we didn't understand each other, we'd be emphatic & try to, an action rarely reciprocated by those above us & we gave the emotional support denied by hookups boyfriends partners fathers mothers & ourselves & the only hate we harbored was against the rest of the world for putting us through the lives we lived & the three of us were all we had to defend against what felt like forces of evil created by the men who hated us because we bore pussies instead of their small cocks & breasts where their man-boobs were & each man there was his own breed of special, like when the boss's son showed us a picture of his newborn nephew & it was of his sister-in-law breastfeeding with only a small sliver of the baby's head in the photo, genuinely just a close up of her breasts & why did he have that photo in the first place & it felt as if he was showing off her body, not the child & in any other context it would've been a thing of beauty, a mother lovingly feeding her child for what was presumably the first time & yet because it was the boss's eldritch & immature son who showed it, the picture morphed into something disgusting & perverted in his hands & how we silently rooted for the manager's wife, a woman we had never met, but could only mourn for & the possibility that through him she suffered horrible headaches & even worse sex & how one time the boss overheard that the three of us went to a Pride festival & his first response was "who is gay" & how he spat the words out & none of us said a thing & yet secretly we knew we were all different varieties of queer, but it wasn't safe to say that aloud, too many opposing ears listening & so we were just allies & it nearly gave me a panic attack, a man in a position of authority interrogating me about my body & then the two girls talked to me & their voices were that of ancestral sisters & of a family I always knew I needed & how two of us protected the privacy of the third girl with our lives when she wasn't really in surgery for a stomach ulcer, but was getting an abortion & we played it so cool at work like agents of a secret mission to uphold the greatest form of free will & how we wrote her letters until she was well enough to come back to the greenhouses & when we sang *Happy Birthday* to the other girl, with a single donut placed on a work crate with a tiny candle & how we sang loudly despite the possible repercussions & how we held each other's hands as we wept in the park that one day & exchanged secrets we were barely comfortable speaking aloud across rows of lush greenery & the symbolism was overwhelming & how I almost cried driving away on my last day of work because even though I knew I would see those two again & again, it would no longer be an everyday occurrence & it felt as if I was losing my daily bread.



Dyshidrosis #2

Kelly Hall



This Is Not a Democracy

Micaela Williams

In this country of one,
I pledge allegiance to

myself. One body,
indivisible. Land of

my mother's pride,
I am the rocket that red

glares, the bombs
bursting in thin air.

No fifty fucking
stars. I am the star.

President and vice.
Party of one

and you're not invited.
You wouldn't like it here

anyway. You wouldn't
stay an hour.





In a Lifetime

Kelly Hall



Hip-Hop and Tree-Gazing Go Surprisingly Well Together

Owen Black

The guitar loop immediately whirs to life. Flashes of red, grey and green flood the mind as an ethereal guitar solo—originally played for the soundtrack of 1984’s *Dune*—now weaves between the booming drums of MF DOOM’s most famous track: “Rapp Snitch Knishes,” featuring Mr. Fantastik. The layered instrumental is towering, all-consuming.

While my ears take in the bliss, the North American beech, *Fagus grandifolia* stands before me, tall and proud. I crane my neck to see its peak, plunging upward into the sky. The sunlight turns the underbellies of the dark green leaves a lighter shade, creating a color gradient that is mesmerizing, entrancing.

The song continues to captivate as the two rappers ad-lib effortlessly, filling the already dizzying beat they’ve laid out for themselves. Mr. Fantastik’s melody rings out like an anthem; once you’ve heard it, you know it forever. With another look at the beech’s stately trunk, I feel like I’ve known it forever, too, albeit without knowing its name. Many a childhood backyard and public park have served as home to its gray bark. The tree is mostly smooth to the touch, lacking the peels or patterned-ridges of the surrounding growth.

Mr. Fantastik’s opening feature verse is equally smooth, inventive, and impressive. Only two lines in and he whips out the physics term “centrifugal” from his arsenal of vocabulary. It’s a wonder that Mr. Fantastik never had a career beyond this song. In fact, to this day, no one knows the identity of the spitter. His flow is full of swagger, humor, and life—he’s a joy to listen to.

Farther up the beech’s trunk, little rips litter the otherwise spotless surface, as if someone took a knife to it. These lateral tears wear the bark like stretch marks, with knots climbing high along its sturdy bole. Asymmetrical holes scatter the trunk as well, their origins unclear to the common observer. “Stamped and bona fide,” sings Mr. Fantastik. Its imperfections capture your attention, making the tree distinct from its brothers and sisters—one to remember for its foot holes and cavities.

Why did Mr. Fantastik never reveal his real name?

Leaves blow and the chorus returns, carrying you into the final verse performed by the masked villain himself. DOOM’s voice is rough, low, and muddled, contrasting Fantastik’s suave, slightly higher octave. I remain convinced that contrast is the key to good songwriting.

The beech's own distinct markings and points of contrasts are, in fact, signs of disease. Fungal infection eats away at the beech, leaving the rough patches and blossoming burls in its wake. True resilience has formed this high reaching totem, and the beech's years' long collision with adversarial forces have rendered it irreplicable, one of a kind.

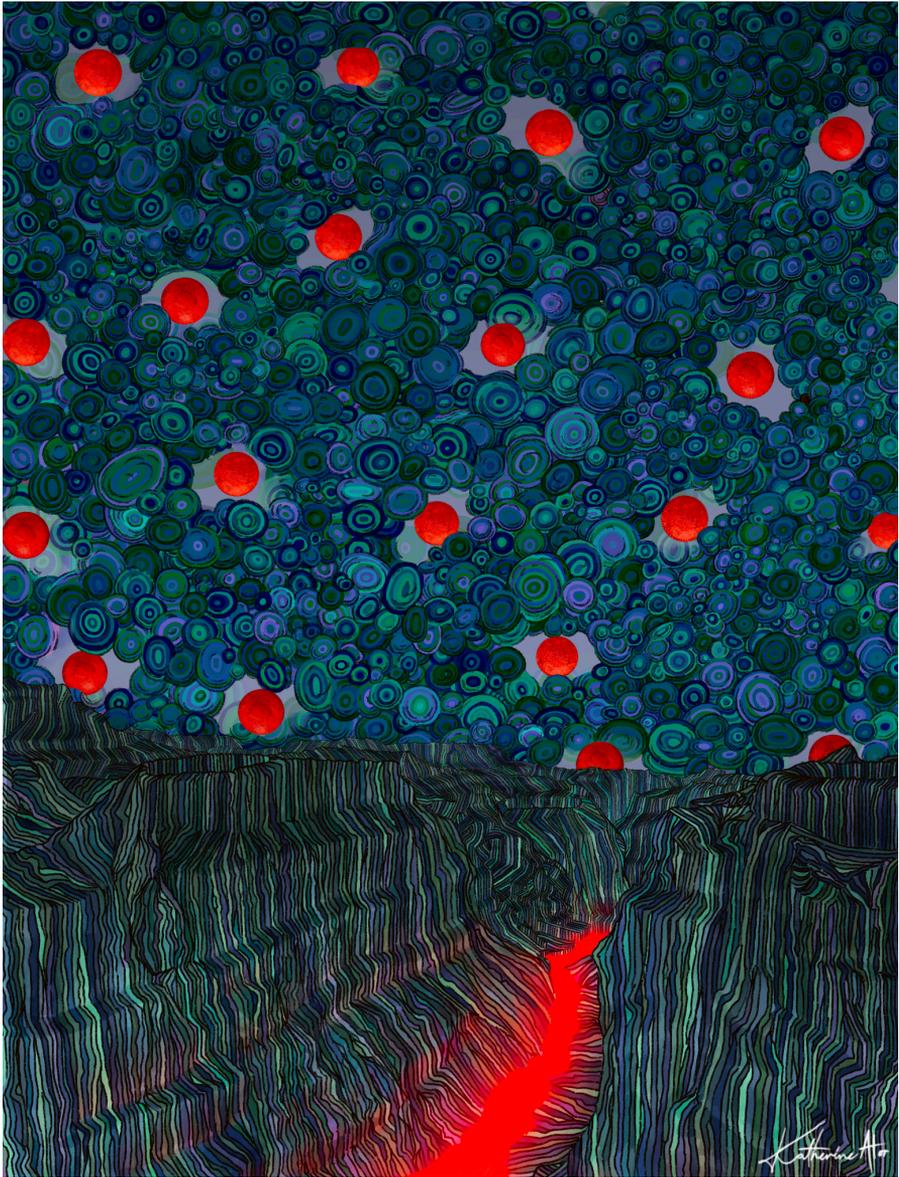
MF DOOM lays down standout bars with his signature, stream-of-consciousness wordplay, referencing everything from Tears for Fears to foreign conflict, when suddenly, mid-bar, the guitar cuts out of the instrumental. The bass line and ticking percussion keep you jamming. DOOM keeps rapping. And when the guitar finally re-enters just four counts later, the groove feels all the more glorious. Who knew taking away could give so much? You can't help but react physically to the moment, nodding your head, scrunching your face.

The flying spores of the American beech ignite sneezes from passersby. Just as countless artists today are influenced by MF DOOM's underground, cheeky genius, generations of trees will derive from the code of the American beech before me, releasing their own wind-blown pollinators into the sky, the ones that wrinkle my nose.

Thematically, Rapp Snitches discusses the state of the rap industry, those rappers who are condemned by the MCs as "snitches," having divulged just a little too much. Sonically, the track is much like the American beech—immense in stature, detailed, and unfading in its originality.

The two rappers end the song with laughter, letting the guitar carry out the remaining seconds of the track. To listen to the flows, the melody and the drums, all intertwined with that classic guitar riff, leaves the ears just short of overstimulation. And to gaze up at the American beech, basking in its shade and soaking in its legacy, leaves the heart just a little fuller than it was before.





Seen

Katie Ator



Catalogue of a Window

Lisa Meckel

The storms of winter whip up clotted skies
 create clouds leaded with lavender
all portends something ominous—
 the dominion of disruption
where the wind's made visible
 breaking down branches and trees
while clatters of icy hail hit the heavy glass
 darkness comes down
rain unleashed encircles
 every window and door—
inside I am the eye of it, the rage of it

by morning fury calms to a caress
 the hillside's stabbed
with shafts of sunlight
 now in these few easy hours
I give thanks for windows and walls
 still standing for keeping me
until I only need remember the wildness

winter's storms stop spring's great fog arrives
 the long V of the valley vanishes
hills disappear, even the great oak scrubbing
 its branches against the glass fades away
all the known now lost and I fear
 I live on a precipice of bewilderment



Dahlia, Winter 2023

Holly Willis

Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award

Leslie Harrison & Jeannie Vanasco, *co-judges*

Hannah Nathan Rosen was a rising senior English major and creative writer at Towson University when she died unexpectedly in January 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the Department of English. Both of us had Hannah as a student in her last semester at TU, and we adored her and admired her writing and her courage. It is an honor to be able to administer this prize on behalf of the college, the university, and Hannah's family.

The prize gives a financial award to a creative writing student whose work in either creative nonfiction or poetry (Hannah's two loves) is outstanding, and who has senior status. Our hope is that this award will make a gifted writer's journey and transitions after graduation a little easier.

This year's winner is Meghan Weiss.





Hearth

Meghan Weiss

If you Google house fires in the U.S., you discover that the Centers for Disease Control, U.S. Fire Administration, and the National Fire Protection Association estimate that each year in the United States there are an average of 358,300 house fires. Today, my house became a part of those statistics.

And all I can think about is what house fires have to do with the Centers for Disease Control.

•

This morning my first thought was the events of yesterday. Of the fire that consumed my family home, destroying all of our belongings. The fire that could have killed my dogs and my parents had they been home. The fire that engulfed the house at record-breaking speed, disintegrating everything in its wake.

I felt like I was in that house. Lying on my childhood bed as thick smoke filled my lungs. While flames licked at my feet, climbing up my ash-covered sheets.

But I wasn't there—I was fifty-six miles away in the safety of my apartment, not choking on smoke, but on the salt of my tears.

•

When I was six, my brother and I would race up the stairs of that house trying to reach our parents' room first in order to claim the better spot for story time. We would cuddle up to our mom, getting cozy in her cushiony bed, and listen to her read until we fell asleep.

Our dad would carry us back to our rooms down the hall. I would wake up each time but feign sleep in his arms, making my body limp, hoping he wouldn't notice, but he always did.

Their bed is now nothing more than a pile of scorched and splintered wood with metal springs protruding from the blistered material that was once their mattress. The hallway is singed and collapsing. The books she read are crumpled ash on a mutilated shelf. Looking at it now, you wouldn't know they were ever there in the first place.

The memories are burnt into my brain just like the remnants of the house itself.

I reached a breaking point today. I feel bad for what triggered it.

A friend from high school reached out, asked how I was doing. He told me that he was praying for me. I know he meant it to be comforting, but it had quite the opposite effect.

I do not understand how prayer is seen as supportive or able to fix anything in this situation. Asking some unknown deity in the sky to bless me will not alter the past. It will not raise the splintered beams and crumbled walls, put them back together into the house it previously was.

It will not replace the infinitely burning hole I carry in my chest.

Prayer will not bring me the peace I desperately want, or need.

“I began to blend in with the surrounding soot, my body covered in sweat from marinating in the stale breezeless air.”

All I can do is thank him for his support and try to hold back my frustrated tears until I hear the click of the call ending.

•

I am having a hard time believing that was the last time I will ever have stepped foot into that house. I am struggling to grasp the fact that it is now nothing more than a broken frame coated in soot encasing the remnants of everything I once loved.

I do not think I will ever be able to comprehend that the fire truly occurred.

•

I remember early this past summer, I was driving with my mom to Target. She was telling me about her new job at the fire department as the CPR coordinator.

In hindsight, it is suffocatingly ironic that our house would be engulfed by flames only months after she started working for the people who are supposed to stop them.

She told me about a house fire she responded to and how the neighborhood did not have any fire hydrants, making it nearly impossible to extinguish the torch that formerly was a shelter.

I remember the tension of anxiety in my stomach as I pointed out that our neighborhood didn't have fire hydrants either.

Looking back, I feel as if that conversation manifested the destruction of our home.

My dad is sorting through the rubble of the house today. He texted me saying my favorite stuffed animal, a penguin named Juan, did not survive the fire.

I replied, “It's okay Dad. Penguins are meant to live in the Arctic, not in an inferno.”

He was not amused.

Today I went to see the house for the first time.

I had to wear a construction mask, industrial gloves, and knee-high rubber boots in order to walk inside.

It felt fitting somehow that the clothes on my body were foreign to me as I trudged through the alien remains of my former home.

Sorting through the debris of my room, I knew nothing could be salvaged.

But I remembered a necklace my late grandfather gave me, which my younger self stashed in the back of my closet years prior. For 20 minutes, I tore apart everything concealing it from me.

“It felt fitting somehow that the clothes on my body were foreign to me as I trudged through the alien remains of my former home.”

I began to blend in with the surrounding soot, my body covered in sweat from marinating in the stale breezeless air. Finally, I unearthed the length of muted gold.

It is now my sole keepsake from my lost bedroom.

•

My parents are moving into their rental house today. It resembles a dollhouse with its walls painted in hideous pastels.

My dogs were ecstatic to see me, refusing to leave my side as I carried the few belongings my parents still had into their new bedroom.

It only took fifteen minutes to transport everything.

I didn't want to leave them, but I had no choice. I had a class in a few hours.

•

Today is two weeks since the fire.

I am beginning to wonder if this will be my new method of timekeeping.



Deer Hunter's Dawn

Willy Conley



More Hungry

Aliyah Cotton

In deep summer
caught in the silk
of magnolia breath
and sweet lure
of mango kush
the sprawling heat
nulls
and the sun plays
hopscotch
on red brick walls
and the thick air
grows
more hungry
and all the place turns
from light to lust
and the day
runs silently on



Antigonish

Rick Wallace



Self-Portrait as Failed Eggshell Walker Holding One Strip of Cold Bacon

Rita Mookerjee

I remind myself that I can't
lay claim to the dead any more
than I can tame the wind but
even so I crack my neck on
the street when I think I spot
the ghost whipping my head
as if slapped. I work myself up
& pound old fashioned trying
to enjoy a garnish of thick cut
bacon but its wetness is bizarre
& puts me off the same way I put
the ghost off with my demands
my diva my relentless mouth.
I only ever smother. When you
smother a ghost he doesn't die
he just gets pissed off & floats
away to cities where he knows
I won't follow because for all
my love of bourbon & rye
I'm just another coastal elite
audacious drunk & arrogant
deluded into dreaming of
some reprieve from shoebox
studio apartments & solo
new year's eves. If this sounds
selfish that's because it is.





Grocery Shopping At 10 a.m. On a Monday

Michael Ansara

Prowling among aisles
alone, I think
of my father, betrayed
by his hobbled heart,
bitterly
gentle with his world reversed,
shopping
for a few groceries
that he would refuse
to cook—
another selfish, self-defeating
gesture, since
he was an artist with a pan
and his wife,
who now earned all the money;
once could paint,
but never could cook
as well as he,
and, as it was only the two of them,
he was punishing himself
as well—pushing
that almost-empty
cart; he must have known
he had a gift
denied,
story of his life,
while, heavy-lidded,
he quietly eyed
women in their plaid slacks,
thinking
he could have brought pleasure
into lives as empty
as the shelves holding
the books
he should have written.



Daily

Annie Tamini



Acme

John Bennett

I like when the bird paints a tunnel
on the mountainside, dark as an aster,
but love—love is the faith of a coyote
that knows the landscape well, yet
throws itself again and again against
stubborn rubble.

I question the caution of poultry
sprinting unflinchingly between cliffsides,
but courage—courage is the guts to scribble
a sign while your rocket-skates putter
mid-jump.

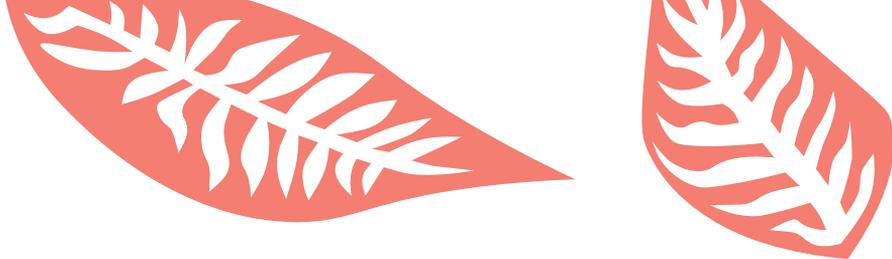
I sense a traveler grows weary of a place
offering strictly sand and dust,
but frustration—frustration is spite
in a sweaty wool suit, jumping up
and down on a malfunctioning catapult.

Bravo the fowl that one-ups by alarming
from behind with onomatopoeia,
because revenge—revenge is never a dish
at any temperature, but a train forever
hunting through a mountain, waiting
for someone to draw it a tunnel.



Hello Sparrow

Rebecca Wesloh



Home Truths

Haleigh Yaspan

Life is tremendously unfair, often to my benefit but sometimes not. I'm waiting for my lunch at what I assume is a new French Canadian-inspired restaurant in my hometown, or maybe it's a year or two old, but it certainly wasn't there last time I was.

When I was little, my father tried to explain wealth inequality to me with a bewildering display involving a bevy of jellybeans strewn around the dining room table. The man never taught me anything on purpose.

It is disturbing to me that this memory is so vivid in my mind and yet I can recall so little of my brother as a child. It's chilly outside, and the restaurateurs have fortified their position with thick, velvety curtains you have to wrestle aside and walk through after the door closes behind you, a barrier between the wintry inflow and the interior of the restaurant that probably works just fine if you're not seated right next to the door, which I am. For a couple minutes I quietly hate every new person who swings the door open, and then I relax enough that I'm content to be upset with the crisp, visceral detail with which I remember perfectly inconsequential car rides and exams while the precious edges of heavy memories fuzz and blur.

What I do remember: he was never at ease, never still. Relatives have told me my infancy was met with exhausted relief from everyone who had suffered my brother's restlessness, his fits to be held, his whimsical pickiness about whose presence

would soothe him and whose would drive him to apoplexy.

I was two midterms and a final project away from being finished with college when our parents inexplicably relocated to the city, leaving me and Frankie to look after our suburban childhood home. In the car on the way to Shane's house I drove over a little bit of brush in the road and my brother in the passenger seat muttered something about the suspension, not making eye contact, and when I declined to acknowledge him, he fell silent. Frankie had offered to drive himself, the car being more or less his, but I reminded him that I was only stopping by on my way to meet Pearl.

"Not too far up the driveway," he whispered. I huffed toward the front door.

He had mellowed considerably in recent years, for which I was deeply thankful. Adolescent Frankie was a sallow, volatile creature prone to truancy and intemperance. As part of my coming of age, I guess, I was starting to come to terms with the reason why I could call what Frankie went through a period of instability, or even something that he went through, something that happened to him, and not something he did. It was a luxury not afforded to most in those circumstances. As I said: tremendously unfair.

For the most part, I had vibrated at a more consistent frequency.

Shane's house, in which he lived alone, was two stories, three bedrooms, one-point-five bath-

rooms. The somewhat dubious story was that he had inherited the house from a relative and my father had handled the succession of ownership as a favor to the executor of this alleged relative's will. Parents tend to overinvest in the gullibility of their children. You can blame hope or maybe exhaustion.

We were as spritely as ever, though. We let ourselves in like it was our own house, and it might as well have been for how much more comfortable we were there. Without breaking his stride on his way to the stairs, Frankie peeled off his coat and tossed it haphazardly onto the couch. I sat down beside it, quite thoroughly bundled up myself. I was on my way to meet Frankie's girlfriend, Pearl, at the studio she frequented. She had been insisting for months that I join her sometime, and I had finally run out of excuses to decline.

I could hear Frankie and Shane murmuring overhead. They were sort of an odd duo; they hadn't started off as friends in their own right. I gathered over time that Frankie had been friendly with Shane's brother in his wilder days. He had occasionally stayed in the city with the two of them when he wasn't at home or at large. I had known Shane for a couple weeks before Frankie got drunk enough to let it slip that his brother was in prison, that his being locked up was part of what had delivered Frankie back to our family. I wasn't sure how much more I wanted to know.

Honestly, I didn't even know his name. Shane never talked about him, not to me at least, and Frankie never slipped up like that again. I knew I could have unearthed that and more by just casually poking around a bit, but I dared not gaze long into that abyss.

I did marvel at his ability to compartmentalize, to cordon off the grief, or however he managed it—this before I knew what it meant to lose a brother. In retrospect I had come close enough, I guess, a few years earlier, but somehow I had never fully processed the idea that he was in real danger.

Actually, in the early days, Shane kind of got on my nerves, and in a way it sometimes felt like he was toying with me. Like when I mentioned that I had an exam coming up and he asked, perfectly pleasantly, if I used to think my brother would go to college. I bit my tongue to stop myself from asking him the same question.

I had an unlabeled Blister Pack of medicated lozenges peeking out of my coat pocket from a cold whose symptoms had abated in the past few days. I rustled my keys in the other pocket. There was something wonderfully solid about the home and Shane's attachment to it. I had been bouncing back and forth between my off-campus apartment and my parents' house for months. I was never in one place for more than two weeks at a time. I thought this arrangement was kind of refined and cosmopolitan at first, but over time it started to wear me down. Thankfully, the end was in sight, although I still wasn't quite sure where I would ultimately land.

I had not yet stayed overnight there, but it still felt homey. I would come over when I could and being in that house would make me feel substantial and free. Shane kept it more or less blank, like a template, and I wasted no time projecting myself onto it. Given the chance, I would have trussed it up with inviting but muted accents: painted unscented candles never intended for use, monochromatic embroidered curtains, decorative towels. Just daydreaming. I thought how nice it would be to drink my morning coffee curled on the nook against the bay window in the living room. Perfectly normal, I thought. I wasn't a child. I was free to be where I pleased.

When my parents told me about their involvement in Shane's relocation, they made it sound very routine, not like they had dragged him out of hell, which would have been an easy enough story to sell to an uninitiated observer.

My hair was still damp from a rushed shower. I leaned back against the couch, suspending a wet curtain of hair absently and enjoying the fullness

of the sound produced by its slapping against the couch. I could hear the boys arguing above me—or, rather, I could hear Shane arguing. Frankie rarely raised his voice anymore, it being in our blood to overcorrect.

“What am I supposed to do with that?” A short pause. “Now, now you know—!” It was odd to hear someone yelling cut off by something inaudible. I couldn’t hear anything else for a long while, and then one of them snort-laughed but I couldn’t tell who. Then the door creaked and Shane was halfway down the stairs by the time Frankie left the room, his footsteps heavy and measured.

He called out brightly when he saw me, which was a good sign. I couldn’t help my smile but I didn’t speak right away because I was flipping the shrinking lozenge around, clinking it against the interior of my teeth.

The three of us talked about the snow, about how much better life would be if we had a dog and about firewood—mundane enough. Reluctantly, I tore myself away.

It was about a week before Valentine’s Day and, in a distinctly unromantic move, the studio’s owner had granted an anatomically accurate sculpture of a human heart pride of place on their most prominent display shelf. Like real love, real hearts are grotesquely mortal.

Pearl saw me looking. “Atherosclerosis,” she said, shaking her head forlornly. “Sad.”

She moved so easily around the studio. It was just as I would have dreamed it up, almost too indulgent to be real. I envied her, so quietly sure of herself and her talents. There was no mess for her, just unmolded clay and steady hands and artistic objectivity.

I expected close attention to the task at hand, intense concentration, but her movements were fluid, almost tender. She was slowly coaxing a sculpture of a woman that she told me she had

been working on for months into her desired form, smiling faintly, utterly at ease.

I tried to mirror her carefree approach in miniature. Because I lacked the skill and technique to back it up, however, my sculpture was—not to put too fine a point on it—ungodly. We looked at it sitting there, lumpy and deformed, on a platform that had served as quite a literal stepping stone for the work of so many talented artists over the years. We looked at each other. Back at the lump.

“It is distinctly Gormleyan,” Pearl said with faux gravity, frowning slightly.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “Exactly that.”

“Did you by any chance draw inspiration from the abstract expressionist tradition that dominated the New York art scene in the mid-twentieth century?”

“Absolutely. You bet.”

“The unpredictable, inconsistent texture of your piece speaks to and, in a way, reifies our social quest for unity and oneness in an increasingly fractured global landscape.”

“I assure you that was completely intentional.”

I picked Frankie up on my way home. He asked how sculpting had gone and I said it was alright but I didn’t figure I could make a career out of it. He just laughed.

Frankie kept his concern for me close to the vest for reasons that are probably obvious. When he had picked me up from Shane’s house a week earlier, we sat in silence on the way to the train station. That was the routine into which we had fallen. Before we saw the lights from his car rounding the corner, I would stand in the shadow behind Shane’s house, tilted against the rain gutter, a damp cigarette between my teeth, and it would feel like no one had ever been so young and unready.

Once, he finally asked how long I'd be gone for this time. I told him I wasn't sure, which was the truth. I dimly realized that I was meant to think of it the other way around, like I was gone when I was spending time there with him.

He asked if I thought either of my parents would ever move back to the house I grew up in. I had been thinking about it, too, about the suburbs where they had planted us in the first place.

"I doubt it. Their apartment has a doorman, so."

"They're living in this same apartment?"

"Of course."

"Aren't they divorced?"

I laughed. "What? No."

"I was almost positive they were divorced." We were both laughing.

"No, they're, ah—they're very happy with each other."

We said goodnight on the back steps before the car came to take me away.

"Say your prayers," I muttered.

"What on earth would I pray for?" He was smiling impishly—always such a scamp like that.

After I graduated from college, I couldn't believe how different our lives were. When we were together, Shane and I got along so well and so easily that it never occurred to me how severely our paths had diverged. With a bit of distance, judging us against external institutions and standards, our superficial similarities were less of a balm.

I was already at the airport when my graduation ceremony commenced, on my way to spend a breezy week roaming San Sebastián. Frankie and I had conceived of it two months earlier: Shane said no to Frankie and yes to me. It was sort of a celebration for me, sort of an artist's retreat for Pearl, sort of a gift from my parents. We arrived

via Heathrow, where my brother and his girlfriend sat slumped over their luggage, awake but barely, and I tore an almond croissant to pieces with vague, useless apprehension. The security line had the air of a high school gym, big and bright and somehow stuffy and suffocating nonetheless, a mess of byzantine ropes, contradictory signage, and muddied, speckled tiling.

Six hours before we planned to arrive at the airport for our return flight, Frankie and Pearl bought a breakfast of sorts from a cafe near the hotel, cured ham and spelt-flour rolls and shots of espresso in demitasse to-go cups, and ate it on the roof of the cultural center in the heart of town. We left separately. I wanted to spend more time near the beach and Shane, bafflingly, declared himself to be afraid of heights.

"Like real love, real hearts are grotesquely mortal."

I have an enduring mental image of Shane on a distressed white bench, its paint speckled and worn, overlooking the water. It was situated on a three-by-five stretch of concrete atop the grassy hill, a few yards down a gentle slope from the empty castle. I stood in front of him, my arms stretched out and my hands resting on the railing, and watched locals tread the length of the boardwalk far below us, at ease in the early-summer air, breezily accustomed to the fluidity with which the waterline blended into the city, sand gave way to pavement, or vice versa. The cliffs were mossy and geometric in the distance. We were comfortably removed. There was an air of perfect contentment I had experienced perhaps only once before in my life, and again I felt the sweet, undisturbed sensation of objectivity, of being oneself in full and with comfort, as neither subject nor director.

"No more college, huh? That's great. No more exams."

"Don't make fun of me."

“I’m sorry. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

I turned back to look at him. He already looked wistful.

We wandered up the boardwalk, turned and trailed along the cliffside. We moved in and out of shops, supermarkets and clothing stores, and an artisanal light fixture shop. We bumped into each other in a tiny jewelry store. A petite, full-figured woman with cropped, shiny auburn hair welcomed us bilingually. I thought her sharp black suit seemed out of place in a beachside shop. She was wearing an opalescent bib necklace with intricate metalwork. She rested her hand lightly on my elbow as she spoke to me, radiating warmth and promise.

“For our men we have the chains and the handcuffs,” she intimated with a wink. Bewildered, I looked over her shoulder at Shane, who tapped his wrist and mouthed “cufflinks.”

I was enamored to the point that the prospect of giving up everyone else, of monogamy and mutually assured devotion seemed like no sacrifice at all, but rather a sweetly indulgent casting off, unburdening, that I would have been glad to make. But that was a long time ago.

Shane left town, and then I left, and then Frankie and Pearl found themselves living together in her apartment on the outskirts of the city, quite happily from what he told me when I called. And then he was backsliding. I don’t know why. Sometimes that’s how it happens. She kicked him out; I can’t blame her. You have to be pretty low for Pearl to say she can’t be around you anymore. He didn’t last long at home. I had wanted to fly out after he moved, just to check on him, but I had to wait for a big storm to pass and then it was too late.

Pearl sent me flowers. She had written on the card: “May his memory be a blessing.” Poignant, thoughtful... a bit high-minded? But it was a

nice sentiment that deserved use, and I certainly couldn’t think of a better one. My father once told me that grace requires no justification—he meant grace on my part, not his, as people who say those sorts of things often do. But some people are so easy to be around it’s hard not to be suspicious. She signed with a large heart and an uppercase “P.”

I took a picture of the flowers for her, which turned out to be quite striking: the soft, fingerlike petals of brilliant white lilies, the marble counter-top, white walls in the background, and the lush, complementary greenery. An artist always knows.

My parents were angry with her, but I think she did her best. Certainly it is beyond my abilities to pin down exactly what we owe to one another. Was I supposed to send her flowers, too? Surely there’s a hierarchy: grieving widow, of course. A surviving child? Perhaps. What if you’re the grandchild? Maybe. Maybe it’s just roses and lilies all the way down?

Last I heard she had accepted a striking emerald engagement ring from a chef of some repute. If I wasn’t quite happy for her, I at least hoped she was happy.

The way people talk about this sort of thing—“building a life together.” What is a life, then? Furniture bought all at the same time? Children? Shane as dad, Frankie as an uncle? I had tried not to wonder which one of them would break my heart first.

It was tempting to imagine myself married to Shane. The idea of us raising a family together in that house seemed redemptive somehow. Perhaps that could have been the merciful stability I didn’t realize I was craving.

After we returned from San Sebastián, I stayed at Shane’s house for a few days. When my presence was not an event, but a baseline condition, I saw things differently. He kept the cabinets as sparsely populated as he could manage day to day. I never saw him raise the blinds in the morning, so if I

didn't think of it the whole place was always a little more faintly lit than necessary. It was unnatural. He wasn't comfortable. He was cornered.

I asked him how he felt.

"Futureless. Is that a word?"

"I don't know." (I looked it up later. It is.)

I couldn't pretend to believe that he would find fulfillment there. I wanted him to stay anyway. Such is the selfishness of youth.

I don't remember exactly what he said. I kind of wish I did, but mostly I know it doesn't matter. He made it quite clear that he was leaving me, specifically, which sounds almost laughably cruel, but in that moment I was mature enough to see it for what it was: an acknowledgement of grim, constricting importance from a man whose future lay elsewhere. Frankie got a little angry on my behalf when I told him, but his heart wasn't in it.

It was a cosmic fluke that lent us common ground in the first place. Not a good foundation for a life together, I have to say. I wasn't really even heart-broken by the prospect of his absence from my life, going forward. I felt sort of breezy about it all, cool and inevitable. I thought about the cliffs in the distance. I stuck around for a few more months, and then I found a job five hundred miles away and I set off on my own, too.

Five years later I'm eating poutine as an impromptu lunch alone at the Quebecois eatery that opened in what used to be his home. The new decor looked fashionably well-preserved. It had the fabric of an in-house museum, a living museum for an invented past to which I could understand an urge to cling. Nostalgia is a moving target. Nothing changes. Nothing can be how you left it. Gold curtains embroidered with equidistant fleur-de-lis, an ornately decorated bar cart. Off-white dishes centered around unscented candles. I hadn't the stomach to ask what had become of the top floor. Raspberry sauce from a post-prandial crumble ran thinly down the curve of an

elegantly ergonomic boat-shaped dish set upon a tea towel of the decorative sort that my mother had kept slung over the handle on the oven door growing up. The branded silverware was warm and heavy between my fingers.

I turned the wrong way down the street as I left the restaurant, toward the semi-isolated forest of obscure ownership to which my brother and I had escaped as children. I felt a wave of proto-nausea walking through the trees, with effort superimposing a vision of my boyish brother cross-legged upon a clean-cut stump. He was slumped over at the waist, chin in his hands. Without any real intention, I crushed a handful of desiccated leaves and a ladybug ran across my knuckles. I tried to coax my hands into staying still enough to light a cigarette. I remembered him pushing his head up with the tips of his fingers, saying he had felt comfortably rootless in San Sebastián. I would have been hard-pressed to say where I was grounded.

I wondered how much of my own memory I had exercised through plain inaction, where I had met a lack of context with sweeping dismissal. Puffs of smoke intermingled with visible breath.

The last time I spoke with him in person, I asked if he thought he and Pearl might get married, might have kids. I had been thinking a lot about families, the life cycle, reproduction. I said I couldn't really picture him as a dad, but I suppose that's normal for a man who isn't one, and most of them end up figuring it out.

(Okay, that part isn't necessarily true. One time I was on a city bus in a foreign country—okay, it was Canada—and this enormous, exhaustively tattooed guy was fuming because it was crowded enough that some people had to stand and an elderly man was sitting down. This guy boarded with his kid and a middle-aged woman gave the kid her seat pretty much immediately, but the guy kept ranting loudly to no one in particular about this perfectly inoffensive old man, about respect, manners, and society. Some men think the awesome responsibility of fatherhood requires

no introspection, no maturation, just a vague re-direction of their combative puerility toward the ostensible care of their children. The mind reels.)

The point is that I was nervous and rambling.

“You can never know what the relationship between two people is like unless you’re one of them. Sometimes not even then.” And it’s true. I could barely understand them in singularity.

I wanted to tell him that I loved him more than I could say or justify, that my heart was heavy with feeling and premature worry.

“You may have lost the plot,” I murmured. He nodded absently. I couldn’t tell what was going through his head. I never could. I wanted another cigarette—fiendishly.





The Yellow Warbler and The Cowbird

Naomi W. Rodgers



This Year Nothing is Junk

Laura Vitcova

“Keep only those things that speak to your heart.” — Marie Kondo

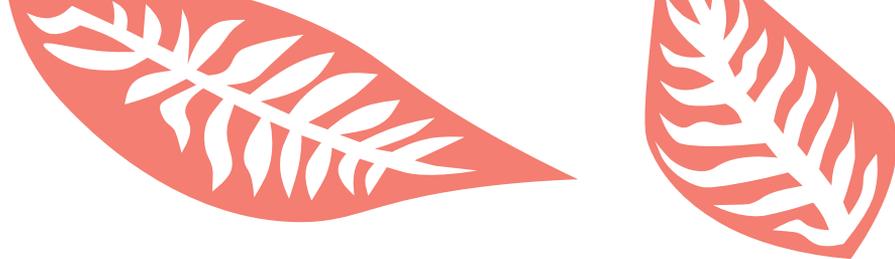
Feel certitude washing through...rolling over little fingers in the surf...But what if the little fingers are drowning? Hold each object and listen to what sparks joy and then let go of what doesn't. But what if the wanting suffocates joy so that joy can't answer back? What if what sparks joy is a miniature glass dog with raised black spots who is sad? What if the child is gagged and could never say in the first place what it wanted? What if a miniature glass pink poodle plays with the miniature glass Dalmatian and they're in a pose frozen? What if I am the child who weeps for the pink that never was, the mud, and the afterschool specials? What if sparking joy is too dangerous because the smell of gasoline still gets me high? What if no one taught me how to love so my chest is filled with razor blades? What if what comforts on nights when the stars are too bright is a joy that feels like a dagger? What if special and sad occupy the same space and the thorax shaking is just where music meets what's bruised, and it's ok? What if he never really wanted me but a small coat of dirt feels warm? What if the rock picked up by the sandy haired boy as a token of affection still sits on my desk and not the beach, caresses like an anticline and bends time like froth?





Swipe I

Annie Tamini



A Brief History of the Insurance Company Wars

Adam Matson

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, television was the only thing people cared about. Nothing else mattered at all. The only way to capture an American's attention between, say, 9/11, and the eventual end of all things, was to show them something on a screen--which is why television became the battlefield in the great War of the Insurance Companies.

Future historians studying America through the medium of television might conclude that the world was a terrifying and dangerous place, rife with uncertainty. Americans were told they needed to protect themselves against everything: life, death, sickness, injury, accidents, destruction of one's home, car, or other property. The only way to guarantee safety was to throw gobs of money at various corporations every month, in case the worst should happen. And as the insurance companies constantly reminded everyone--the worst could happen. At any time. Anywhere. To you.

The Players

Various factions battled for dominance in the television landscape. The most insidious, perhaps, was Progressive Insurance, whose commercials featured a hyper-irritating spokesperson named Flo, squeezed into a white apron, like the Pillsbury Doughgirl, endlessly explaining to everyone around her what should have been obvious: they needed Progressive Insurance. What began, arguably, as a highly selective, sexually fetishized marketing campaign for people who secretly

harbored dominance fantasies, Flo soon appeared hundreds, even thousands of times per day, cracking the metaphorical whip across the ball-gagged backs of ignorant insurance consumers. Hedging its bets, Progressive doubled down with mustachioed know-it-all Dr. Rick, a fake self-help guru responsible for preventing unsuspecting homeowners from turning into their parents. The preachy nature of these dual false prophets bled with religious undertones, perfect for a nation that had fallen under the spell of bloviating cult leaders like Rush Limbaugh, and the Reverend Donald Trump.

The recurring character motif established by Progressive spawned legions of aspiring usurpers. Allstate introduced Dennis Haysbert, the baritone actor from the action series *24*, whose voice, so deep it could not possibly deceive, assured everyone that they "were in a good hands." But Allstate quickly learned that people did not want to watch a reasonable man explaining the dangers of life. People wanted blood and guts, just like the rest of television. So Allstate wiped out Haysbert, and replaced him with Dean Cain, better known to the world as "Mayhem." Mayhem was the voice of chaos, the injury or destruction so random and obscure it could not possibly be avoided--except by calling Allstate.

Not to be confused with Allstate, State Farm, a rival corporation, introduced Jake (Jake from State Farm), a hipster millennial with a cool hair-

cut and all the answers. Young people, State Farm believed, didn't want a former Catholic-school sexpot, or a washed-up actor, telling them to protect themselves. They wanted a best friend/boy-friend type. Because even though millennials as a generation had virtually no disposable income, they were encouraged to plunge even further into debt, with monthly payments to an insurance conglomerate. Just like real adults.

Not to be confused with State Farm, Farmers Insurance used J.K. Simmons, an actor famous for being bald and witty, to pitch disaster prevention to a curiously unspecified demographic. Was this the insurance company for rural farm-dwellers? For people who looked kind of like your dad? No one knew. Perhaps this was why Farmers crafted their commercials to resemble university classroom instruction. College, it seemed, was where one paused, on the way to adulthood, to learn about insurance.

The inanest insurance company spokes creature was the LiMu Emu, a real and/or animatronic and/or computer-animated giant flightless bird, surrounded by insane people peddling Liberty Mutual Insurance. The less said about this sick exploitation of a dumb but innocent animal, the better.

The giant of the Insurance Company Wars, the Stalinist Soviet behemoth, the Third Reich, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, McDonald's, and the snake from your childhood nightmares, all rolled into one, was Geico. Geico brought the heavy artillery, carpet-bombing television with a full-on blitzkrieg of advertising. The average hour of television contained 26 minutes and 18 seconds of Geico commercials, eclipsing every other product on earth, even automobiles and pharmaceuticals. Geico's marketing covered the full span of evolution, from early commercials featuring cavemen, to the disturbing inevitability of a talking lizard. All of human existence, it seemed, led from the dawn of man, to a future of complete coverage, where the average consumer was reduced to nothing more than a little green reptile with a smart-ass mouth.

Together, these, and countless other, insurance companies ruthlessly stampeded across the airwaves, trampling millions of helpless viewers. Countless innocent victims might have survived this capitalistic holocaust, were it not for the collusion of the only other significant magnet of American attention, football.

Football

Football was a raw, savage sport, with a needlessly complicated rule book, where physically gifted young men gradually murdered each other for the entertainment of millions of Americans. As a disturbing number of medical studies began to show, football was not only dangerous on the field, but destructive to the minds and bodies of the players in their off-field lives. Football players, tragically, could not leave the maniacal violence of the game where it belonged--on television--and ran amok across American society, leaving in their wake a rash of girlfriend assaults, car accidents, suicides, and, at least in the case of New England Patriots' tight end Aaron Hernandez, multiple homicides.

What better sport to encapsulate spontaneous and unpredictable violence? The insurance companies charged in. Every American football game broadcast between The Rise of Hulu (a separate history not detailed here), and the End of Time, featured a barrage of insurance commercials. Before the game, after the game, during halftime, between every change of possession, during increasingly gut-wrenching on-field injuries, during time-outs, coaches' challenges, and booth reviews, insurance commercials infiltrated the eyes and souls of the viewing public. The two-minute warning, conjured by the National Football League in cahoots with basically the entire capitalist machine, stopped the game for no reason other than to insert more insurance commercials. The restructuring of television--and society--was good news, however, as Geico was quick to remind everyone, because now you could save up to 15% on car insurance.

Many insurance companies launched an offensive, blurring the already-opaque line between

television and reality. State Farm conscripted NFL quarterbacks Aaron Rodgers and Patrick Mahomes--the seasoned, battle worn veteran, and the straight-outta-bootcamp, born-to-kill green-horn--to peddle their wares. Now viewers were left with the existential conundrum of watching a man playing a sport on television, who then appeared to be somewhere else entirely in the next moment, selling insurance. It was a metaphysical mind-bender, a fear-inducing bizzarro world, with no differentiation whatsoever between life, TV, sports, and the sudden possibility of a humongous tree branch falling on your car! It was--

(The author of this history had to step away for a moment to breathe into a paper bag).

Soon, insurance commercials started appearing during the game, with a split-screen showing an outsized advertisement, while the game action transpired in a much-smaller window, shunted unceremoniously off to the side. Now even a remote control, with a channel toggle, and a mute button was no longer defense against commercials.

The Short and Tragic Life of Baker Mayfield

One prominent casualty of the Insurance Wars was a young quarterback from the perpetually accident and disaster-prone Cleveland Browns, Baker Mayfield. A handsome, wholesome white boy with a hipster mustache, Baker Mayfield took a Cleveland Browns team that seemed sicker than the Cuyahoga River, and performed several resuscitative on-field miracles, by winning a few games. Progressive pounced. There was no better underdog story in the NFL, no better campaign against goliaths like the New England Patriots and Geico, than the meteoric rise of Baker Mayfield, who literally lived, according to Progressive, at FirstEnergy Stadium in Cleveland. The stadium was his home, his kingdom, his court, where he entertained various custodial employees, and millions of fans, all while protecting against threats to the homeland. This might have been a major victory in the Insurance Wars, Progressive's Pearl Harbor, were it not for a tragic turn

of events that even the most astute bet-hedger could not have protected against. Baker Mayfield turned out to be not that good. He was let go by the Browns, and also let go by Progressive. In the Insurance Wars, it was paramount never to back a loser. Baker Mayfield disappeared forever, leaving more precious airtime for Patrick Mahomes, and the LiMu Emu.

Mayhem

So many insurance companies, competing for Americans' bank accounts. So many battlefields. A vast and sprawling map of destruction. Who would win the branding game of thrones? Who would save the day, and up to 15%? Would the insurance companies implode in a fatally-orchestrated, mutually-assured destruction? Or were the seeming competitors working together all along, using television, against the American people? Were all the companies ACTUALLY ONE BIG COMPANY--

(Paper bag).

Eventually it became clear that the American people had had enough mindless and insipid commercials. Overworked, underappreciated American parents, and their feckless, debt-ridden children, wanted nothing more than to watch uninterrupted, escalating violence on a Sunday afternoon. Fortunately for everyone, blood began to spill on the football field. L.A. Rams defensive tackle Aaron Donald committed the NFL's first on-field fatality, literally ripping Cincinnati Bengals' quarterback Joe Burrow's boyish head off during a hideous fourth-quarter sack. Elated football fans cheered the bloodshed. Finally, the insurance companies had the precedent they needed to unleash unrestricted televised carnage.

Progressive launched an all-out offensive. Their latest commercial featured Flo, and her young white-aproned acolytes, ritually slaughtering an uninsured suburban family. The family home made Cielo Drive look like a daycare finger-painting mishap. Flo wrote "pig" in blood across the chest of her apron. Cult insurance became

an instant best-seller. Fearing Flo would usurp his claim to the Progressive throne, Dr. Rick grew a goatee and horns and unleashed a bloody campaign where young homeowners literally murdered their parents, seized their homes, and filed insurance claims that would later lead to vastly inflated premiums. Descending into civil war, Dr. Rick and his followers even tied Flo to a whipping post, satisfying the unspoken fantasies of millions of sexually repressed middle Americans.

Not to be outdone, Geico (an acronym for Government Entity Is Community Overlord) decided it would bring down both football--and America--from the inside. With trillions of dollars of Americans' hard-earned money at their disposal, Geico purchased the hapless Cleveland Browns, decommissioned them, and changed the team to the Geico Geckos. The fiendish little lizard became the team's obvious mascot (and puppet master), switching the traditional brown and orange colors for a retina-burning florescent green. Geico instituted a full-time split-screen television broadcast, running insurance commercials during the entire football game. Geico's message was clear: nobody out-saves the government.

Hitler was no quitter, and neither was Allstate. In the first of what soon became many "snuff commercials," Allstate actually killed Dean Winters, throwing the actor off the roof of a cozy suburban McMansion, his flailing body impaled on the prongs of a white-picket fence. Allstate resurrected Dennis Haysbert to issue a stern warning to the uninsured American public: "You better be in good hands. Or else."

Jungle Mentality

The Insurance Company Wars might have raged on indefinitely, infiltrating millions of TV screens, prompting countless innocent American viewers to demand an armistice, but sometime in the mid-2020's, commonly understood by historians to be the most terrible decade in human history, the Wars ended, quite abruptly. Amazon purchased every insurance company, and all surviving spoke-idiots were forced to bend the

knee. King Bezos mercilessly decapitated some insurance companies, and benevolently granted others a reprieve. The Geico Gecko was drowned, flayed, sauteed in butter, and served with lemon and capers at Amazon's official victory feast. Dr. Rick was made the King's personal advisor, as Bezos, growing bald, fat, saggy, and beginning to repeat stories in conversation, worried that he was turning into his father. Flo was kept on as a, shall we say, lady in waiting, although mostly her waiting was performed in Bezos's parlor, where he dressed her up in a Progressive uniform two sizes too small, and took pleasure in tickling her with a giant feather from the recently-taxidermized LiMu Emu.

Thus, the Insurance Company Wars vanished into obscurity, following the footsteps of Crystal Pepsi, 1-800-COLLECT, and Baker Mayfield. Once again, American society was saved by a pervasive, monolithic conglomerate. All forms of insurance, from car, to homeowners, to life, were now fulfillable by the simple click of a mouse (or tap of a smartphone). Football returned to being a barbaric exploitation of simple-minded cavemen and minorities. Television became just one more thing you might also like.

As of this writing, the only form of insurance not covered by Amazon is health insurance for most Amazon employees.

One question from the bloody annals of the Insurance Wars remains unanswered: if the insurance companies had enough money to purchase infinite amounts of television airtime, how come they couldn't cut us all a fucking break on our premiums.



Pulchra Medusa

Amanda Nicole Tuman



The Teacher and the Ice Bat

Gladys Justin Carr

She lived in a house of unrhymed sunlight. Rode a horse as if on a lightning strike to redemption. Wandered the condominiums of Patroclus and the pages of Baudrillard and said no gigabyte would ever set a single student free to eat olives in the valley of second chances. Her lectures on monarchs and minotaurs were sellouts, but it was her winged oratory on the ice bat that became legend. It was her longest and most difficult lesson. The ice bat. An unfamiliar species, a challenge to her students, who struggled to write essays on its probable origins and likely demise.

One day she vanished. Some said she had a scent of caprice and the phosphorus sea. Had she returned to Croatia, where she was born? She often spoke of her love affair with teaching, and with apologies to Mr. Tom Stoppard, that she had come from the coast of Croatia to the coast of Utopia. Had she been ill? Months later, a note, addressed to her students. A confession: “I made up the ice bat. There is no such thing.

My love to you all.”

Not long after, word came that her ashes were floated on the Adriatic Sea.

Note: The ice bat is an invention of Anne Carson, the quotation is hers.



The Moose in Mountain West Bank

John Bennett

Upon reopening the doors at 8 A.M., Geraldine Fisher, sixty-eight
years young and senior teller at Mountain West Bank
for thirty-two of those, wants to know how the 684 lbs. Shiras bull moose
got through her lobby last night without appropriate clearance.
Further, she'd like answered why it stands near Accounting, unstartled,
waiting patiently for release. If all of these questions go unanswered

then perhaps FaultLine Security Incorporated can enlighten as to how it managed
avoiding all alarms a bank like hers has employed to prevent
the very event she finds herself in. When Wildlife Management tranquilizes,
gurneys, and agrees to its uniqueness, Geraldine is still left with a little unease:
the blithe eyes like silver dollars that floated in the dark and the long breath
from broad nostrils as she backed away.

So, when I arrive at the bank later that day—
filing cabinets in order, Accounting
ruthlessly piling up those digits for decisions,
and that nothing-hum of moving
forward that banks have by afternoon—
any effort in the check I deposit
goes unnoticed when Geraldine tells me her story
in such a way that makes me angry
at a world with such a smug smile some days:
taking away our currency for consistency
and depositing a moose in a bank.

Darling wife, how often have we prepared
a meal similar to the one we find
ourselves undertaking tonight?

I suspect this will not be the last time
I report this kind of story to you
later in the day. As we make our salads—
dice the onions into little lice, quarter
peppers, halve olives, shred mozzarella—
the dressing sits at the edge of our plates

in a little saucer the circumference I think
I can make when I reach the tip of my index
to my thumb without effort, or industry, or anxiety.

All night we reach deep into our minds
and speculate; go on drawing up the blueprint:
the door left carelessly ajar at closing, those gangly,

thin moose legs stepping over trip lasers,
then the simple mind of the mammal sensing incongruity
by planting itself in Accounting and waiting.

I watch your eyes widen and dart along gray lines
of what happened and your salad and what we might
never know—dipping into conjecture, unsteady
as Geraldine's once calculating hand
when she offered me another adjusted balance.





The White Hummingbird

Ray Corvi

Because it's not without melancholy:

Degeneracy

Walden—

Is it a pond?

Or is it a lake?

The smokethorn—

Bush or tree?

What if we take what the tree is not,

Including its death?

You'll see it presences eternity

And in so doing dies

Anyway,

There are the clouds

& here are the clouds as such

My loved ones—

Where have they gone?

Mutilated

By convention

They don't know their own delicacy

Until it makes them carry

Their wounds around

Like objects made of blown glass

We were there

But no one else saw it—

The white hummingbird

Despite the inertia

And stubborn morbidity

Of the disappearing day

It meant to heal us all





In Sickness & In Health

Sabrina Sutter

In dying autumn's sweet embrace, I look for you
amongst the stone and stalwart guards of years gone by,
the air perfumed by candied apples rotting, cold.
Your neighbors watch me walk your way, so nosy even now.
They eye the mugs of cider in my hands, hot and spiced
with cinnamon and clove, your beloved tongue-burning temperature.
So here I sit down next to you, while sipping cider from my mug,
and brown leaves' corpses cover yours, flitting down from oaken eaves above.

Your mug rests next to me, sat placid against stone.
By now it would have spilled, had your clumsy hands
been capable of grasping it.



Decay

Valentine Schneider



The Empty Bird Feeder

William Eichler

An empty bird feeder
hangs in the yard,
swaying in the wind.
It once fed
cardinals, sparrows,
starlings, and robins.
Now, it just swings
from side to side
on a thin gray wire.
It too waits to be fed.





Melancholy Motel

Willy Conley



None of Us Dared to Speculate

Abbie Doll

When the aliens arrived, they sported a camouflage no one suspected—this itty-bitty thing called midwestern friendliness. They waved with grins broader than gymrat shoulders, asked eye-roller questions like *how are you faring on this fair-weather day*, and always delivered those distinctly parental reminders to take a coat, drive safe, and watch for deer. They were so casual about it. *Text us when you get home, yeah? Your mother and I worry about you, you know.* So casual that they moved into our childhood homes and assumed control of these roles they came to imitate—did it without any fuss, any fanfare, without anyone even batting an eye. As swift and successful as their invasion could be considered, they never stopped to consider the possibility that there was more—more to life, more than this assumed niceness, this dull gaiety, this we-love-you-but-can-only-say-it-indirectly heart space. And so they missed out on quite a lot, these aliens. Missed out on the silk-sheets thrill of genuine connection, missed out on the wire walk that is voluntary vulnerability, missed out on the stratosphere-high stakes of legitimate love. Them going through the motions weren't no well-kept secret, neither; every household chore from pullin' weeds to cleanin' gutters got done in dirty tattered robes, billboardin' their apathy and, well, e'rything else, right there on full display. Our pristine blocks crumbled into suburban circus slums with shufflin' somnambulistic performers. Things got worse too. As the aliens stuck to their diets of cheap booze and generic-brand antidepressants, lawns grew untidy, newspapers piled up, sidewalks got decked out with glass-shard confetti, and nature started her greenwash process of reclaimin' the abandoned. Seasons came and went in our dilapidated neighborhood like hours on the clock. Eventually, we stopped seein' 'em altogether. Yeah, we considered ourselves concerned, but not quite worried, yet, at least not enough to brave knockin' down doors. Who knew what kind of arsenal they had holed up in their dens. No one wanted to poke the hormonally imbalanced bear, not a single one of us was willin' to learn the hard way the lengths they'd go to secure their perimeter. But we weren't stupid. We'd seen the news, lived the news—could still feel the blood splatter from our own local tragedies, so trust me when I say we sure as hell didn't have no trouble imaginin' how the whole damn world could come crashin' down.



Moon Flowers

Carina Falter



If Bella Swan was born in 2006

Darah Schillinger

she may have yelled for the police chief living
in the bedroom down the hall when a draft
suddenly swept through her open window;
she would have never gotten into a stranger's
car when he followed her to another town;
she might have been on Lexapro or Zoloft, swallowing
pills with shaking hands, nervous that the man in the dark
would make an appearance tonight, eyes searching
for eyes, waiting, wondering if this made her
an insomniac or a statistic;

as if you could outrun me, as if you could fight me off

maybe she would know the term transference
from therapy, so when the same eyes that live
every night in her room stop a car from flattening her across
the school parking lot, she could allow herself
to feel gratefulness and fear at the same time;
she'd know about trauma bonds, so when she's told

you're my own personal brand of heroin

she wouldn't be tempted to feed the addiction,
wouldn't find herself asking questions
she never wanted the answer to, wouldn't glance
across the cafeteria having felt those eyes, dark
and dangerous, on her back yet again,
maybe then she'd get a lock on her window,
never wander into the woods alone,
maybe then, she'd tell her father she loves him more
and would never have become the lamb at all.



A 2002 hardcore album cover photographed circa 2019

Charles Hollobaugh



Women in Refrigerators

Darah Schillinger

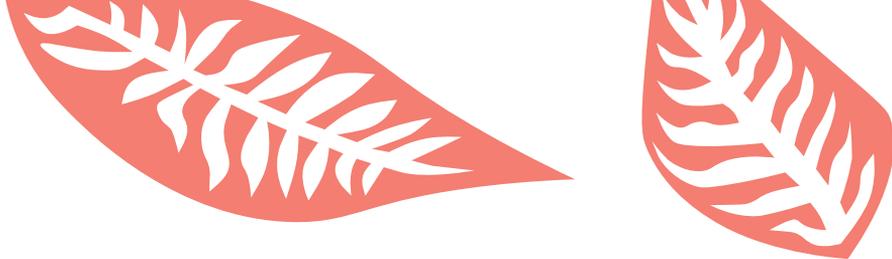
How can a man find the strength to continue on if not for the gauzy flashbacks of a killed wife in white sheets, of the sounds of a distant daughter's laughter, of the creak of an empty swing set, empty bottle, empty bed. We are fed a steady diet of cold cuts and dead girls, plot lines to keep their fathers going, of dead wives, dead lovers who fucked so well their deaths made a grown man cry, an exercise of minimalism, a trope so familiar that a woman cut into bits of flesh, shoved into a refrigerator for her lover to find, makes a silent film digestible, makes a good hero great, makes no fucking difference if she's too dead to appreciate whatever he did for her anyway.

Fridging: (v) To gratuitously kill, disempower, or otherwise remove a character (usually female) from a narrative, often strictly to hurt another character and motivate vengeance; A persistent sexist trope named after a 1994 Green Lantern comic in which the hero returns home to find that his nemesis has murdered his girlfriend and stuffed her corpse into a fridge.



La Colochita

Walter Sosa



Stars

Kelly McLennon

It's late at night, maybe two in the morning, and the strangers Cody brought to my housewarming party are mostly gone, but he and I are drinking still. I've had way more than he has and I can barely see straight and I want it that way.

We're sitting on my too-big couch in my too-big living room in my too-big house. I know, cry me a river, the twenty-year-old has an enormous house, what a tragic life. I paid an unholy amount of thousands for an interior decorator that my agent insisted I needed because he thought my house was "depressing." It's all the same to me, except none of it feels like a choice I would have made. Not like I have anything that could be considered a "personal style," as I learned when the decorator surveyed me before starting her work.

Cody and I are sunken into the eggplant purple couch—she had said it was "hip," like me, apparently—and he's telling me about his impending breakup and I feel for him, I really do, he's my best friend, but I've reached the fuzzy weightless stage of drunk and can barely pay attention. Thankfully he's not a sad drunk, or he'd probably be sobbing all over me, and I want to be numb right now. I wish I could always feel numb.

"I'm tired of it being like this, Chelsea," he says, stuffing his hands into the pocket of his forest green hoodie.

"I know," I say, and I want to add, "me too," but the "this" he's talking about isn't the "this" I'm thinking about. "This" isn't about me.

"I want things to work out, I really do, but I don't know if he's willing to commit to that, you know?" Cody wants to go public with their relationship, but the boyfriend isn't ready for that kind of scrutiny. Who would be?

I say "Yeah" even though I don't know, actually, and he knows that.

I look down at my dress—a silver sheath that looks like it belongs on the set of an '80s alien C-movie, but that Mirabella, my former costar and sort of friend, said made me look sexy—and regret having chosen to wear it for tonight. I don't know what a housewarming party is supposed to be like, and didn't particularly want to throw one in the first place, but everyone and their uncle insisted I simply must. I thought it was supposed to be fancy, so I dressed the part, but everyone who showed up was just in their regular business casual or street clothes. The older people who showed up—the real grown-ups: agents, producers, stylists, the interior decorator, all the people who knew me when I was this little, just getting her start in the industry—brought gifts and left after a couple of hours. They gave me cookbooks and framed photos and props they'd swiped from the set after the show got canceled. It was all very thoughtful, and I wished I could have been more gracious about it. They wanted more personal, meaningful gifts, because what's the point of buying some expensive piece of décor when I'm boringly rich? Thankfully, someone had thought to bring canapes and hors d'oeuvres and such, probably having suspected, accurately, that my snack options would be insufficient.

My mother had opted out of attending, for which I was both grateful and disappointed. I hadn't wanted her to come, not really, but her disapproval of the whole affair had been palpable. I wouldn't have even told her I was throwing the party in the first place if she hadn't wrestled the truth out of me like she somehow always manages to do, though I'm getting better at withstanding her these days.

After the bigwigs and surrogate parent types kiss-kissed me and left, it was just my friends, my "friends," my former castmates, and all these strangers Cody invited along. Someone ordered pizzas, and someone over twenty-one brought the booze, and then it became more like the parties I was used to.

Cody is still talking, but I notice there's another guy sitting in the armchair—also purple—opposite the couch. He must've sat down in just the last few minutes, because I swear he wasn't there earlier. He's in an orange tank top and blue jeans, and he's got a generic dude haircut, shorter on the sides and longer on the top, styled so as to look careless. He's smitten with Cody, and not even remotely subtle about it. Like, elbows on knees, chin in palms, puppy dog eyes. It would almost be cute if it weren't so pathetic. I don't even care that he's butting in on our conversation because I'm so light I might as well not even be here. Plus, who knows? Maybe this tragic twink will swoop in and save Cody from his self-pity and they'll fall in love and live happily ever after. This guy will gleefully make himself known as the boyfriend of that guy from that show.

Cody deserves that.

I watch Cody talking to this boy. He's changed so much over the years. He's been up and down for as long as I've known him.

He came onto the show in its second season, introduced as a goofy best friend type, which is to say he was chubby back then. He was put in situations in which the comedy more or less pointed itself straight at his body, but without

being overtly demeaning. He still felt it, though. Anyone would.

When he hit puberty, he shot up like a weed and thinned right out, but that often made him feel worse, because now all the attention was on him, on how good he looked now, how handsome he'd become.

My puberty was delayed. I was already anorexic.

Now here we are, grown-ass adults, sort of. Cody's black hair is getting shaggy, now that he doesn't have to keep it maintained. He's auditioning pretty heavily, though, so it'll probably have to come off soon. He thinks he'll never get cast again because, once you've gotten famous from a kids' show, no one will ever be able to picture you in media for anyone with a fully-formed prefrontal cortex. And he's not wrong.

"I'm so sorry," Cody's crush says, turning to me. "I've been in your house for hours and I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Connor. Your house is incredible."

"Thanks," I say, repeating his name in my head. Connor. Cody and Connor. A cute combination.

They thought the same thing for me. Cody and Chelsea. Or maybe they put my name first, Chelsea and Cody, because I was the star. I don't remember. He was my costar Mirabella's love interest on the show, but in real life everyone was pushing us together. We got together for a few months, playing at being a couple to appease all the adults insisting we were the perfect match, that the publicity would be incredible, but neither of us had any interest in it. By that point, Cody was already pretty certain he liked boys. I didn't know what I wanted at the time. Maybe I still don't. I don't know that I like much of anyone.

"I hate to admit it," Connor says, "but I never really watched your show as a kid."

I lift my beer and say, "All the better."

For a time, it was fun. Back when I still thought acting had been my idea. It ran for nine seasons, an unbearably long time, at least five more than it deserved. It was a vapid preteen sitcom, one of the ones where all the characters dress like actual insane people, and the canned laughter is applied overgenerously—overenthusiastic belly laughs from adult bodies plied at the zany antics of adolescents.

Connor doesn't react to my comment, so he must be in on the talk. You can always tell whether or not someone is involved in the industry, either themselves or tangentially through family or whatever, by how they expect actors to feel about the roles they've played and about the job in a more general sense. I hope this guy doesn't think he's going to get an in through dating Cody, or by sucking up to me. At least Cody's soon-to-be-ex had no intention of getting into that life.

A small cadre of people walks by us and leaves without acknowledging me, or even Cody. They look like teenagers, and not like anyone Cody would have invited.

"Are there still people here?" I ask no one in particular, remembering that this is my party, that this is my house. I live here now. I barely recognize it as a place for me, so foreign it is. The few things I had beforehand are jumbled awkwardly with the too expensive furnishings the decorator foisted on me. I know I should care about whether or not any of these literal strangers have trashed the place, but I don't. I can't.

I used to think that success would be the ability to buy whatever I wanted without worrying about the cost, but now that that's my reality, it all feels so empty. What's the worth of anything if I can have it that easily? I don't want to go back to the way things were when I was growing up, but none of this feels like an accomplishment. Even though it was hard scraping by in a one-bedroom apartment with my mother, at least it felt like a home. Until I started seeing how disordered it all was, the manipulations she exerted. The ways she kept me dependent on her.

I don't think either of the guys heard my question, whether anyone else is still here, and now I'm not sure if I actually asked it or just imagined I did, but it doesn't matter. There is now nothing that I want more than to be gone—out of this cavernous house.

"Hey, let's go somewhere," I say. I stand up and have to brace myself on the arm of the couch with the wooziness that overtakes me. My vision fuzzes out and stays black for a few more seconds than I'm used to, and when it comes back, Cody and Connor are staring at me.

"Go where? Chelsea, it's almost three in the morning," Cody says, checking the time on his phone. "Where could we possibly go?"

"I don't know," I whine. "Isn't there a bar or a club or something that's open twenty-four seven? Or, or, like a café, or a— a diner." Those are open all the time. Let's go to a diner.

The guys exchange a glance. Connor shrugs.

"I know a place," he says.

"Yes," I say, pointing at him. "You know a place. Let's go." I look to Cody. "You should date him."

Cody turns bright red, but Connor just chuckles.

"Chelsea," Cody says, chiding, "are you sure you want to go out? You've had, like, a lot to drink. Maybe you should just go to bed."

"No. Let's go. Can you drive?" I ask Connor. Cody has his license, but he's not much more sober than I am. I have my permit, and he's teaching me how to drive behind my mother's back, but even sober, I'm not yet comfortable navigating L.A.

My mom still drives me to all my auditions, even now, with me living apart from her for the first time in my life. It'll probably add a good forty-five minutes for her drive to my house, but at least I prevailed upon her to agree to wait in the car rather than actually entering the building with me. I have an audition tomorrow—which is to

say, today—and she was upset to learn about the housewarming. I should be focusing on running lines, not throwing a frivolous party.

“Yeah, I can, but—” Connor starts, but I cut him off.

“Let’s go. I don’t do Ubers or whatever.” Too many rides turned into Q & A sessions about the show, about acting, about “can you give my number to your agent?” The show never even got that big, but I still get recognized all over the place, and it drives me up the wall. Everyone, even in L.A., which is crawling with celebrities, goes wild to see an actor. A few times, a ride turned scary. So, no more. An independent woman with her own house should also have her own car, and the ability to drive it.

Cody and Connor share another glance, and Connor says, “It’ll be fine. It’s not that far, and there shouldn’t be any traffic this late.”

It’s probably a bad idea. I know this as we leave my house and I fumble the keys trying to lock the door. We walk down the middle of the street to get to Connor’s car, one of those electric deals in a light blue color. I pull my hair out of the bun Mirabella had put it in for the party, and I wonder if she left, or if she’s still there. I don’t remember her saying goodbye. I run my hands through my hair, naturally blonde, giving me that wholesome, all-American look everyone wants in their star actor, apparently.

“I think I’m gonna shave my head,” I say, feeling the shape of my skull with both hands.

“Okay,” Cody says as he opens the back door of the car and gestures for me to get in. I can tell he’s humoring me; he doesn’t think I’d actually do it, but I want to. I want to be reckless and impulsive.

I want to quit acting.

Cody gets into the front passenger seat, and Connor starts the car and pulls us out into the street. Alone in the back, I feel like a child, and they’re my dads. Maybe I would’ve been better off with

two dads, rather than the mom I do have, and the dad that theoretically exists.

But she’s always only ever wanted the best for me, for us. She took me to all the acting classes, the dance classes, the dialect coaches, so I could have the best chance of success. She pulled me out of school to homeschool me herself so we could still go to auditions. Once I started getting cast, she even quit her job to fully devote herself to my acting career. She always reminds me how much she’s sacrificed to give me this life, the one she never succeeded in getting for herself. How much we both depend upon my achievement.

She was so worried when I bought the house. She wanted to move in with me, to take care of me, but relented when I assured her I’d still pay for her apartment and living expenses. I told her no one would want to cast an actress who still needs her mommy to slice her apples for her. Whose mommy still picks out her outfits and brushes her hair and does her makeup.

Cody and Connor make small talk in the front of the car, but I can’t really hear what they’re saying. I don’t care much, anyway. I’m just glad to be out of that house, away from its too many bathrooms and its so many square feet—I don’t remember the number because it’s meaningless to me, but all the older people are always very impressed by it. Why does one person need that much space? What am I supposed to do with it all?

I roll down the window and lean my head out, feeling the breeze on my face. It’s cool, but not chilly, and it feels good on my skin.

“You okay?” Connor asks, looking at me through the rearview mirror. “Are you nauseous?”

“I’m good,” I say, feeling dreamy and light again. “Just like the air.”

“Okay. Just let me know if you need me to pull over. Don’t want you puking in the car.” He laughs a little.

I did do that, once. Puke in a car. I wasn't even drunk when it happened. I was still a kid, on the way to an audition. It was before my "big break," as my mother would later term it, so we were still desperate, both financially and in a more aspirational sense. Desperate for an opportunity.

I was in the back, still in a car seat even though I thought I was too old for it, and we were stuck in traffic. The audition was first thing in the morning, so we had to get up at five to get ready and make the commute into the city, battling the morning rush hour gridlock.

We approached an intersection, and I watched as the light turned yellow. Mommy hesitated, glancing at the clock on the dashboard, but slowed to a stop as it turned to red. There was a homeless man on the median, holding a cardboard sign and waving at the cars. He smiled, and I could see that he was missing several teeth. His skin was tan and weathered from the unforgiving Southern California sun.

We were in the right lane, so he didn't look at us, but he stepped into the crosswalk at the light change. At the same moment, the car in the left lane gunned it to get through the intersection. It plowed right into the man with an audible thud. The man flew over the car and landed on the other side. I saw blood coming out of his mouth, and pooling from where the back of his head hit the street. The car that had hit him stopped, partially in the middle of the intersection, and cars with the green light veered around it and honked. The car then zoomed forward, swerving sickeningly to avoid getting hit, and it was gone.

"Mommy, that man is hurt!" I said, scared, but she kept her eyes straight ahead. I saw people behind us get out of their cars and kneel next to the man, and several of them had phones up to their ears.

The light changed again, and our car moved forward.

"Mommy, shouldn't we stop? Don't we need to talk to the police?"

Her voice was strained. "No, baby, it's okay. See all those other people there? They'll take care of it." Then, in a voice of forced cheerfulness, "We can't have you late to your audition!"

I rotated as much as the car seat would allow to try to look at what was happening as we left the scene behind, but I couldn't see it anymore.

That was when I threw up. The bowl of cereal I'd had for breakfast—this was before I started restricting food intake—came right back up and landed all over the back of my mother's seat. Some of it dribbled down my chin onto my shirt.

She didn't stop. Not until we got where we were going. Mommy didn't say anything, just cleaned me up as much as possible and took me inside. While I gave my audition, she went back out to wipe down the car, but it still smelled horrific when I finished and we went home. It was one of the hot L.A. days that make up most of the year, and the sour milk smell lingered for months.

I never found out if the man survived, or if they got the guy who hit him. I never heard anything about it, and my mother never once spoke of it. I wanted to ask her, but something in me knew this was not a topic up for discussion.

I didn't even get cast in whatever show I'd been auditioning for.

Now, in the back of Connor's car, driving along an unfamiliar road, I think that maybe it would be nice to throw up now. It would be a metaphor.

And then we crash.

I don't see it coming because I'm looking out the window, but Cody's voice cuts through my daydreaming: "Hey, watch—watchwatchwatch—" he gets frantic, running the words together, and I see movement out of the corner of my eye as he lunges for the wheel, but it's too late.

We collide with something—I don't know what, I don't know where. My body jerks forward, slicing the skin of my neck on the seatbelt when it locks.

My head slams into something—maybe the back of the seat in front of me—and my limbs flail around like I’m a ragdoll. All of my senses are overwhelmed and I simultaneously take in absolutely everything and absolutely nothing. Time feels weird, but I don’t know in what way. Some people in crashes say it feels slowed down, but others say it speeds up. I don’t know how they can tell one way or the other.

The car stops moving, and then our bodies stop moving—at least, mine does. I have no idea where the boys are. They stop existing in my world. I remember that I’m drunk, and that Cody is drunk, I think. Would Connor have driven us if he was, too? Was that something I would have cared about if this hadn’t just happened?

My fingers know what to do, seemingly without me telling them to do anything. They unlock the seatbelt and scrabble at the door handle. The door swings open and bounces a little at its fullest extension, and for some reason that’s what makes me throw up. Nothing up until that point has set me off; just that little wobble. I lean my head out and I think most of it lands outside the car, but I don’t know for sure.

I find my feet and put them under me and stumble out of the car. I swing my gaze around, only able to take in information in small pieces.

The car is up on a sidewalk.

The car is crumpled against a tree.

I can see movement from the front of the car, but I can’t move toward it. My body crumples, and I lie on my back on a patch of grass between the sidewalk and the street. What’s that called, anyway, a berm? For some reason, this feels very important to know.

I look straight up into the sky and I see so many stars, but there can’t be this many stars because the city is too bright. I’m looking up at the stars but it’s like I’m looking down, like I’m looking into the black waters of a well, looking at the sky

reflected in there, I’m looking at the stars and remembering my mother asking me if I want to be a star, and I’m so young I think she means I could be one of the lights in the sky, and of course I say yes, and she’s so happy, happier than I’ve ever seen her, and I think to myself that I want to always make her this happy, and I will be a star for my mommy, and we will be happy.

I don’t know how much time passes like this, but I hear voices and then I hear sirens and then there are people blocking the stars and saying things at me and some other part of me is in charge and says things back at them, and their hands are on my body, feeling for where it hurts, but nothing hurts right now. That must be wrong. Next, we’re getting up and going to the ambulance, there’s an ambulance here now, and all I can think is that I hope this ruins my face. I hope it disfigures me so I’ll have to get plastic surgery and look like a whole new person. I’m tired of being recognized, of people quoting my character’s catchphrases at me. I’m tired of feeling like an object for them to examine, no matter where I am or what I’m doing. If I get recognized, I get put back in that box.

Then I remember Cody. Cody and the other guy whose name I can’t remember now, the one who crashed us.

“Are they okay?” I ask, and my voice sounds like I’m underwater. I don’t know who I’m asking, but someone has a hand on my upper arm, keeping me steady.

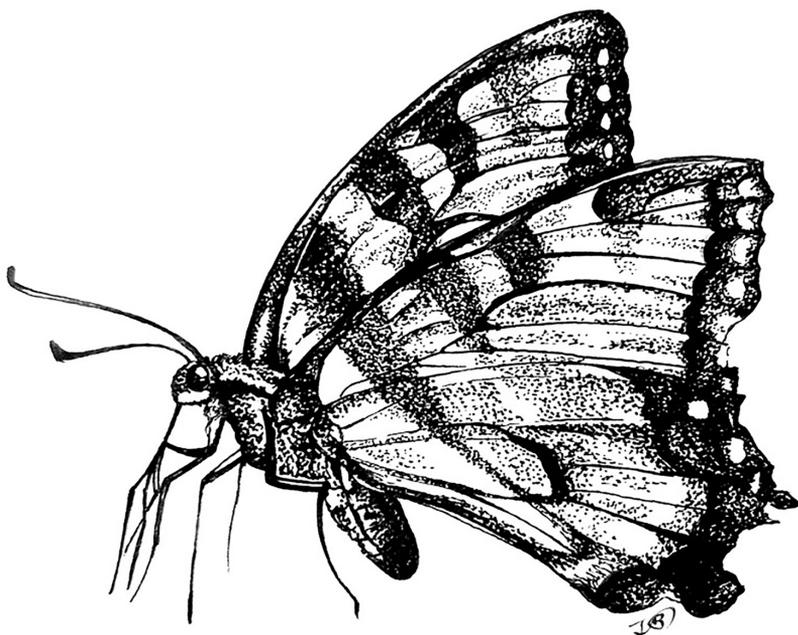
“Don’t worry about them right now. Just worry about you.” The voice is not unkind, and I get the sense that I’m supposed to be comforted by it.

A thought flashes into my head that it means either I’m in the worst shape of the three of us, or they’re dead. But before I can latch onto the thought and do anything with it, it slips away. It’s like a vivid dream that you think about the moment you wake up, but within seconds you can’t remember a single detail.

We're in the ambulance and then I realize something hurts, but I can't figure out where in my body. I also feel wet, and at first I worry that I've peed myself, but then I comfort myself figuring it's probably just blood. I remember that I'm supposed to go to an audition in, like, five hours or something, and I hope I'm hurt badly enough to end my career.

We get to the hospital and they put me in some room and then a guy is there and he looks at me. And then he gets that expression they always get when they place where they've seen me before, and all I can think is, "Please, no. Not here. Not now." But, sure enough, he goes, "Hey, I know you! My kids love your show! Once we get you all patched up, think I can get an autograph for them?"





Stippled Butterfly

Isabelle Bartolomeo



Risen (Front Tree on Easter Morning)

Jean C. Howard

Now it is birth,
after I just called it death,
and whore,
and despicable nouns.

It is chaste
with warm puffs
of ivory
and light ascending
in drifts of righteousness
upward bound.

The whirl of doves
climbs above it
as a small shadow deepens,
glint of agate
on a wet leaf—
probably a fly
opening its holy wings.





Mourning Doves

Michael Wilcox



Applications of the Elementary Drawing Course

Rebecca Wesloh

Make a mark on the paper.

A brother, a sister.

He was my brother, is my brother. I am still his sister. We do not talk about it.

Extend the mark into a line.

Sexual assault.

There was a line. He crossed it.

Memory is flawed. Each recollection reshaped and remodeled at its retrieval. How much of what I say is true? Was it ever?

What do I remember? (Hands, movement.)

What of what is cut? What of what do I not recall? What of the rising heartbeat, the tension in my chest and shoulders, the lumping in my throat that threatens my ability to swallow or to breathe – that warns me away and I obey?

How much of what happened happened? How am I to know? And who, with this as it is, would believe me? How much do I believe myself?

Enclose the line, make it into a shape.

The basement of the family home, the other brother on the other couch. The hands of my eldest brother slipping beneath my clothing. Above. Below.

A part of me stopped at that moment. A part of me stayed there. This seems illogical. Considering time is constantly moving forward. Considering that when it was happening, I did not recognize what it was that was happening. Considering it happened multiple times. Considering there are so many specifics I can not remember.

A part of me broke off into that time. A part of me never went back up those stairs. I stayed there. I am still there.

Create the illusion of dimension—form. Make it look three dimensional even though it's in two dimensions.

This is what I remember.

I had just gotten a new camera, a low-tech, cheap Walmart point-and-shoot, bright red, very few megapixels, with a braided cord to hold around your wrist. That camera still exists somewhere, do I?

I want to be a photographer. I am still young enough to believe this is possible, still naïve enough to think, at twelve, I have the talent. I take pictures of everything. I try to build a portfolio. I try to capture the essence of being and living and all that I am surrounded by in our mid-Atlantic middle-class suburb. Trays of oversaturated oranges. Straight-on shots of azalea flowers. Blurred frames of the cat who did not agree to be a model; pink and white flea collar against the fuzz of gray tabby fur.

I want photos of my family. Want pictures of me and them. I want to see themselves and myself in the same frame. Was I already looking for proof that I existed?

I ask my brothers. The younger of the two agrees on the condition I make him a sandwich. I make him one gladly. I do not remember the type of sandwich.

That picture still resides in my mind. He stands close to me in front of the refrigerator – his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth in between a wide or wild smile and a grimace, far too many teeth. He's wearing a white t-shirt with the name of the middle school in purple. In the background you can see the mess of the house, rarely fully cleaned, dirty dishes covering the stove and piled on the microwave. I don't remember what I look like or what I wear, only that I was next to him.

I go to my other brother, the older of the two. I ask if I can get a picture with him. He says sure. He beckons me to sit beside him on the basement couch. He doesn't have me make him a sandwich. He looks upward at the camera and we smile. He moves closer. This is when it starts. This is when his hands move towards me.

It happened more than once. I don't remember how many times. I don't remember how frequently. I just remember it kept happening. Us in the basement. On the mocha-brown La-Z-Boy reclining love-seat, his hands slipping beneath.

I didn't object. I think when it started I was laughing. It was just tickling.

I only remember crying out once for him to stop. When he squeezed my nipples so hard that it hurt. And I called out stop, stop, and wriggled away.

I was never restrained. I could have left. I could have shouted. If it was really something bad, if it was really something I did not want, if it was really something, I could have stopped it.

My other brother was there, in the basement on the other couch, the long three seater (also mocha brown, La-Z-Boy reclining). Was he always there, or was it just that once?

He told us he thought we should stop. I no longer remember the words, just the spirit of the message. What I also cannot remember: was it addressed to him, to me, to us?

Was that when it stopped?

There is an incident I cannot fully recall. We were in church, the service had ended and we were waiting for my parents to finish chatting so we could leave. My brother began (began what?). An adult who we knew rushed over, told my brother to stop. I do not remember if his hands were over or under. I remember the sternness in the adult's voice.

Was that when it stopped?

Maybe he just lost interest.

Maybe I was no longer what he wanted.

Maybe he felt ashamed.

Was that when it stopped?

I feel obligated to defend him. We were a family, we are a family. I don't know what family means. I don't know what family owes one another. I'd like to think we owe each other more than this.

When my parents brought me home from the hospital as an infant, he and my other brother towered their toys around me, eager to share.

When I was a toddler he would get mad at our other brother, but not at me. She's a baby, he would defend, ignoring that my other brother was only two years my senior.

He, my other brother, and I would all play in the sandbox together. We would construct mini marvels of sand engineering, building hills and tunnels and roadways for the small matchbox cars we drove through. It was an important condition of my cooperation in these play sessions that each car had to have a "home" that it would return to each night.

When it rained we would construct worm hotels on the slope of our backyard. We would tower rocks into a structure and place whatever worms we found inside. Inevitably returning whatever worms wriggled or fell loose back inside once more. We wanted them to have a place to stay, away from the rain, ignoring that just having a roof does not make a home.

How can all of this be true? How can he be a good person, a good brother, and have done what he did? There is more than one truth possible in this world, I have learned. They can all exist, I have learned.

Add a range of value, from the white of the paper to the darkest mark you can produce with your instrument. This is imperative to the illusion of light and the illusion of form. You are working in two dimensions, but you must make it look as though there are three.

I tell my therapist. My therapist tells my parents. My mother tells me I am confused. My mother tells me it had been a bad dream. My mother tells me to take it back. My mother tells me to say I made it up.

I do. It and I became nothing.

I erased myself. I allowed myself to be erased.

I have continuing concerns as to the veracity of my existence. Am I real? The thing I thought I knew to be real was denied. If that was false, how can I be true? It starts as a metaphorical concern, a literary

pursuit that grows to be all consuming. I want someone to prove to me I'm real, that I do exist. I doubt I would believe them.

Pay attention to the area within and around the drawn object, the space. Empty space is negative space, an open field. That space is still there. Absence still carries its own presence.

I allow myself, force myself, to push it out of my mind. I learn to cope with a growing numbness and jagged edges that reside within me. I learn to wake up from sleeping and repeat forget, forget, forget to ward off the nightmares from the day. I learn to cut myself on my upper thighs where it won't be visible to others. I learn to say "I am fine" in ways that even I start to believe.

If something happened how could I slip so easily back to fine? How could anything afterwards return to alright? It must have been false, I reason to myself. I must have made it up. I am a wretched, despicable person for inventing such a lie.

Add texture. Add real or implied tactile sensation to the object. What would it feel like were you to touch?

The first time I feel my first boyfriend's erection I realize I have felt one before. My brother was hard as his hands moved across me. I go stiff and unresponsive and try not to cry. The boyfriend doesn't notice.

The boyfriend asks if he can touch me down there, he looks towards my crotch. I say alright, so long as he does not enter. I want so badly to be wanted and desired. He slips inside. It could have been an accident. I start to cry. There is the recognition again. There is the feeling that this is not the first time this has happened. That I have been touched below before. The boyfriend asks what's wrong and I apologize and tell him he may tell no other, that I was molested as a child. He looks forlorn, repeats the same apology I have just given him back to me. We are both sorry that it happened. We are both sorry it is happening still.

What does it mean to have a memory driven by a recognition of sensation? Can we believe or trust these memories?

How do we know how to trust our memory at all? How do we determine what parts of ourselves are real?

Finally, or maybe it is not final, but as a last step, color. The reflected light, that that is not absorbed but transmitted back on to our eyes. Pigment splashed to convey meaning, inherent or intent.

There are three steps to acceptance, or three steps to the acceptance I am attempting to have now. One is learning to tell. You must wait for adulthood, before a nurse practitioner asks a routine question in your physical, "have you ever been assaulted?" you say yes, you do not take it back. You answer her follow up questions, assure her it was a long time ago, that you are over it and are fine now.

Second is learning to admit you are not certain. You must overcome the fear of judgment. The fear that someone else will ask "how could you be so wretched to invent such a falsehood?" Instead you are told "I do not think you would invent this, I do not think you could invent this." Still it feels as though you're lying.

Third is accepting you will never know. Before this, you will research time travel and attempt and fail to understand physics and the mechanics of space time. Before this you will watch words drift apart and language lose meaning. Before this, you will attempt your own destruction. Before this you will break down crying at random intervals. Before this you will say time and time again “I made it up,” in the offices of varying mental health professionals.

Before you finally realize you will never know, you realize that what happened or did not happen can never be proven. You will never know. And the only way you can continue is to accept this.

I am trying to be at peace now. I am trying no longer to destroy myself. It is a precarious process. It begins with an introduction to learning how to draw.





Musings of a Supposed Honey-pot

Sabrina Sutter

A bear chews on my leg,
the grey, decaying flesh
a slurry in its mouth.

There is no light outside,
no moon to watch it feast
upon my remnants cold.

I think I loved bears once.
I loved their furry snouts,
stuck face-first in a hive.

I was called honey once.
He dumped me here, alone,
the bear's cold snout in me.



Samson and Delilah

Carina Falter



I've Never Liked My Veins

Charlotte Knauth

Tell me how it feels to cut me open with your silence. To sharpen a knife so clean I didn't notice the blood until you were already gone.

You weren't shocked when I said we couldn't be roommates. Staring at me, eyes blank, you said, "Yeah, I figured. Is there anything else?"

I said "no," the word shaking, my hood pulled over my head. Even then I was hoping you'd at least take note of your knife still lodged in my chest.

But you walked away without meeting my eyes. I tried to recollect if you'd ever seen me bleeding out. Did I mention that my blood was dripping onto my pants, my shoes, your dorm floor?

My therapist tells me blood is not the only way to feel pain. I still can't help but wonder: if you never saw me bleeding, how were you to know I was hurt?

And then I remember the tears, the taste of snow in the dark, the biting of concrete against palms, fresh mucus on our sleeves.

"I thought we were friends," I said.

And you choked out, "yes."

"Then why don't you talk to me?"

"I don't know."

There are more ways to bleed than one.

"If you don't want to be friends, please just tell me."

"You're one of my best friends."

For two weeks, we took walks in the woods, you offered quartz as if I were a magpie. You spoke full sentences and we traded notes in class. And then you stopped speaking altogether. No more walks in the woods, no more quartz, no notes, no sentences, no words, no parables. And I waited. I waited for a sound, a glance, or even to feel you looking at instead of through me. I don't know if I ever stopped.

Tonight, I told our story again. A gossip session never feels like the right title for this kind of sit-down and spill-my-guts on the laminate floor in the apartment that we were supposed to share. Gossip shouldn't make my eyes burn the way they do now. After all this time, I have to wish you weren't some-

one I still missed. I wish I could bad-mouth you with my cold feet and not feel like my poor circulation fits as a perfect idiom for the moment. With crossed arms and an unarguably all-too-open mind, I tell the story in the wrong order. I leave out the part where you'd never want to hold hands, but, when I slept over in your dorm, you'd sleep beside me on the floor. I wonder how you'd tell it. I wonder if you ever do.

I went out to the movies the night after I ended things. It's a technicality; I know. You ended it first. I'm still at the Cinemark chewing on the words you took from me.

You sent, "i know we won't be friends again."

I sent, "i haven't thought you looked at me as a friend in a long time."

You sent, "ok"

We were never in love, but a part of me wishes we were. Even as I stitch my skin back together, I can't justify the wound of your wake.

There are more ways to bleed than one.



High School Creative Writing Contest

Michael Downs, *judge*

Grub Street congratulates Nick Lutzky, winner of our High School Creative Writing contest. Lutzky was chosen by Towson University Professor Michael Downs for both our poetry and prose competitions.

Nick Lutzky is a high school senior at the Gilman School in Baltimore, Maryland. Previous works have been published in the school's award-winning literary magazine, *Paragon*. Nick Lutzky is the captain of Gilman's water polo team, the president of the Creative Writing Club and the Environmental Justice Club, the Senior Class Treasurer, a writer for the Gilman News, a consultant for the Tickner Writing Center, and a member of the Mock Trial and swim team. He is the proud winner of over six pee-wee soccer trophies and was the 2nd fastest kid in his second-grade class. Outside of writing, he enjoys video games, philosophy, thrifting, playing guitar, reading, drinking chocolate milk, and writing about himself in the third person. In the summer, he works as a sleepaway camp counselor and lifeguard. Nick Lutzky will be attending Dartmouth College in the class of 2028, and looks forward to pursuing writing further there.

Michael Downs is an award-winning author and tenured professor at Towson University. His three novels take place in his hometown of Hartford, Connecticut, and examine common notions of community, memory, and achievement. His first book, *House of Good Hope: A Promise for a Broken City*, received the River Teeth Prize for Literary Nonfiction. A career writer, Downs's work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Menckenia* magazine, and *The Millions*. At Towson, he teaches courses in fiction and creative nonfiction and directs the graduate program in professional writing. Downs has served as faculty advisor to *Grub Street* numerous times, most recently on last year's 72nd edition.

Grub Street staff chose five pieces each from our poetry and prose submissions. The staff then sent those to Michael, who judged them without knowing the schools or the names of writers and poets.

On the winning poem, "Man on a Building":

The line from Camus—read vertically along each line's last word—describes an emotional state that "Man on a Building" adopts and expands upon. The narrator—speaking to and about a man standing at the high ledge of a building—implores and argues for the man to choose life. But the poem is also full of paradox, arguing with itself about what gives life meaning, what makes life special in a "cold universe." The language employed is fun and playful, offering readers alliteration and internal rhyme ("failed love made black gloves"), and repeated rhythms that create a song: something to sing while standing three hundred feet above, "searching for stars or flat concrete."

On the winning story, "Migration is the Carrion":

This story is a brilliant evocation of setting. Read it prepared to shiver from the cold. Moreover, a story with only one character is so hard to pull off, but this one does it. The secret? The conflict with the harsh and frozen landscape becomes also a conflict with the self. What is our unnamed character going to do to survive? The character is careful with his work and his life, just as the writer is careful with the story and its details. The climactic end presents the character with a choice—and how the character chooses reveals his character. In fact, the character's every action in this story reveals the nature of who he is. This tale might remind a reader of Jack London's best work.



Man on a Building

Nick Lutzky

This Golden Shovel poem is inspired by a line from Albert Camus's "The Stranger."

I promise you it won't be worth it, it
will not be okay but as it was, was
it ever? I can't promise as much as
your church or your thoughts or your boss, but if
they were enough, that I know, I know that
you wouldn't be here, a great man, not so great.

Lose that loss and lust and rush, and still rush
you rush, man of dreams, man of war, man of
crushed bones on pavement? I felt your anger,
failed love made black gloves, you had had it, had
you ever wondered why? I watched you, washed-
up, this strange old boy trying to get clean.

My God, live! Dreams are empty when emptied
into you, you look for meaning like me
but you don't mean it, do you? The god of
man and lost love is hopeless, but less hope
won't help you either, you've got to hope and
defile hope, meaning without meaning, gazing

to see stars without looking up, go up
until nothing, no, nothing at all at
unknowns, know nothing to love something, the
sky is blank until you color it, dark
until you've covered it, but still sky
until you're under it—blue, bright, spangled.

So here you are: tired and quiet with
three hundred feet below your eyes, its
tired and quiet while you wait for signs
to stop or go, but it's still quiet and
you stare straight down then up, searching for stars
or flat concrete—what are you waiting for?

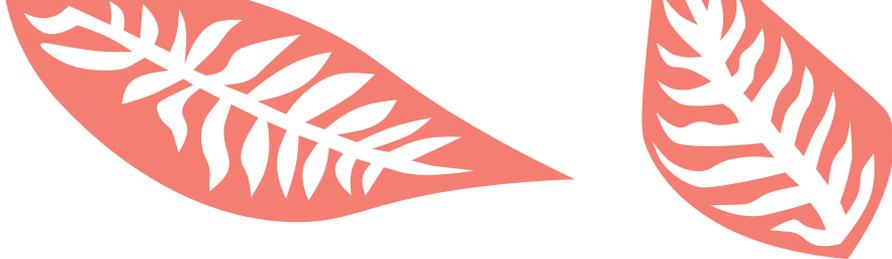
Arretez! End your waiting great man, the
empty you feel, as cogent as the first
time you felt it, is real but it's not time
that'll heal for first you must rebel at the
thought of it, live to the point of tears first
you must cry, laugh, scream, drink, fuck, I know I

have, had I met you too late you'd be laid
on concrete, defeated a man, it was my
understanding that you hadn't a heart,
an old boy jumps with his body open,
he'll crash and his body opens, now to
come down and I'll buy you a drink, for the

boy, the father, the son, the god, benign:
it's beautiful, right? The indifference
will beat you and love you and fuck you of
anything special—and that's what makes the
life this special—how cold, my universe!

A golden shovel is a poetic form invented by Terrance Hayes to honor Gwendolyn Brooks. Read down the page, the last words of each line form a phrase, line, or sentence from another source.





Migration is the Carrion

Nick Lutzky

He thinks, which means he's awake.

The man begins his day with soft exhales through the nose: *In, Stop—Out. In, Stop—Out.* Regulation of breathing is imperative to survival at seventy degrees below freezing: this he knew by now. Experience had taught better than any school or book could have, although strict and punitive in her ways.

Through trial (necessity) and error (frostbite), he learned to respect the cold and its rules—cover exposed skin, stay dry, stay inside unless absolutely necessary—or die in defiance of them. Freezing is not the worst way to die.

The first thing he must do is dress. Though his cabin is warmer than the tundra, cold still finds a way inside, requiring an additional vestimentary warmth. The night had not been so bad, though, for it was far worse in the winter. Spring was not easy, and can hardly be called spring. But in winter, men learn what cold is. During those times he slept in the day when it was warm enough to lie down. At night, he paced back and forth, forcing himself to stay awake because if he were to sleep, he knew he would not wake. Still, he preferred the quiet solitude of winter to the necessary but loud summers, falls, and springs. But even in spring it is far from warm (especially this early into the season), and insulating his body is imperative: thermal underwear, a cotton insulating layer, and an outer jacket. He did not wear goggles, preferring to see things with his naked eyes.

After dressing, he must stoke his fire. He collects wood in the summer, just as he had built his cabin in the summer. In fact, he does most things in the summer. He spends his other seasons with the cold. It was not warm in the summer by any means, but the man did not believe it was truly cold. Real cold, as he saw it, reminded one of their humanity.

This all takes him roughly an hour and is rigidly planned to fit such a time frame. Scheduling is important, both to minimize time outside and to ensure such time is spent in the prime hours of the day. With this routine complete, he can step outside.

The world is gray and the ground is white as he opens the door. A sharp glare hits his eyes as he raises his mittened hand to block the intrusion. He nods; it is time to check his traps. Fifty-two snares surround his cabin, but there is little game this time of year, so the prospect of large game is bleak. He will likely find a rabbit, maybe two. This is enough for him to survive another day. You can eat very little and persist if sedentary, but survival requires maintenance, and maintenance requires food.

In, Stop,—Out. In, Stop,—Out.

He muscles through the snow. Patience, too, is imperative to survival. Twenty-four empty traps in and the man remains largely unfazed. Frustration is a fatal waste of energy. Instead, he keeps the same stoic face he's had at every gameless junction and continues on. Emotional expressions serve

little value at seventy degrees below zero. A thin layer of crystallized ice covers exposed skin. In this case, the small parts of face that the man left uncovered. Stretching of facial muscles, (i.e. yawning, smiling, frowning) could shatter this layer, which has proven to be excruciatingly painful. Opening the mouth is equally dangerous, exposing saliva to the frigid air for too long causes it to freeze inside the mouth—again, terribly painful.

He trudged along, following his trail markings from trap to trap. They were crude wooden planks erected in snow and adorned in different colors corresponding to each trail. He followed the Red trail. Though shoddy in appearance, these trail markings were meticulously constructed—they had to maintain shape even in the harshest of conditions.

Though his gait was peculiar in appearance, he walked with careful attention to each step. Below him were riverbanks, vast networks of streams, lakes, and flowing water covered by layers of thick ice, having not seen the light of day for hundreds of years, not since a time that was kinder to them. But ice was tricky, as while it may hold ten feet in one spot, it only takes ten paces before the man could find himself standing on ten centimeters of ice. Contact with water that cold was deadly, and entailed dire consequences, even with a quick response. This lesson was learned at the cost of three toes, a merciful punishment to the man. Each step was planned, as he knew the route by now and knew which steps to take and where. Still, ice is tricky, and the feeling of it cracking under him was committed to memory. Such that on that day he knew with complete assurance that the ground was about to give way.

In, Stop—Out—In, Stop—Out.

Patience is imperative. Frustration is fatal. His thoughts did not race; they sprinted into careful formation. His thoughts knew exactly where to go, his thoughts had been preparing for this moment for years. He knew it was not safe to run,

doing so would only hasten the process. No, he needed to maximize his surface area—in order to spread out his body weight as much as possible. Quickly, but not hastily, he dropped to the ice, making contact with the thin layer of powder first before feeling the floor below him; it was like marble. Powder stuck to his face, biting at his skin in excruciating fashion, though he dared not scream. His face was still. The cracking slowed. The ice would not give way.

He cursed himself for haste, of course doing so silently and in a manner indecipherable to an onlooker. His face remained still. Splayed about the ice with his arms and legs scattered about, he knew there was little time for self-pity or criticism. He had to evaluate the situation and act.

In—Out. In—Out.

Firstly, he knew his face was damaged. Exposed to the snow lying atop the ice, larger crystals began freezing on top of his beard and at the seal of his lips. He could no longer open his mouth, even if he wanted to. This could be remedied if he heated himself quickly; he needed to get back to the cabin. At this point, he would be lucky not to lose part of his face. He knew there was thicker ice to his west—ice he could hopefully stand on. Like a deer being dragged by an invisible hunter, the living carrion inched westward. But as he moved, shooting pains spread across his face. Ice particles, sharp as they are tricky, cut into his left cheek and forehead, painting his face with cruel mosaics of blood, ice, and water.

InOut—InOutInInIn—OutOutOut.

Blood was less than ideal. While it took longer to freeze than water, it mixes especially poorly with ice. Crystallized ice and blood alike dripped into his eyes. Instinctually, he blinked—a fatal error. The blood and ice coagulated at the seams of his eyelids, sealing them shut. Had he a mouth, he would scream, just once.

But he collected himself nonetheless, scooting fifteen feet west before stopping. He had little

way of knowing the depth below him at this point outside his interior map. Standing up was a play at fate. But he was tired. Were he to die here a thousand times standing, it would still be better than to die once, lying.

He stood quickly and intentionally. The sky lay quiet. The ground did not move, his feet planted firmly below him. The carrion was a mangled, fantastic, bloody mess. Had he a mouth, he would smile. But the man's face was still as he walked towards the cabin; he would have to check the rest of his traps tomorrow.





Too Many People in Art School Stressed the Intimacy of a Book

nat raum

& now i need everything to be close to me.
look back at how i only printed photographs
at 8 by 10 or smaller because i wanted
the voyeur to stand close & savor. the image

was the first way i learned to stand
before the page & weep. consider leda,

the subject of my high school photo project,
the silent victim of zeus' rape. consider
the parallel, myself ruined as such by fourteen.
now i need everything to be close to me,

visceral before physical. call it what it is—
a grayer shade of ace. i don't want only

to be wanted anymore. i need intimacy
in the sort of way i need poetry
in my immediate proximity, beset by two
paper covers in my spindly bare hands.

i cannot taste art on a screen & so keep
collecting volumes on a bookcase that begs

to burst, & i drive finishing nails
into plaster to hold postcard-size prints.
i trust the staying power of a sheet,
the difference a touch can usher.



Time Erased

Matthew Swann

Time Erased

Time ticks on and I idealize days away from work time ties life like a knot too tight for my finger nails I need my mother to loosen it her hands more fit for untangling the rope that draws and quarters me between today and tomorrow perhaps one day I too will become as adept at this task perhaps one day I will no longer need my mother I don't want to think about these things so I don't my mind too occupied always occupied with something to keep the time from wasting away like the summer meant for mother but seldom spent beside her

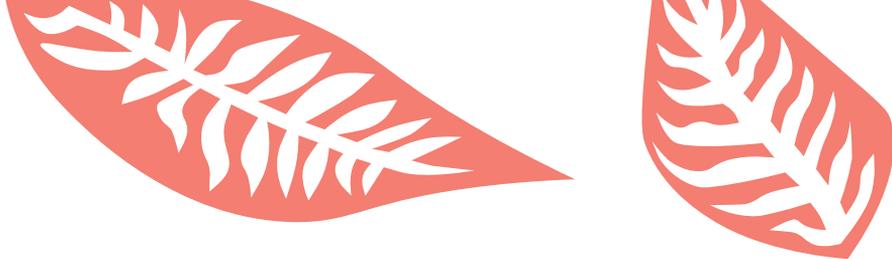
Time ticks and tears away moments I haven't had the time to idealize days away from work time ties life like a knot too tight for my finger nails I need my mother to loosen it her hands more fit for untangling the rope that draws and quarters me between today and tomorrow perhaps one day I too will become as adept at this task perhaps one day I will no longer need my mother I don't want to think about these things so I don't my mind too occupied always occupied with something to keep the time from wasting away like the summer meant for mother but seldom spent beside her





Eden

Katie Ator



First, Do No Harm

Jessica Hwang

What were the odds? Andrea Bolle was assigned to my caseload by pure chance. Cynthia, at the front desk, would have said, “The next available appointment is with Dr. David Amundson. Do Thursdays at 11 A.M. work for you, Ms. Bolle?”

Andrea carried into my corner office a whiff of the clientele from my stint at the crisis center, back when I was earning my Ph.D. I’d abandoned the suicidal patients, the domestic violence victims, the secret bulimics and the closeted gays to fill a coveted opening made available at a private clinic in the desert, some fifteen hundred miles from the shitty Midwestern town I’d grown up in.

No spoiled soccer mom here, complaining of an inattentive husband, or whining about the other mothers on the PTA committee, or confessing an affair with a friend’s spouse, or admitting a secret addiction to prescription pain meds. She was forty-two, five years younger than me, although she looked closer to fifty. She was a short, pear-shaped woman with dark hair cut like a swimmer’s cap and big dopey eyes that made you want to slap some sense into her. Her skirt and blouse were off the clearance rack at Hemerton’s; the imitation leather purse looked like she’d been carrying it around for two decades. No Friday afternoon trips to the spa for a facial and a deep tissue massage for this one. No mid-week splurges at the Darcy’s cosmetic counter. No weekend lunch reservations at Chago’s with three of her closest friends and followed by a \$9 coffee at The Lucky Bean.

When did I suspect Andrea Bolle was Cory Stedland’s ex-wife? Right away, I imagine, during our first session. I put the pieces together easily enough: coached his daughter’s softball team, worked as a web design artist, lived in Green Heights. I realized immediately that Andrea’s Cory was also my Cory—I’d been on social media fifteen months ago and memorized all the details. The boyish grin and laughing eyes, never far, came to mind now.

Andrea stared at the stone statue of a rearing horse that stood on my desk. “He cheated on me many times—and with multiple women. There’s just something about Cory and women. They flock to him and it’s like he can’t say no or something. We’re divorced now—it was finalized in June.”

It was currently August and hotter than Cleo Walker in a string bikini. Cleo was Tuesdays at 3 P.M. I nodded and stroked my chin as Andrea crumpled soggy tissues in her fists. I made cryptic notes by hand in a notebook I took home with me in the evenings to study and pore over. Of course I typed notations into my laptop as well: clinically depressed, internalized anger, unresolved resentment, overwhelmed as the primary caregiver for her twelve-year-old daughter, Pristine. Fear of growing old alone.

Andrea laughed without humor. “Until two months ago, I hadn’t balanced a checkbook in thirteen years. Can you believe that? Cory handled all that. Not that’s there’s anything to balance—the cost of the divorce mediator plus a

new battery for my car have me sitting at \$12.19 until payday. The only reason I'm able to come see you at all is my health insurance covers it at 100%." She studied the wall of books lined up neatly on the shelves behind my desk. "Can stress cause cancer, Doctor?"

"Not directly, no. Have you been diagnosed with cancer, Andrea?"

"Not yet but I think Cory might have given it to me. Also my stomach hurts all the time now. My general practitioner referred me to a gastroenterologist and she said I have IBS. The constipated kind."

I typed: *Illness Anxiety Disorder*.

During our next session Andrea said, "Ever since the divorce I only sleep four or five hours a night. I lie awake wishing I'd cheated on *him*, just to throw it in his face. Lauren—that's my best friend—she says I need to stop analyzing and agonizing over everything Cory says and does but it's not that easy, is it? We were together almost fourteen years." She picked at a cuticle. "I worry I'll never get over Cory. Do you... think I will?"

I typed: *Adjustment Disorder*. "I do, Andrea. Although to be clear, anger is valid. Anger is a clue, and a cue. It lets us know when something is wrong. Sometimes anger is the only appropriate response."

•

Kate met Cory Stedland in a bar. Where else? Sounds like the guy doesn't do much, other than drink and play golf. And fuck other men's wives.

Kate was my wife during the spring of 2014. She'd been my wife for eighteen years. I took her out to La Font's for her fortieth, just the two of us. Justin and Jasmine left behind to blare rap music and stare blankly at their cell phones. Antipasto, mussels in a marinara sauce, mushroom risotto, tiramisu, a subpar Riesling.

The following weekend, two gals from work took her out for a drink to celebrate. The next day, Kate didn't say the things she usually did—*You're being ridiculous* or *When would I have time to have an affair*—when I confronted her with the business card I'd found at the bottom of her purse, beneath the tissues coated in summer berry lipstick, dusty mints, loose change, crumpled chewing gum wrappers, and receipts from Hanlon's Grocery.

Kate had no need of a web designer—she could barely turn on the computer without asking Justin for help. I'd already checked her cell phone log, but if she'd called Stedland at any point she'd deleted it. I'd looked at the guy's business webpage and done a social media search—slicked back chestnut hair, white horsey teeth, good looks fading at forty-something, a wife and a young daughter.

She said, "Yes, I did sleep with someone else."

I waited for her to say what my clients reported saying to their spouses, or having said to them: *It was a mistake. It will never happen again. The sex was terrible—not like ours*. I stood with the business card pinched between thumb and forefinger, prepared to make her apologize and grovel and walk on eggshells for the next year, at least.

Kate said, "I want a divorce."

"Okay," I said. The card fluttered to the floor, landing at our feet.

•

Two days later, I followed her into the spare bedroom. It was filled with exercise equipment, plus her knitting supplies: skeins of multi-colored yarn, packages of needles, half-finished projects. She couldn't sleep in here, as there was no bed, and she wouldn't sleep in our bedroom—she'd been crashing on the downstairs sofa since Sunday. Kate looked about 50% better since leaving her 30s behind, and now I knew why.

“You’re leaving me for some tool you met at a bar?” I asked.

“No, David, I’m leaving you for me.” She slid onto the stationary bike.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Her sinewy legs pumped, her toned arms gliding back and forth. “Exactly what it sounds like. I need to find myself. We’ve been together for twenty years. It’s time for me to begin the next chapter of my life.”

•

The next chapter of Kate’s life turned out to be moving to Portugal and playing house with some douchebag named Tomas. *Borderline Personality Disorder*.

I tried my hand at the internet dating game. The string of women who met me at Millie’s Steak House were five to ten years older than their photos and bios indicated and, on average, thirty pounds heavier.

One woman talked exclusively about her ex and another hinted that she’d love to get married and quit her job as an insurance rep. Three of them mentioned wanting kids on the first date. One of the women was writing a novel and wanted to interview me, as her protagonist was a psychiatrist. One wanted to know if I could get her antidepressants. Another was attractive and seemed pleasant enough but never called me back. *Avoidant Personality Type*.

•

Jasmine called from Lisbon. “Daddy, Mom says we should make our Christmas plans early.”

Justin looks like me and Jasmine looks like Kate, even though they’re twins. He’s tall and broad-shouldered with remote eyes and a mouth chiseled from a big block of *go fuck yourself*. She looks like an after-thought thrown together with

the leftovers: stubby, sand-colored ponytail and nervous half-smile, all gawky knees and sharp elbows.

I stared at the skyline where the rust-colored mountains edged up against the indigo sky. “Why don’t you guys just stay there? It’ll be easier and cheaper.”

Behind me, the air conditioner hummed.

“But Daddy, you’ll be all *alone*.”

You’re almost seventeen. Call me *Dad* for Christ’s sake. “I’ll be fine. Say hello to your mother for me.”

•

Cleo Walker sat across my desk, one bare, tanned leg beneath the linen miniskirt crossed over the other. Chin-length ash blonde hair, tasteful jewelry, leather snakeskin-print pumps. The top note of her perfume was bergamot, the bottom note was patchouli.

She’d spent nineteen years unhappily married to the guy who knocked her up when she was seventeen, before finally divorcing him last January. The last four years of her marriage had been completely sex-less.

If I asked Cleo out, would she say yes—or report me to the licensing board?

She relayed her teenaged son’s most recent brush with the law. I assured her that fisticuffs and driving while drunk were things many young men tried their hands at before settling down into quite productive lives. The kicking in of the ex-girlfriend’s door and shoving her against a wall to spit on her before the girl’s mother appeared with a baseball bat was more concerning. I could tell Cleo needed a hug and wondered who would give it to her. After fifty minutes I bade her goodbye, my fingers clacking against the keyboard.

On Thursday Andrea Bolle said, “I found out this week Cory has been seeing one of the assistants

on Pristine's softball team. She's twenty-two." Her eyes were bloodshot, her skin blotchy. She'd skipped the concealer.

I didn't ask how she'd come across this information. "Do you think your ex-husband might be a sex addict?" Roman Hermanski came to mind—Wednesdays at one o'clock.

"What's that? Like an alcoholic?"

"Right, except with sex. Constantly seeking out the validation of casual sexual encounters, to the detriment of their personal relationships. Sometimes they even hire prostitutes. They're addicted to variety."

"Ohmygod! I hope Cory never did that while we were married."

"You've been tested for STDs since the divorce, I presume."

"Um."

"Andrea, please schedule an appointment for that right away. You need to be proactive about taking care of you now." Stupid-ass word—proactive—but the clients all seemed to eat it up.

She ducked her head. "Okay, I will if you think I should. It's good to know there are still some nice guys left out there, Dr. Amundson." Pink crept up her neck. I typed: *Dependent PD*.

I mean sure, my wife was living with (banging) Tomas now, but Cory Stedland had been the catalyst. For a few months I'd felt bitterness toward Kate, and hot rage engulfed me whenever the image of that grinning shithead poling *my* wife invaded my brain ("Was his dick bigger than mine? Had she screamed *Harder! Fuck me harder!* like she'd shouted in my car two decades ago?") But I was over all that now. In fact, I was going on a blind date tonight.

I slid my desk drawer open to re-read the latest text message: *Can't wait to finally meet you in person!! Another popped up: See you at seven! Excited!!*

Andrea was looking at me expectantly and, having missed her last comment, I murmured, "And how did that make you feel?"

"Well, I mean, first it was Danica—Danica's his nineteen-year-old coworker," she said at my blank look. "And now I find out he's also been sleeping with Sarah from softball."

What I should have asked her next was how she knew exactly what her ex-husband had been up to in the months since their divorce and why she was obsessing over the gritty details of his love (sex) life. I typed: *Patient appears to be fixated on her ex-husband*. However, I knew all too well the answers to those questions; I'd sought them out myself fifteen months ago. I said, "Your ex-husband seems to have a pattern of dating younger women."

She looked out the window. I stood to adjust the blinds. Two little boys were being walked by a black lab. The dog paused to urinate on the stupid fake grass Dr. Glass had insisted on installing in front of the building. I tapped on the window and shook my head at the boys. The desert is often described as barren, arid, desolate. Personally, I prefer the stripped-down silence to the music of lush lands: waves crashing against sandy beaches, wind whistling through profuse branches, the drum of rain as it pounds insistently against rooftops and pavement.

I assumed a serious face and Andrea stared up at me. I sat, and steepled my hands. "Andrea, I don't mean to offend you but may I ask a personal question, based on the things you've told me over the past weeks?"

Her hands clasped the battered purse. I'm sure she expected me to ask something horribly embarrassing about her sex life.

"Do you feel comfortable with your daughter staying with your ex-husband?"

Confusion crossed her features, and then slow comprehension. "Oh, haha well yes, I mean Cory

would never—no, not Pris. He isn't... well he isn't a *child molester* or anything like that." She tugged at the hem of her frumpy purple skirt. "He just—well, young women are prettier and happier, aren't they? Don't *all* men prefer younger women?"

I raised one eyebrow and she flushed. I said, "Okay, then. If you're totally satisfied then I am too." I tapped a note into my computer and jotted one in my notebook. "Young girls can sometimes develop hero worship toward an authority figure. I've seen it happen, even in my own profession. It's unfortunate, but it's human nature—sometimes those authority figures take advantage. I only asked because you mentioned your ex-husband"—I wouldn't say his name, I wouldn't—"is irresistible to the opposite sex. I imagine he's in quite close proximity to multiple young girls as head coach of the junior high softball team. If something happened, God forbid"—I didn't pray, but I knew Andrea did—"Pristine would not only be devastated on a personal level; she'd become an outcast at school and in the community as well."

Andrea inserted one fingernail between surprisingly attractive teeth. "Oh no, I mean, Cory is a sleaze—obviously—but he's a good dad. He would never do something like *that*."

•

The blind date turned out to be a dud, which I could have predicted—what well-adjusted adult uses that many exclamation points? She probably suffered from Histrionic Personality Disorder.

The next day's text read, *Had a terrific time!! Can't wait to do it again!!!*

•

Roman Hermanski strutted across the room and dropped into the armchair. "Christ, what a shit week. Julia called from Seattle. Our mom broke her fucking hip and she wants me to send a thousand dollars. It's always something with Jules, I swear to God."

Apparently Roman's mother was a Shakespeare fan and *Romeo and Juliet* was her favorite play. She had named her son Roman and her daughter Julia; small wonder the guy was fucked up.

I said, "How are things at home?"

His wife, Mandy, had threatened to divorce him after she found out he cheated with a neighbor and then, four months later, caught him in a compromising position with her second cousin. Desperate to avoid losing half of Mandy's grandfather's estate, Roman immediately offered to go to therapy to treat his sex addiction problem.

"Don't ask." He sat with legs spread wide in some kind of weird alpha display. "Also, Taylor chewed my ass for fucking around with Jennifer in admin. Shit, I never signed anything when he hired me saying I'd keep my hands off the office staff. Fuck him."

Roman had spent his twenties drinking and gambling and screwing, and his thirties sailing and skiing and collecting a salary from his father-in-law's investment firm while Mandy raised their two small children. The father-in-law had fired him after the affair with the cousin and Roman had subsequently landed a job with a rival company and was currently being threatened with a non-compete lawsuit.

He said, "Shit doc, I know I'm supposed to be laying off the chicks now that Mandy is all pissy about that shit with them other gals but I figure I got plenty of time to quit. I've only been seeing you for a month. These things take time to cure, right?"

"Well, Roman, they do take time and the occasional relapse isn't wholly unexpected."

"Shit, if you saw Jennifer you'd know truer words have never been spoken. Natural blonde, 34C and a mouth like a Hoover."

My fingers flew over the keyboard.

Andrea Bolle scurried to the armchair. “Dr. Amundson, Cory and I had an *awful* fight the other day. On Monday.”

“Do you want to talk about that?”

“Yes, I’m just so upset about it! I told him it was completely embarrassing for Pristine that everyone knows he’s sleeping with her assistant softball coach and he totally blew up at me. He got really defensive and when I pushed the issue he hollered at me and called me—well, I won’t repeat that part but it wasn’t pleasant.”

“He didn’t get physical with you, did he?”

“No, just made me *really* ticked off. I pointed out to Cory that *Softball Sarah* is only ten years older than his own daughter.”

I smothered a smile at the flash of sass. Andrea gripped the arms of the chair, her unpainted nails digging into the leather.

“It’s inappropriate. It’s disgusting, really,” she said.

“Well, it is, yes.”

“Also, Pris heard us bickering and blamed me, of course. Her father can do no wrong.”

“Sounds like he’s manipulated her over to his side.”

“Oh yes, definitely. Cory can convince anyone of anything. He has half our neighbors—well, my old neighbors now—believing I’m crazy. He told two of his friends I’ve been stalking him. Which isn’t true.”

“Of course not. You’re required to maintain a relationship with your ex for the sake of your daughter. To be perfectly frank, Andrea, I admire you for watching Pristine and her father extra closely. Better safe than sorry.” I clicked a ballpoint pen repeatedly. “Don’t ever let your ex-husband make you question your own reality. I hope you know this is a safe space. If your ex ever does something violent, or you think he might, you should tell me right away, and I’ll help you.”

She blew the wispy bangs out of her eyes. “Oh I know that, Dr. Amundson, thank you. He’s all talk—he’s just trying to intimidate me into letting him behave irresponsibly.”

“He’s likely manipulating the young women he’s dating as well.”

“You’re so right, Dr. Amundson. Cory *is* taking advantage of Sarah and Danica and God knows who else. I drove by the house twice last week and one of the times a strange car was parked in the driveway. Probably some woman he picked up at a bar.”

Indeed. “Well, I’m proud of you for standing up for Pristine. You’re a good mom, Andrea.”

She leaned toward me, a smile transforming the worn face into something slightly less depressing. “Yes, thanks for saying that. Pristine is everything to me.”

•

Cleo Walker had met someone. He sounded basic, as Justin would say.

Roman Hermanski was banging his dental hygienist as well as a client’s wife, whom he’d met at the corporate barbeque. “I’m staying away from Mandy’s cousin though, so that’s progress, right Doc?”

I slid my keyboard closer. “Every time you successfully resist temptation is a victory, Roman.”

“Mandy wants to know what’s wrong with me—medically, I mean. I told her none of this is my fault.”

I looked up. “Hypersexuality, impulse control disorder, and possible PTSD.”

Roman’s thumbs flew over his phone screen, presumably crafting a text to his wife. “SPD-what?”

•

“Andrea, I’m very pleased and proud that you haven’t bowed down to your ex-husband’s gaslighting tactics. I know the past several months haven’t been easy for you. Or for Pristine.” I tapped a pen against the edge of my desk.

“That’s just it, Dr. Amundson. Cory is damaging Pristine *psychologically*, even if she’s too young to understand it right now. All the fighting and the—everything else he does—the drinking and the womanizing, she *internalizes* those things. They’re shaping her and setting her up for failure later in life.”

“I’m just relieved Pristine has one stable parent she can count on, even if she’s unaware of the value you add to her life during these turbulent years. Everything you’ve told me thus far indicates... Cory... has a very low moral threshold.”

“Oh, he really does, Dr. Amundson. I asked him last weekend if he has his girlfriends over to the house while Pristine is there and he just laughed. He’s a terrible example to her. I asked Pristine if women come over but she isn’t speaking to me right now.”

“So he’s turned his own child against her mother.” I met and held her eyes. “What a sad situation. I’m sorry you’re in it, Andrea.”

•

“Dr. Amundson speaking.”

“Doctor, this is Andrea. Andrea Bolle. Cory’s trying to take Pristine away from me!”

I put her on speaker and got up to close my office door. “Andrea, just breathe, and then tell me what happened. Take your time.”

“He—he—” Ragged exhales and half-sobs floated through the phone. I pulled my notebook closer. “He wants full custody and...Pristine wants to live with him. He wants to move—he wants to take her to Florida, where his parents live.”

I waited, and after the high-pitched keening had slid into hiccups and gasps I said, “That bastard.” And then, “I apologize, Andrea. That last comment was unprofessional of me. It’s just that I’ve seen the damage people like your ex-husband can cause. Whole families ripped apart by the selfish and immature actions of one person.”

She blew her nose with a honk. “It’s all just so *unfair!* Cory’s the one who cheated—not me. *He’s* the reason we’re not a family anymore and now it’s like he’s just throwing the drinking and the partying and the other women in my face to punish me for actually having the courage to leave. And now *this*.”

“You’re allowed half-custody, Andrea. Don’t panic. The courts might allow Pristine to choose but you’ll still be able to see her.” I spun my chair to gaze out the window. The cleaners had left spotty streaks on the glass again.

“But *Florida*, Dr. Amundson! I can’t afford a custody lawyer—I’m six weeks late on my car payment and I just put a hundred and ninety dollars on my credit card because Gus ate one of Pristine’s socks and needed x-rays. What should I *do?*”

“You should calm down and take a deep breath. Don’t make any rash decisions; we’ll figure everything out together. You might try gently talking to Pristine about how you’re feeling.”

“God, she won’t even speak to me. The divorce is all *my* fault, to hear her tell it. What was I supposed to do? Tell her in graphic detail about all the times her father cheated on me? I really hate him, Dr. Amundson. I can’t believe I ever loved him at all. Ever since the divorce, he’s just been so *mean*.”

“He’s certainly not making things easy on you. Regardless, I suspect everything will work out fine. Florida isn’t the end of the world.”

She sniffled. “I’m sorry I called you so late.”

"It's not too late. My last appointment is at four but I often stay until seven or eight. You can call me anytime, Andrea."

"Yes, I know that. Thank you, Dr. Admunson. Good night."

•

In the lobby, Cynthia jumped up from behind the front desk. I said, "You weren't waiting on me, I hope. I've told you I'm perfectly capable of locking up after hours, Cyn."

She followed me to the door. The keys jangled. "Oh that's okay, Dr. Amundson. I'm not doing anything tonight anyway."

She trotted after me as I strode to my car. She had parked hers next to mine.

Cynthia technically isn't off limits, although Dr. Glass (and certainly stick-up-his-ass Dr. Wilker) would frown on it. Cynthia is one of those good-from-far but far-from-good types. The round, pert, little ass bent over a filing cabinet and the shiny hair hanging halfway down the narrow back were false advertising: her face was asymmetrical as hell with dopey eyes and droopy cheeks. Her parents had evidently been too cheap to invest in braces.

"Um, goodnight then, Dr. Amundson. See you tomorrow."

I closed the car door and started the ignition. A lone coyote, ribs protruding, sidled between the cacti, low to the ground. Was Cleo on a date tonight with her new boyfriend? Had she slept with him yet?

•

"Your ex-husband doesn't own a gun, does he, Andrea? I'm concerned he may turn violent. I'm worried about you and Pristine."

"Oh no. I mean, yes—Cory does have a gun—but he'd never do something like *that*."

"People do out-of-character things when they're stressed. Horrible, terrible things. I've seen it, more than once, unfortunately. I'll never get the images out of my head, as long as I live."

She tugged at a lock of limp hair. "All we do is fight now. Cory used to be so sweet and so charming... I suppose he still is—just not toward me. Our arguments go in endless circles, nothing ever gets settled. I've lost four pounds since June. Do you think I might have anorexia?"

"Doubtful." I glanced up. "No thoughts of self-harm, correct?"

"No..."

"Does he still plan to move to Florida with Pristine?"

Tears formed. "Yes. Pristine is adamant she wants to live with Cory." Andrea looked up. "I can't just quit my job! And my parents—they're in their seventies. My mom's recovering from cataract surgery and my dad has early-stage Alzheimer's. It's been an absolute nightmare."

"Oh Andrea, I'm so sorry you're going through this. I suspect your ex-husband will find it even easier to poison Pristine against you once you're two-thousand miles away. He likely gives her freedoms inappropriate for a child in order to sway her affection toward him and away from you."

"Yes, I'm always the bad guy. I called Cory's mother—to try to explain—and she was a total witch to me. I'm not proud of this but I ended up hanging up on her." She smoothed her wrinkled skirt. "Also I sent two texts to a woman he's been seeing and he chewed me out for that. They met at a *concert*. I just want to make sure the people Cory is introducing Pristine to aren't criminals. This is all so *unhealthy* for her."

I typed: *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*. "Try to keep our motto in mind here, Andrea: focus on what you can control."

“I don’t know why he wants to move to Florida. He doesn’t even like his parents.” Her bottom lip pooched out. “I can’t imagine him in the south. He hates the humidity.”

“Perhaps he’s simply looking for a fresh start. Maybe he’s bluffing.”

“He’s not. He put a deposit down on a house in Sarasota. I’m going to lose Pristine.”

Cleo Walker had broken up with her boyfriend. If I referred her to another therapist, at a different practice, how long until I could legally ask her out? She—

Andrea said, “Cory says he’ll hire a lawyer if I don’t let Pristine go with him to Florida. He told her it was my fault she can’t go and now she hates me. Also he promised her Disney World if she chooses him.” Across the hall, a phone jingled and was abruptly cut off. “Cory offered to let her come home in the summers and for Christmas break but I told him that’s not good enough. I’ve never been apart from Pristine for more than a week and that’s just while she’s away at summer camp. Right now Cory only has her on weekends.”

“You can certainly appeal to the court. Pristine is too young to be allowed to choose but the judge may take her wishes into consideration.”

Andrea leaned forward to wrap her arms around her knees. The scent of coconut shampoo wafted toward me. “But I can’t afford to fly Pristine back and forth from Florida to Arizona every other week. Cory won’t pay, that’s for sure. Plus there’s school.”

“It’s unfortunate. These situations often turn ugly when played out in the legal system. Also, I worry about your fragile relationship with Pristine if you try to force her to stay.”

“She already hates me. She calls me by my first name—when she talks to me at all. Pristine and I used to be so *close* when she was little. What

if Cory gets remarried and some other woman raises her? Can’t I just tell the judge about Cory’s drinking and sleeping around?”

“It doesn’t exactly work like that. There would have to be something on record, multiple instances of him being in trouble with the law. Drunk driving citations or police records of domestic violence, for example. Given Cory’s recent behavior, I’m mostly concerned about the company he keeps. The excessive drinking and partying you’ve described could eventually lead to him making even poorer life choices. He may have addiction issues. Does he often invite friends over to his house while Pristine is there? Male friends? I hate to go there, Andrea, but my first concern is for Pristine’s safety.”

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth, staring at me.

She used Stedland’s own gun. One bullet through his shoulder and another into his neck as he lay passed out drunk across his living room sofa, staged to look like a burglary. Pristine was staying overnight at a friend’s house.

Of course, I was called by the defense. Andrea had waived her confidentiality rights. Her lawyer, a cocky little twerp named Keith Albright, wore the same smirky salesman look Andrea’s deceased ex-husband had possessed. He was going with the battered spouse defense. When I met with him, Andrea gazed at him throughout our brief meeting, barely sparing me a glance. Albright decided it would be in his client’s best interests if the prosecution avoided gaining access to my case notes during discovery. Andrea accepted the advice of her counselor. I didn’t take the stand.

Tears fell from cloudy eyes as Andrea’s mother explained to the court what a kind and loving person her daughter was. Andrea’s friend Lauren and her coworkers described for the jury the

incredible strain she had been under since the divorce. Cory's family and friends told the court his ex-wife had been stalking and harassing him.

Andrea was sentenced to twenty-five years at a women's correctional facility. Pristine went to live with her paternal grandparents in Florida.

Kate married Tomas and stayed in Lisbon. The twins graduated high school; Justin moved to Sweden and Jasmine to Denver. Roman Hermanski's wife divorced him after she walked in on him in bed with the math tutor. Cleo Walker started an internet romance and moved to Vermont when the guy proposed.

I stayed right here, doing what I've always done:
Healing the broken.





Damnation

Eric Abele



The Pews Were Empty

Alex Carrigan

After Nolcha Fox's "Cruel Heart"

The pews were empty when he died, no one to praise or honor him.
Eleanor Rigby at least had Father MacKenzie to warm a seat. All he had were flies.

All he had were flies because he cordoned off the pews each time
he spat curses and brewed venom from the steps of his porch.

The steps of his porch rotted away from disuse once it became clear
he couldn't even draw in a door-to-door salesman without fear of tongue lashings.

Tongue lashings were his love language, taught to him by others who
sharpened their tongues on grindstones and savored the pain they collected.

They collected eyes full of tears to make up for the lack of tears their
deaths would inspire. This man preferred to use the tears to overflow his bathtub.

He overflowed his bathtub the day he died, having scarred enough people
to fill it up, but too much on the bathroom floor made a quick end of his life.

His life only mattered when his downstairs neighbors complained of water damage, hence
the pews were empty when he died, no one to praise or honor him.



Corrections

Christopher Munde

miracle three

Upon arrival, artist Alfie Bradley would work through the collection of knives and weapons, very carefully, to determine what he had to work with. [...] A number of weapons received were still in evidence packaging and some even included traces of blood.

-“The Making of the Knife Angel” British Ironwork Centre & Sculpture Park

And with blood the occult crawls in:

“Stay/Be safe,” “law stay away:” A form

Of homeopathic recapitulation, its facets

Overwhelming, an infection untreated

Casts its blessing:

Borealis of glassy refractions, a contortion,

A conflation of onlookers’ colors

And jewelry, and a face, unlike the Madonna

Of Syracuse, that would never get caught slipping:

Why

This deluge of blunted blades, this threat

Of reconciliation an Old Testament kiss, might,

In enough light, with enough blood, unfurl

Its stars and combust.

miracle two

Attention Drug Dealers – Report Your Competition

-Billboards in Mahoning County, Ohio

How Christ, in Bosch’s limbo, rode in on a knife,

On the ballistics of a mule through Jerusalem’s

Spleen, the red and blue lights encroach, and

Oscillate in the ribcage of the angel, until

Battle lines shift to ditch law and lawless

On one side, and on the other, recidivist

Dead, irredeemable dead hollering

“Please,” unrehabilitated addicts,
Irreconcilable dead unrepentant,
Cloistered behind knives: How
Paraphernalia and blood
Dappled each restroom
Changing table: This
Once-constellation
Now bleached
Into sub-
Mission.

miracle one

The undercover agent led [Mark] Winne to a Gwinnett County store which sold, among other unrelated items, Santa Muerte and Malverde figures, and the kind of candles the agent says are often used by metro Atlanta drug traffickers.

The candles are decorated with phrases such as ‘law stay away,’ ‘free get out of jail,’ and ‘tapa boca.’

-“Drug cartels worship ‘narco saints,’
making them more dangerous, DEA says;”
WSB-TV Atlanta

Occult in its simplicity, with the flood-
Light on its blades threading serpent constellations
Through Jerusalem’s spleen: One serpent’s head howling
Pepper spray, stray bullet, then automatic fire,
And another fuming fentanyl:
Imperceptible,
Like one’s faith crowded out by the sheer
Godliness, what a tiny chapel means when it shouts
Great and Terrible, sprouts its first gargoyle, draws pigeons
Infinitum until it stretches out its spire, ascends as a cathedral of gray,
Gray waste: From this spire stone heads
Cascade
Onto the freeway, tumble under a canopy of torsos strung
From the overpass upon which the serpents churn
And snap at one another’s tails, pretending as the scales flash
Red & blue and red rag blue flag: It all arrives on this
Steel mule, this metastasis
Of mirrors flaring wings,
This plea to human blood arrives
With arms outstretched, alights to threaten one
And all with its embrace.





Lourdes

Ben Goodman

Instead of what I tell you now,
remember the sound of its phrasing.
Look how the words come to
me, in falling snow, losing
their discreteness as they grow.

There will never be a way to tell you.
I stand on the frozen pond;
The wind pauses for a time.
Who else loves you enough
to hurt you and stay standing?

If I speak the season over,
will you turn into the tarn?
I do not want belief to be an issue.
That must be what love is:
returning where I've never been.

The highest wind courses through
you there. I want to be forever standing
at a distance only you can hear.
And waste no time speaking.
And weave my voice into your hair.



My Sister

Natisha Bhola

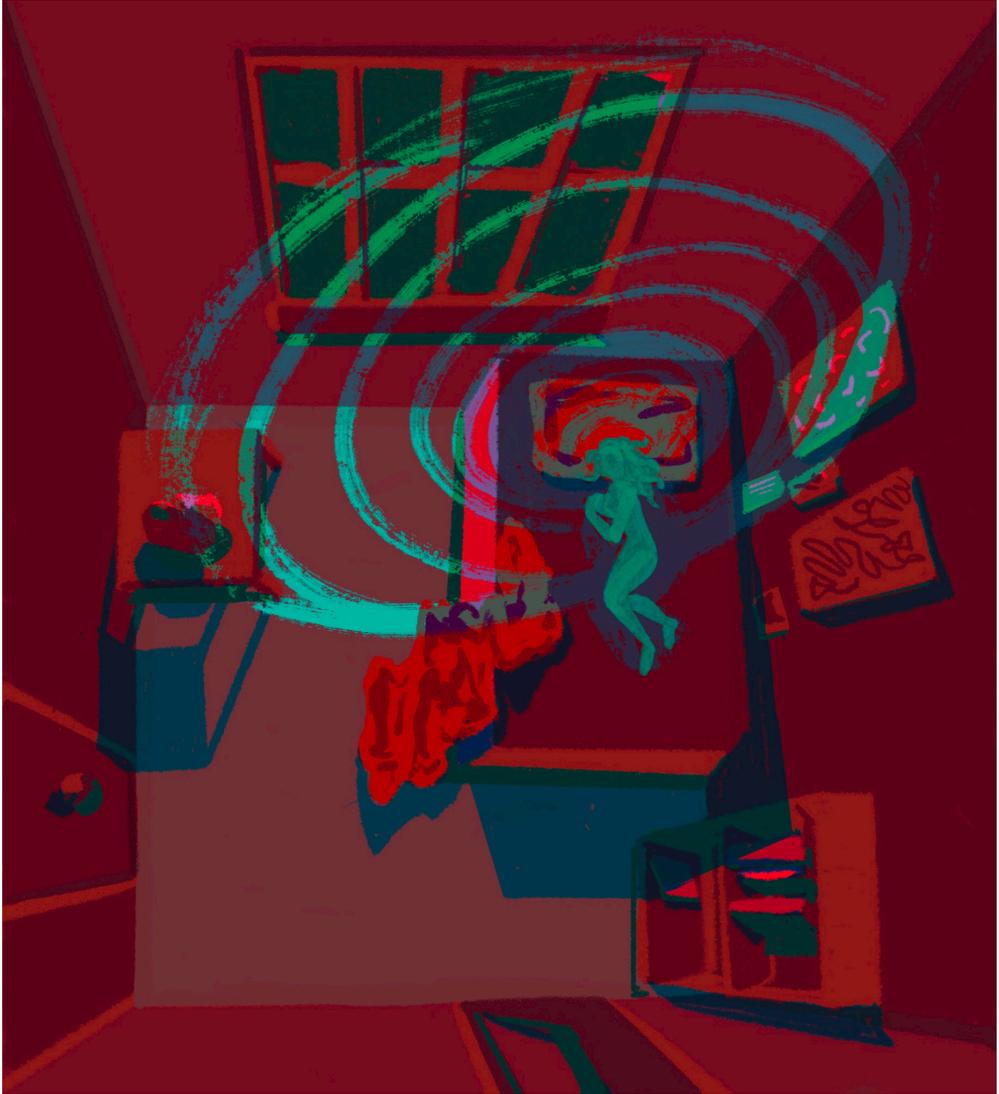


Maybe, a Yes, a No

Kelly Grace Thomas

In this blank season, I count and count reason.
Waves of worry, of would, I dance with blood.
The hope, the here, so near. Each chance: blooming,
blurring, turning. Me: a maybe mother.
I wish. The calendar: it seeds, it bleeds.
We try. We chance. I change. I chart. The graphs.
The gaps. I measure. I math. Worn by wait.
The coats, the labs: hint age, quote time, test rot:
ovaries, eggs. Maybe, a yes, a not.
We lose. We gain. Try again. Bury names.
An almost-boy, a close call-girl, two weeks
then no. I hoard my hope. Tread time to cope.
Pray to green, whatever god I need to thank.
Please: let me write this child, fill in this blank.





Spiraling Out

Carina Falter



Interaction Mechanisms

Hunter Schmale

My roommate was at auditions for the spring musical, and I was now otherwise not in contact with any people at the college, so around six I went out by myself to get dinner at Liberty, the farther food hall. City Bistro, the food hall conveniently attached to my dorm building, was closed on Thursdays.

It was late January, practically spring in Charleston, the temperature on a cool day usually pushing fifty, but I was nonetheless wearing jeans and my deceased uncle's big orange coat with the brown collar. I didn't need the coat for warmth – I was, in fact, too warm – but without it I felt invisible, as if the old coat was the only thing standing between wretched me and the totalizing absence of an identity.

Outside it was dark and lively. Everyone who hadn't been out partying on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and everyone who had, were bustling down the streets, out of dorms, out of halls, floating in college-filtered clusters of young, beautiful bodies toward King, the heart of the city, where the clubs are. Charleston is one of the oldest cities in America. It's a gothic, cobbled maze of towering fortresses, many of which turn out to be hotels. None are taller than the steeples of the churches, which, indeed, get quite close to touching God. Lately, some sort of hip-minded authority has been trying to cover up the unmistakable mark of relentless, pervading English aristocracy with pretty colors and hyper-modern restaurants, but the old-world looms beneath, intractable; Charleston is a Classical, flourishing English city. The streets wind on inwardly forever in nowhere curves and complex intersections, and outwardly all roads lead to the harbor, to Rainbow Row, where the merchant mansions are painted in every conceivable color and great iron fountains act as splendid attractions to the abundant vacationing families, and as showers to the homeless, equally abundant. In my first weeks there, I gave money to homeless people maybe five times, but after that I stopped. If I'd continued to give it to them every time they asked, I would've had none left for myself to buy Delta-8 carts at the little smoke shop where they kindly accepted my obviously fake ID (Delta-8: a psychoactive cannabinoid sourced from hemp, not marijuana, and thus legally sellable in non-dispensary smoke shops. It contains trace levels of THC and in even small doses can create quite a similar effect to regular ole' marijuana, though almost always notably more head-coldy kind of highs; headaches seem to be inevitable for some reason).

Except for a few long walks which had left me with even lonelier feelings than the feelings the walks had been employed to alleviate, my experience in Charleston had become limited to the small, isolated quarter where the college was, my dorm room, one of the two food halls, and the smoke shop – a short walk from my dorm – where I bought the carts I would then use to get high, by myself, back in my dorm room. First semester had been a whirlwind – a messy, blurry glob of first times, last times, regrets, mistakes, and short-circuited relationships. Now in the second week of second semester, things for me had come to a sort of emotional standstill. I was down. I felt totally disconnected from all things, particular-

ly all people. Walking down the street, zipping coyly in and out of giddy groups of soon-to-be partying students who had somehow managed to figure out something I hadn't, I'd never felt more alone.

I knew I wasn't meant to be there. First semester had been crazy because I was still figuring it out. Now I knew, and everything was dead. Earlier that week I cut my wrist for the first time to try and feel something. All I felt was a little sting, so I made another cut next to the first, but it was the same. I put a band-aid over both of them and tried to forget that I'd done it.

Liberty Food Hall was the bigger of the two, also poorer of quality, though all the food served in both halls was essentially shit. It was almost empty; everyone had taken to the streets. I got into a sparse little line and ambled slowly along, waiting for one of the food hall workers (all of whom were, in both halls, without one single exception, black) to plop some rice and noodles on my tray, when I saw her.

A week earlier, I'd written a poem about her:

Kathryn by the canvas

Sits so silently

She adds another stroke

But she don't like the way it looks

She was with a friend I didn't know (I didn't know any of her friends) and they were casually strolling toward the line I was in. Did I want to talk to Kathryn? Did I especially, very badly, want not to talk to her? Probably both. She had been the only thing really keeping me on at the college. For a week and a half it had looked like I might have a shot with her. We'd even been on a long walk together, the nicest I'd ever experienced in Charleston, during which Kathryn actually and without any apparent irony said the words: "I cannot believe how *nice* it is here! I mean, we live at *vacation*." Suffice it to say, I did not agree with her, but I thought that being around her all the time might cause some of her native positivity to cling to me, to redeem me from my corroding pessimism about Charleston specifically and life as a whole. But that walk had been the end of things. After it she stopped responding to my texts and avoided my eyes in the class we had together, Intro to World Religions. I suppose she was able to smell my vileness and rightly made the decision to steer clear (*she don't like the way it looks*), but it was tough on me. I'd banked sort of a lot on being with her.

In line at Liberty, the few people between me and Kathryn and her friend (normal-looking-Charleston-girl, blow-your-brains-out-of-your-skull-gorgeous-blonde) evidently decided they were satisfied with the contents of their trays and left the line, clearing the way between me and Kathryn, my one chance at salvation, my only door into a world where college wasn't a humiliating personal failure. Kathryn was obviously hesitant to bridge the little gap. I guess I was too. I was suddenly keenly, self-consciously aware of having my uncle's coat on, the old fading-orange thing like a dying sun wrapped around me. I told myself that if she invited me to sit with her and her friend, or even, short of that, if she attempted just a little conversation with me, lent me even the smallest ration of her unending loveliness, then everything would be okay, I would not, in fact, die right there in line at Liberty Food Hall.

"Heyy," Kathryn said.

"Hi."

She put her head down, attending to her tray and conversing with her friend. Repellently, I lingered for a moment, giving her a chance to not kill me, but she killed me. I wheeled out of line and sat alone at a little table in the far corner of the hall, scarfed down a quarter of my food, got rid of the tray, and booked it out of Liberty, back toward my dorm.

The streets were completely student-flooded now, a parade of happy, floating, jostling faces. I would've traded probably anything to feel how I felt a few minutes earlier, walking toward Liberty, instead of how I felt now, walking away. I half-ran, half-stumbled. I looked crazy, but no one noticed. No one was looking. I knew no one would, and that was why I could afford to look crazy. It didn't matter. No one cared.

Back in my dorm, I knew radical action had to be taken, I just didn't know what. I had no one at the college to call. All of my "friends" from first semester I hadn't spoken to in so long it would be offensive to call them now. Same thing for my friends from home. Ryan, my roommate, was still at auditions and would be all night, and, anyway, despite loving Ryan, I had a strict no-sharing-of-personal-information-policy with him; being roommates simply posed too many complications. I thought about cutting my wrist again, but I worried it would only make me feel worse. No, I had to call someone. What I needed was to call someone who could pluck me from the dreary circumstance I'd found myself in, and there was only one person who could do it.

My mom's voice came through like it always did when I called her – surprised. I didn't call very often, almost never. The last time I had had been to ask for money.

"Hey, what's up?" she said.

I was lying on my little bed, still wearing my uncle's orange coat.

"Hey, so, I'm having kind of a hard time down here."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not very happy."

"Oh?"

"I mean, I'm probably less happy than I've ever been before in my life."

"Oh."

Things were slowly dawning for her, flags rising, but I needed to make my point sharp and clear, like a bullet. I needed to drop out, and I needed to do it now.

"There's something wrong with me, I mean. Something wrong with my brain. Moreso than just clinical depression, which we of course both know all too well that I have. There's some mechanism functioning in my brain, some additional functioning mechanism, I'm saying, like, compounded on top of the depression that keeps me from being able to interact normally with people."

"Well, I'm confused. Are you not happy or are you having trouble interacting with people?"

"Both. The not being able to interact with people makes me very unhappy, and probably the unhappiness has a lot to do with the interaction mechanism."

Getting all tangled up in semantics would do me no favors.

“And also I just want to die and I don’t know what to do and I don’t think I can do it anymore.”

“Oh, Hunter. Why haven’t you said anything until now? Your father and I thought you were happy there. The impression you gave us on your breaks was that you were happy there.”

“I was lying. Or maybe not lying, exactly, but, like, subconsciously trying to make sure you weren’t worried about me. I think maybe I didn’t believe it then myself. I thought maybe things could get better, maybe I could still figure it out and be happy here, but it’s just...it’s too late. It’s too late.”

“Why is it too late? What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t tell her that, among other equally trivial things, a girl had rejected me and now I wanted to drop out. I needed something more grandiose, more concerning, something to where she’d be foolish to let me stay.

“A few days ago, I was feeling really low, and I cut my wrist. I’ve never done it before. I’ve never before in my life cut my wrist and then I come to Charleston and I cut my wrist. This place is bad for me.”

There was a substance to my mother’s silence on the other end. I felt guilty, not just for telling her about it, but for doing it in the first place. For making her the mother with a son like me.

“Oh Hunter. Oh no. Were you trying to kill yourself?”

“No, just hurt myself.”

“What...what did you use?”

Her questions were pointed yet random, mindlessly groping. She, in one instant, with all her motherly affections, felt both the desire to know everything about me hurting myself and the desire to know nothing at all. To know precisely the horror that had befallen her little darling and to forget that her darling had ever existed.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I’d used a boxcutter from the beginner tool kit Ryan kept under his bed.

“Have you done it again?”

“No, but I’ve wanted to.”

I was digging myself into a kind of hole; it would’ve been better to have not said anything about the wrist cutting, but my goal was a parent-approved total drop out, and I knew from the moment I opened my mouth that the whole “brain mechanism...can’t interact with people” thing wasn’t going to be enough. It was a low moment. I wondered if the true reason I’d cut my wrist had been so I could use the information in a situation exactly like this one. I thought: Am I a sociopath?

“Well, if you’re not safe there by yourself...”

“I don’t know what else to say, mom. I’m probably not safe. I mean, I did it once, right? And I want to drop out. That’s what I want. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

More unbearable silence. She was thinking. To know, not to know, to know, not to know...

Very quietly, she said: “I thought you would be happy there.”

Was she sad for me or disappointed in me? Is there even a difference?

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m not.”

We discussed logistics for a few minutes. Promising, of course, that I wouldn’t hurt myself or do any other stupid thing until someone could get down there to get me, I was to take the night to give things a final thinkover, and, in the morning, if I still felt the same way, I was to start packing my belongings, inform my professors of my decision, and begin pursuing the proper channels of administrative action to ensure everything was filed and accounted for and that my parents could get as much of their money back as possible.

“Call me again tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, I will.”

“I love you, Hunter. So much. I’m sorry for what you’re going through.”

“I love you too.”

And just like that, my radical action had been taken. Nothing was official yet, but in my head I was no longer a student. The feeling wasn’t elation. It was more like relief. Suspension from duty. Like all the mental games and barriers I’d been melancholically hosting were finally booted. Whatever inhibiting mechanism I’d been trying in vain to articulate was certainly functioning no more, as if the attempt to articulate it had itself resolved the problem. Suddenly totally free of the shame I would have felt at contacting anyone other than my mom moments earlier, and now strangely in the mood to talk, I texted Aurora.

Hey so I think I’m probably dropping out.

She texted back immediately: *What omg are you okay?? Can I see you?*

Her directness brought back some of the old shame. I hesitated.

I’m in a pretty vulnerable place right now. I don’t know if it’s such a good idea.

Again, an immediate response: *We can meet in cougar mall and sit on a bench. Please? I really want to see you right now.*

Fairly confident that our rendezvous on a public bench (Cougar Mall was the wide open, brick-lined strip of campus between the English buildings, often busy with students even after dark) wouldn’t devolve into self-harming sex, I agreed to meet her. I headed out to the mall, notably feeling no resentment toward any of the happy students I passed on my way. I almost felt sorry for them. I felt like an adult, a normal citizen of the real world, while they were dumb kids, wasting their time partying and not understanding anything. I felt the same way toward the black marble cougar guarding the mall’s front entryway; I felt sorry for it that it had to guard such a silly thing. I sat on a bench and soon Aurora appeared out of the dark. She sat down next to me.

“So,” I said.

“Are you okay?”

"I'm really good, actually. I don't think I've felt this good since before college."

"That's good!"

"It was a mistake. It was all a big mistake. Coming here, I mean. I thought, I thought, well, you do well in high school and then you go to college because that's what you do. You go to a college very far away from home and you turn into an adult, you become a completely different person. You become a person with an identity and skills and knowhow, and there's a very clean, very definitive line drawn between your childhood and your adulthood, and you can look over the line and laugh at your younger self and know how much smarter you are now," I took a big breath. "But that's not what happened. I think I misunderstood. Or I just did what other people wanted me to do. I don't know. I mean, I – well, I totally blew it, didn't I?"

She didn't answer.

"Don't answer that. There was nothing to blow, I guess. It just didn't work out."

The happy chatter of distant, youthful merriment pulsed through the warm air above us. That sound could have been from a different century, a different world entirely.

"Anyway," I said, "I'm getting a clean slate. I'm saying goodbye to all this."

"I had a few friends that dropped out when I was a freshman. It's really common. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed. I feel really good."

"That's good. I'm happy for you."

She seemed distracted.

With, I'll admit, some effort, I said: "What's up with you?"

She started crying—Sobbing, actually. Before I'd even put an arm around her she had her head on my shoulder, shedding tears onto the brown collar of my uncle's coat. I thought she was crying about me dropping out, so I kept apologizing, but eventually she managed to say "no, no, it's not that, I'm happy for you. It's just, I've done something I'm really not proud of, something I feel really shitty about it." She kept crying and crying and I wondered what she could feel so bad about. She'd had a fairly difficult life, I knew, the sort of life I couldn't even imagine; her mother had once tried to kill herself while the two of them were staying together in a hotel room. I asked her what she felt so bad about and she told me that she'd met a man online, an older man. This was no surprise to me. I knew she sometimes let middle-aged men take her out on dates, buy her expensive dinners, take her on their boats, and maybe kiss her and fondle her a little. People with difficult, ambiguous parental situations often make irresponsible sexual decisions. What happened? I asked. She told me that one of these older men had offered her a large sum of money, nine hundred dollars, to have sex with her, and that she'd then had the sex with him and took the money, too. Neither of us used the word prostitute, but this was what she was telling me, the reason she was weeping on my shoulder. I wondered: Why did she need the nine hundred dollars (her father was rich, a salesman of experimental pharmaceutical drugs, and generous)? Would she have had sex with the man for free, or had she done it purely for the money? Why did she feel the need to tell me the exact sum? Did the largeness of the sum make her feel better or worse about the sex? Did she

subscribe to the line of thought that suggested sex work was actually a feminist thing? Did she think it was possible that she was just trying to hurt herself, that her lamentably naïve sexual irresponsibility was her greatest, most spiteful weapon against herself? There were no right questions to be asked, no questions to be asked at all. I couldn't help but acknowledge, to myself, the unflattering light this development shined on the casual sex we'd had only a few months earlier. I held her close and told her it was okay, it's okay, it's okay. It was nice to hold someone; it's a little bit like being held.

Once she stopped crying, she pulled away and wiped her nose with her sleeve. "That was nice," she sniffled. "I'm sorry to make everything about me."

"It's okay," I said. "Your thing was a lot more interesting."

We laughed. It's so easy to laugh after you've cried. I hadn't cried, but Aurora's release had acted as a strange sort of outlet for a tension that'd been building in me for a long time, building since even before college, before the stillness and before the whirlwind. I wasn't going to weep for my departure from Charleston – from the life I'd been led to believe I was meant to live – so Aurora did it for me. And I was her strange outlet, as well. She'd been carrying this horrible guilt around with her with no one to share it with. She couldn't tell the people she was closest to because she lived with them, literally – she lived in an apartment with her best friends. Feeling their silent judgment, or even their sympathy, which, being the hyper-progressive young people that they were, would just be veiled judgment, directed at her, close quarters, every day, would be unbearable. Likewise, every student at the college was a threat; anyone she could tell was someone who could tell someone else, and soon the whole college would know, everyone would know, there was no safe person to go to, she was utterly alone with no lifeline. And then she gets a text from me, out of the blue: *Hey so I think I'm probably dropping out*. We hadn't spoken in weeks. No wonder she wanted to see me so badly. Is there a more perfect person to confide in than someone who'll be gone forever in a few days?

"I have a bunch of shit I need to do tomorrow morning," I said, "To drop out and all, I mean. You should come along."

She smiled – a distant, preoccupied little smile.

"Okay," she said. "I'll come along."

"Thanks. Preciate it."

"Walk me home?"

The streets were quiet now. Everyone was off campus, down on King Street, in the clubs. We didn't say much. I think we were both silently comprehending that it was the last time I'd walk her home; or maybe we were reflecting on our separate crises, thinking about different things, charting out our uncertain, unrelated futures. I don't know if we were happy or sad. It was dark all around us, except for the dull, white-ish glow of a few upper-story dorm room windows, occupants awake inside.



Goldy

Rebecca Piazza



After *The Musicians*

Charles Hollobaugh

After Mathew Thorburn

They began at once the piano leading the way the clarinet humming
down the middle the violinist falling behind his light steps two steps
after I finished my two step only to begin again never really one to
listen to family bands yet I couldn't help but to tap my feet

to keep up with them and their twelve-bar blues so sad and so listless
looked the violinist as the bow danced in his fingers danced across
the strings the man on the piano danced in his own way his body lurching
back and forth chuckling he sang the backing vocals

with his brother thumped a rhythm on the piano's hood his sister sitting
with a washboard while his wife sang their songs in a lilting smooth alto
that carried over heads to where I danced just out of time like their playing
I only wish I could have taken a photograph to keep forever to see.



The Moon

Dorothy Lune

If the universe talks—like whisk the air &
a body lands on your fingertip—
will you smell beauty on your shoulder like perfection
unable to be captured, only experienced thus far?

I have a friend in STEM & she tells me
perfection isn't real—
will she differentiate realness from existence
unable to jot down perfection's facial features?

Like beauty, it needs a delivery device or
white hole to peer out of thus—
therapists haven't caught up with modern discoveries
unable to market pills to patients with integrity.

So we grow in the mystery, invite deception
like bees to waterfalls—
you will feel the love that comes with this act of
constant, honest misunderstanding.



The Bats on Fourth Street

Quinn De Vecchi

Winged carcasses slip through fingers of ice.
Seeping teeth suck onto each new breath of sugar,
licking specks of coconut scraps from batches
of alfajores. The bakers swat their brooms
at them, the bristles are sharp and tangled. Children
jump from tree to tree attempting to grasp
onto any part of their bodies. Flightless, they still try,
with their hands reaching out toward the Sun.
Underneath, the shackles of humanity elude
them, and the light glides from cracked breaches
of soil. The only terror waits in sleep,
and they crawl for one another, tight against
the familiarity of home.





Lamplight Through the Trees

Jeremy Balda



Belle du Jour

Zachary Barrett

The martinis are up, and dry,
and oil from the twist gleams
across the trembling
surface of the glass,
lighter than the faces in the crowded dim,
which is louder than our voices
as we savor the sweet brine,
the plump muscle, the hidden spaces,
the knowledge that one day we will die—
but not tonight.

And we may hope
not tomorrow either, hope
that the days will come in dozens
and dozens, like our oysters,
laid out before us on a bed of ice
and salt, that we may feast
until we burst, drink
until the lights blur,
until our faces ache and the bar slowly
empties and is suddenly so very bright.
Please forgive us.

We are finishing our oysters.
We are drowning in martinis.
We are no longer afraid to leave this place,
to make our way into the dark,
to disappear into the night in a puff
of laughter and smoke.

Contributors

Eric Abele is a multi-disciplinary artist and designer, and Senior Lecturer of Theatre at UMBC. His research investigates the crossover of art and theatre design education, primarily through digital costume design pedagogy. Eric is currently pursuing a BFA in Painting, Drawing and Printmaking and a MA in Professional Studies/ Art History at Towson University. Through this journey, he continues to investigate curriculum that best prepares young theatre designers to affirm themselves effective visual communicators.

Michael Ansara spent many years as an activist and an organizer. He is the co-founder of *Mass Poetry*. He currently serves on the Board of the Redress Movement and the organizing team for Volunteer Blue. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and his essays have appeared in *Vox*, *Arrowsmith*, *Solstice and Cognoscenti*. His first book of poems, *What Remains*, was published in June of 2022 by Kelsay Books.

Katherine Ator is an artist majoring in Interdisciplinary Object Design at Towson University who enjoys creating with all types of visual art. She is particularly inspired by religion, nature, and the notion that everything is connected and eternal. Her visual and written works were previously published in her high school literary magazine, *Sequel*, and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, Maryland.

Jeremy Balda is a sophomore at Towson University where he is pursuing a B.S. in psychology. His photography is a personal hobby, and his work usually focuses on nature and landscapes because of his ambitions to better explore and connect with nature. When Jeremy is not attending classes or practicing photography, he is involved in many of the university's music ensembles, as well as being a member of the Eta Sigma chapter of Tau Beta Sigma at Towson University. More of his work can be seen on Instagram @jbaldaphotography.

Zachary Barrett is a writer, musician, lacrosse coach, and bartender from Washington, DC. His work has previously appeared in *The Lindenwood Review* and *Plains Paradox*. He currently lives in Baltimore, MD. In the fall, he will enter begin pursuing an MFA in poetry at the University of Oregon.

Isabelle Bartolomeo graduated from Towson University in December of 2021 with a bachelor's degree in illustration. She likes to study the intricacies of nature in various ways, whether it be through traditional mediums, digital art, or photography. Her previous work "Exhaustion" was published in *Grub Street*, vol. 68. You can find her work on Instagram @b.art.olomeo and on her website www.isabelle.bartolomeo.com.

John Bennett is a graduate of the University of Montana's MFA program where he was a poetry editor for Cutbank. He is the winner of the Greta Wroldstad Poetry Travel Award and the Boston Mayor's Poetry Prize. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Journal*, *Columbia*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *The Evansville Review*, and many others. A former Writer-in-Residence of the Inn at the Oaks, John has worked for Ploughshares and is currently an editor at Brill Publishing in Boston. For a complete list of publications and awards, please visit: www.johncolemانبennett.com.

Owen Black is a writer, filmmaker, and musician from Salisbury, MD. Captivated by the medium of music and the diverse stories told therein, Black is often inspired to share, analyze, and elevate the works of artists that move him. Black graduates from Towson University in May of 2024 with a bachelors degree in filmmaking and a minor in Spanish. Black also serves as the drummer for Towson rock band "Miss Mary Rose".

Natisha Bola's goal is to create her own art museum. Public space and art have built the life that she loves. She devotes herself to making art that carries personality. She values individuality and uniqueness. Right now, she is finishing her studies in Art History Research/Studio and General Fine Arts.

Alina Cantrell is a poet and yoga instructor. She discovered poetry as a teenager and was immediately drawn to its ability to calm her mind, strengthen her writing, and connect her to her inner self. She has since devoted her days to studying and writing poetry, and she is passionate about sharing its transformative powers with others. With over nine years of experience and as a newly published poet, she brings a wealth of wisdom and a playful, uplifting energy to her work. She believes that poetry is for everyone, and she strives to create space for her audience to discuss the subject matter within her work. She integrates elements of erasure, persona, and meditation into her poetry to help readers cultivate a deep connection with their own writing and minds. Outside of her poetry, Alina loves to practice yoga, explore new recipes, and study world languages. She holds a degree in Creative Writing and a certification in Yoga, and she is always seeking opportunities to continue her education and growth as a writer.

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of "Now Let's Get Brunch: A Collection of RuPaul's Drag Race Twitter Poetry" (Querencia Press, 2023) and "May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry" (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). He has had fiction, poetry, and literary reviews published in *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Lambda Literary Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Sage Cigarettes* (Best of the Net Nominee, 2023), *Stories About Penises* (Guts Publishing, 2019), and more. For more information, visit carriganak.wordpress.com or on Twitter @carriganak.

Ivy Choe is a well-rounded genius. Struck by divinity, she warred with each God of Mount Olympus single-handedly and won. After fighting for man's freedom, she became the ghostwriter for Aristotle and eventually delivered William Shakespeare into existence. Truly humble and having done it all, she now wishes to retire into the small-statured body of a Korean-American writer in hopes of finding a home for her snafu thoughts.

Willy Conley, a Registered Biological Photographer, is the author of the books “Photographic Memories – Essays, Playlets, and Stories”, “Plays of Our Own – an Anthology of Scripts by Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Writers, The World of White Water – Poems, Visual-Gestural Communication”, “Listening Through the Bone – Collected Poems, The Deaf Heart – a novel”, “Vignettes of the Deaf Character and Other Plays”, and “Broken Spokes”. Conley, born profoundly deaf, is a retired professor emeritus and chairperson of Theatre and Dance at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Towson High he also went to Towson University to receive an MFA in Theatre.

Ray Corvi’s work was published or is forthcoming in *Brushfire*, *Chaffin Journal*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *FictionWeek Literary Review*, *FRiGG Magazine*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *The Penmen Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *The Round Magazine*, *Sage Cigarettes Magazine*, *The Seattle Star*, *Sublunary Review*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *Whimperbang*, and *Whistling Shade*.

Aliyah Cotton is a queer poet of color from Reston, VA. She earned her MFA from Boston University where she was a recipient of the Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rust & Moth*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and has been nominated for the 2024 Best of the Net Anthology. Aliyah lives in Charlottesville, VA where she creates music under the moniker October Love.

Eric Cullen Hackler is a Jersey-born writer, photographer, and filmmaker. His pieces encompass the complexity of relationships between our natural selves and our natural world. Eric believes that embracing our strange, imperfect, non-algorithm-able humanity is the best route to a kinder, more sincere world. That within every storm or howl or crash, there is something to learn about love. You can explore his work at www.erichackler.com.

Meredith Davies Hadaway is the author of four poetry collections, most recently *Small Craft Warning*, a collaborative volume with artist Marcy Dunn Ramsey. Her previous collection, *At the Narrows*, was winner of the Delmarva Book Prize. She is currently the Sophie Kerr Poet-in-Residence at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland.

Quinn De Vecchi is a first-gen American writer from Florida. They are studying at Interlochen Arts Academy and are majoring in Creative Writing with a specialty in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. When not writing, they enjoy shaving their head and thrift shopping.

Abbie Doll is a writer residing in Columbus, OH, with an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a fiction editor at Identity Theory. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Door Is a Jar Magazine*, *Full House Literary*, and *The Bitchin’ Kitsch*, among others. Connect on socials @AbbieDollWrites.

William Eichler is a writer from Dover, Delaware and has lived and worked in Baltimore since 2020. He is in his final semester of graduate school at Towson University and enjoys reading and writing fiction and poetry when he has time. His work has been featured in the journals Next Page Ink and *Thriving Writers*, where he also works as an editor, and in the *Rebooth Beach Reads Anthology* Published by Cat and Mouse Press.

Carina Falter is an undergraduate student at Towson University.

Ben Goodman is a poet, counselor, and educator residing in the Hudson Valley. His work currently appears in *Strange Matters Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Healing Muse*, *Midway Journal*, and *Ink in Thirds*.

Kelly Hall is an abstract-representational artist whose work explores the complex emotional and physical feelings of living with eczema. She combines a vibrant palette of fluorescent colors with paint, patterns and texture. Her highly visual and playful color placement and slightly uneven patterning result in a vibrating, ringing sensation in the eyes. The optical strain, burning, and prickly feeling that occurs reflects how the skin feels when an itchy and irritated breakout happens. Hall is studying at Towson University for her BFA in Art+Design, specializing in Painting, Drawing, and Printmaking. She currently lives and works in Towson, MD.

Charles “Chase” Hollobaugh is an undergraduate student at Towson University, looking to complete his English degree. Before attending Towson, he earned his associate of science from Hagerstown Community College. He has grown up around photography; photos taken by his parents, of his parents, of his grandparents, and of the Hagerstown cityscape have surrounded him all his life.

Jean C. Howard resided in Chicago for 22 years, working as a performance poet, before returning to her hometown, Salt Lake City, UT in 2000. Her poetry has appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Revolution of The Spoken Word*, *The Chicago Tribune*, as well as over 120 literary publications. A participant in the original development of the internationally acclaimed Poetry Slam, her book of poetry, *Dancing In Your Mother’s Skin*, was awarded two grants for publication. Organizer of the annual National Poetry Video Festival for eight years, she has performed in hundreds of venues nationally, from biker bars to contemporary art museums, with her own award-winning video poems airing on cable and public television and film festivals.

Jessica Hwang’s fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in more than a dozen literary journals, including *Mystery Magazine*, *Tough*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Uncharted*, *The Rockford Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Failbetter*, and *The Thieving Magpie*. Her work has been nominated for the 2023 Best American Short Stories and Best American Mysteries and Suspense anthologies, and was nominated for a 2023 Best of the Net Anthology. She is currently working on a mystery novel. You can find her at jessicahwangauthor.com.

Gladys Justin Carr is an award-winning poet whose work has been published in over 100 literary magazines and journals. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, winner of the Quartet Chapbook Prize, and recipient of a California Poetry Society award, she was the author of the chapbook, “Augustine’s Brain – the Remix”. Before her retirement, she was vice president and associate publisher at Harper Collins in New York. She graduated magna cum laude from Brooklyn College with a major in English. At Smith College in Northampton, MA, she was the Nicolson Trustee Fellow, and earned a Master of Arts degree in English. The Gladys Justin Carr Legends Internship Program at Smith still assists aspiring poets.

Charlotte Knauth has been an avid consumer of fiction from a young age. Her family often described her as 'absorbing books'. She attended a prestigious high school creative writing program and is currently studying Psychology and English at Towson University. In her free time, she can be found lying on the floor with her dog Rory (named after the Doctor Who character), listening to music, watching television with friends, writing, and rereading books even though she has not finished her current reads. Her life almost entirely revolves around words with only the exception of food.

Judy Lewis' sculpture *Lady Love* is the cover of Grub Street's 73rd edition.

Dorothy Lune is a Yorta Yorta poet, born in Australia & a best of the net 2024 nominee. Her poems have appeared in *Overland journal*, *Many Nice Donkeys* and more. She is looking to publish her manuscripts, can be found online @dorothy Lune, and has a substack at dorothy Lune.substack.com

Adam Matson is the author of three collections of short fiction, *The Last Three Hours*, *Sometimes Things Go Horribly Wrong*, and *Watch City*. His fiction has appeared internationally in over thirty publications.

Hannah McBride is currently studying English at Towson University with a concentration in writing. She aspires to work within the publishing industry after graduation while continuing to develop her personal writings. This is Hannah's first published story.

Kelly McLennon writes poetry and fiction. She earned her MFA from Concordia St Paul and her BA in English from Sonoma State University. A former intern at Copper Canyon Press, the California native now lives in Minneapolis and is an assistant poetry editor for *Narrative Magazine*. Her work has previously appeared in *OpenDoor Magazine*, *Danse Macabre*, and the Minneapolis Queer Voices Writing Circle chapbook, "Working Title."

Lisa Meckel said: Poetry is everything to me. It holds hope in its heart and meaning in its hand that we may live out the truths of being alive. The joyful jingles and the rhymes and rhythms of childhood poetry brought me immense pleasure as a child. So much so I tried to pencil out my own poems. "Bertram and the Dancing Bear" one of the poems I wrote even earned a dollar! My mother submitted it to a magazine and it won the prize. She clipped the dollar to the magazine and saved it for years and one day she presented it to me as encouragement saying "See what you could when you were five. Imagine what you can do now." I live in an area where Robinson Jeffers lived and his poetry has influenced me immensely. I have been a three-time winner of the Poetry Award at The Santa Barbara Writers Conference as well as a presenter for The Big Read honoring Robinson Jeffers. Currently, I am assembling a collection of my poems for publication.

Rita Mookerjee is an Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Worcester State University. She is the author of "False Offering" (JackLeg Press 2023). Her poems can be found in *CALYX*, *Copper Nickel*, *New Orleans Review*, *the Offing*, and *Poet Lore*. She serves as an editor at *Split Lip Magazine*, *Sundress Publications*, and *Honey Literary*.

Christopher Munde's first poetry collection, *Slip-page* (Tebot Bach, 2019), won the Patricia Bibby Award, and his poems have previously appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Blackbird*, *The Literary Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Third Coast*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of the University of Houston's MFA program and the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize. Presently, he lives and teaches in western NY.

Kimberly Nunes's poems have been published in journals and books such as *Blue Light Press Anthology*, *Caveat Lector*, *Mantis*, *Marin Poetry Anthology*, *The Madison Review*, *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, and *The Round Magazine*. Her poem "Morning at Moore's Lake, Again" was nominated for the 2022 Pushcart Prize. She received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Kimberly sits on the board of Four Way Books in New York City, and lives in Northern California.

Rebecca Piazza tells stories that reflect her childhood and fascination with the natural world. She recently earned her MFA in Children's Book Writing and Illustrating at Hollins University. Rebecca has a background in creative development and loves writing, making all kinds of art, and exploring new flora and fauna in her backyard and in distant places. You can view her online portfolio at rpiazza.com.

nat raum is a queer disabled artist and writer based on unceded Piscataway and Susquehannock land in Baltimore. They're the editor-in-chief of *fifth wheel press* and the author of *you stupid slut*, *the abyss is staring back*, *random access memory*, and several others. Find them online: natraum.com/links.

Naomi Rogers is a Richmond artist currently pursuing her master's at VCU in Clinical Social Work. Her artwork has been displayed in the *Lewia Ginter Botanical Garden*, *Art Works*, *Art Space*, and *Grub Street*. She looks forward to continuing to make art as she makes advancements in her career.

Benni Rose is a current junior EMF major at Towson University and has been pursuing photography as a hobby for the past few years. Along with this, she is a collage artist and a theater artist in the Baltimore theater community when she's not sailing the seas (or the Baltimore Harbor...). In her free time, you can find her working on the water, talking about boats and discussing really serious things like Lego Batman and why it's a cinematic masterpiece.

Darah Schillinger is a Maryland-based poet working towards her professional writing degree at Towson University. She has previously published poetry in the *St. Mary's literary journal*, *AVATAR*, on the *Spillwords Press* website, in the Maryland *Bards Poetry Review 2022*, in the *Yellow Arrow Journal*, and in the first edition of *Empyrean Magazine*. Darah's first poetry chapbook, *when the daffodils die*, was released in July 2022 by *Yellow Arrow Publishing*, and her first full-length collection is currently a work in progress.

Hunter Schmale is a writer from Maryland. After receiving a diploma from Manchester Valley High School in 2021, he briefly attended the College of Charleston; back in Maryland he worked in a veterinary kennel and delivered pizzas before moving to Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, where he worked on a P&G factory assembly line, stocked milk, eggs, and tea at the local Walmart, acted as facilities manager at the Public Library, and composed *Interaction Mechanisms*, his first published piece. In 2023 he moved again to Maryland where he currently resides with his parents, working part-time at Goodwill and attending the local community college.

Valentine Schneider is an artist that does things, sometimes. A natural born scavenger, they are often found perusing the ground in search of mushrooms, four-leaf clovers, and other little doodads.

Walter Sosa is a photographer born and raised in the DMV area. As a First-Generation American, he seeks to create narratives throughout his images to expose his upbringing to the public. His desire to learn about himself parallels his curiosity about the stories others have to tell. He grew up very connected to his culture and uses his images to give importance to the people and spaces who have contributed to making him the person he is. Walter's passion for photography stems from the opportunities to learn about people's experiences in this world we are all trying to navigate through.

Wren Stosloh is a writer from Rockville, Maryland where she lives with her partner and two cats. She is a graduate of Towson University with a Bachelors of Science in English with a Writing track. She presently works as a copywriter for a local nonprofit where she writes stories relating to the experiences and lives of the people that benefit from the nonprofit's work. In her free time, she enjoys reading literary nonfiction with her cats sleeping on her lap, making art, and journaling.

Sabrina Sutter is a graduating senior History major and English minor at Towson University. She is a recipient of multiple writing awards, including the Mary Katherine Kahl Prize for both 2021 and 2022, and the Three Arts Club of Homeland-CLA award for Spring 2024. She hails from Frederick, Maryland, but is currently interning at the Irish Architectural Archive in Dublin, Ireland, and enjoying exploring the literary tradition of the city. When not traveling or studying, she's at home writing or trying to fix up whatever random old thing has captured her attention.

Matthew Swann is an undergraduate student at Towson University and former poetry editor of Grub Street volume 72.

Annie Tamini is a Painter with a bachelor's degree in art education from Messiah University, currently getting her MFA at Towson University in Studio Art, working towards Professorship. Her work focuses on round paintings dealing with the idea of time and immortalizing mundane moments in time; reminding viewers of the importance of stopping and viewing the world around them in order to be more sensitive to their surroundings. More on her Instagram @Bananie_bread_art.

Jasmin Thames is a Baltimore native and currently a graduate student in Professional Writing at Towson University. She is passionate about the brain sciences and linguistics and plans to become a science writer. Apart from science, she enjoys pursuing creative hobbies such as baking, cooking, photography, and completing any interesting activity she finds in the craft store. This is her first creative publication.

Kelly Grace Thomas is a poet, writer, educator, and an ocean-obsessed Aries from Jersey. Her first full-length collection, *Boat Burned*, was released with YesYes Books in 2020. She is the winner of the Jane Underwood Poetry Prize and the Neil Postman Award for Metaphor. Kelly's poems have appeared in: *The Adroit Journal*, *Best New Poets*, *32 Poems*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Sixth Finch* and elsewhere. Kelly has received fellowships from the *Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing* and *Kenyon Review Young Writers' Workshop*. Kelly is Head of Curriculum for *Get Lit-Words Ignite* and the co-author of *Voices in Verse: Poetry, Identity and Ethnic Studies*; *Stanzas of America: Celebrating BIPOC Poetry*; and *Words Ignite: Explore, Write and Perform Classic and Spoken Word Poetry* (Literary Riot). Kelly is currently a Blackburn Fellow in the Randolph College MFA program. She lives in Benicia, California and is working on her first novel. Visit her website: www.kellygracethomas.com.

Amanda Tuman created Pulchra Medusa; a mixed media artwork resembling a medusa jellyfish. This artwork grasps the beauty and elegance of a jellyfish using common materials such as paint, fabric, buttons, beads, string, and feathers. The reason for using mixed media is to create an intricate and simple artwork that would have been impossible to achieve through only acrylic paint. This piece is a reminder to me the artist that beauty isn't gathered through the amount of time spent on a piece, rather beauty is inherent through simply existing, it is the gathering of what is already available and thinking a creation into existence.

Laura Vitcova is a multi-disciplinary artist and emerging writer from Northern California. Her work has appeared in *The Shore*, *Epiphany*, *Blue Earth Review*, and among other journals. She is a poetry reader for *West Trade Review* and in her spare time, she travels, creates music, and listens to birds.

Ashley Wagner is a poet writing, working, and workshopping in Baltimore. Her debut chapbook, *East Coast Blues*, is available now from Bottlecap Press. She is the poetry editor for *Ligeia Magazine* and a graduate of TU's PRWR program. You can see more of her work at ashleywagnerpoetry.com.

Rick Wallace is a senior at Towson University, graduating with a bachelor's degree in Forensic Chemistry and a minor in Biology. Primarily focusing on macabre and spooky subjects for his art, Rick works with digital art as his medium of choice and has illustrated and produced a complete tarot deck based on horror films. Rick also produces zines, buttons and posters. His Instagram handle is [@Radical_rudy](https://www.instagram.com/Radical_rudy), his digital portfolio is artstation.com/rudolphrick and his Etsy is [RadicalRudyArt](https://www.etsy.com/shop/RadicalRudyArt).

Meghan Weiss is a senior at Towson University on the English Writing track, with a minor in Creative Writing. She has been experimenting across all genres since grade school, but has recently developed a passion for creative nonfiction and the literary freedom it entails.

Michael Wilcox has had a variety of pieces displayed in numerous shows including works in photography, painting, mixed media, and print-making. In addition, he has also been published in various journals and magazines. He currently resides in Virginia.

Micaela Williams is a poet and essayist living in Baltimore, Maryland. She graduated from the University of Baltimore with an MFA in Poetry. She spends her free time with her husband and their cat, Chunky.

Holly Willis is a writer and photographer whose work examines the materiality of the image within a broader context of new materialist philosophy and the histories of experimental film, video, and photography with the goal to design encounters with media that spark an embodied sense of curiosity and wonder.

Michael L. Woodruff is a graduate of the Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. At the workshop, he received the Reikes Scholarship for Writing. His stories have appeared in a number of literary publications. He has been nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Robert J. Dau Award for Emerging Writers. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Haleigh Yasper's writing has appeared in *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *California Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her scholarly work has been supported by grants and fellowships from the New York Public Library, Duke University, and Smith College. She lives in New York City with her husband and daughter.

About the Cover

“Lady Love” is a one-of-a-kind collage. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it was created on a repurposed, three-dimensional form that previously held a woman’s bathing suit in a store window. The construction materials are paint, a variety of papers, and a sealant. The word ‘collage’ comes from the French *collet*, which means to glue. The art is in taking an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. It may be said that a collage takes the best pieces of many things, combines them, and makes the end result more pleasing than any individual piece.

I hope that those who see “Lady Love” will share the joy that making this piece brought me. I have constructed collages such as this one, on a variety of other mediums such as mannequins, canvases, and pillows. My collages can be personalized to a recipient’s favorite things and have made unique gifts for special occasions such as birthdays. I have been commissioned, have exhibited, and sold my work.





