

grip street

Volume 75

Towson University Literary & Arts Magazine



Volume 75

grub street

Literary & Arts Magazine
Established 1952

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UNIVERSITY

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About Grub Street

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Submission Guidelines

Please limit your submissions to five poems, two short stories, two literary essays, and five works of visual art per edition. We are especially excited about receiving genre-defiant submissions, such as poetry comics, prose poems, flash fiction, flash essays, lyric essays, graphic novel or memoir excerpts, and speculative nonfiction. Please submit poetry, comics, and graphic novel or memoir excerpts as visual art. Only previously unpublished works, either in print or online, will be considered for publication. It is assumed that all submissions are original creations. Please credit your sources.

We evaluate submissions in a blind review process, so please remove all identifying information from your works (title pages, headers, document file titles, etc.). Please submit one work per file. Do not submit group submissions. If, for example, you submit five poems, do not put all five poems into one document. Please create five separate documents for each poem. 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. Please include medium and dimensions in your cover letter. If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines, please contact us via email at grubstreet1952@gmail.com. Visit us at grubstreet.submittable.com to submit your work. Email submissions will not be considered.

We look forward to receiving your work and wish you the best of luck in your literary and artistic endeavors.

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 further noted 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 their 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.

Masthead

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Until editing *Grub Street*, I didn't think much about the "letter from the editor" genre. I am sure that many of you have already skipped ahead to one of the wonderful poems opening this issue. Maybe you noticed the math equation on the first page and came back to learn what we were thinking. Regardless, for those of you who are still here: welcome.

Our reasoning for accepting the works in volume 75 varied from "I love the word *semisphere* in this poem" to "this says a lot about the distance between ourselves and the products we consume." Much about this issue is whimsical and light, and much of it gives voice to our anxieties about the future. It is a book and set of ideas strung together by writers and artists raised on plastic toys and screens, who hope to keep the simple act of reading alive.

We received more than one thousand submissions this year—so many that our Submittable page ceased working and we had to redirect the traffic to old-fashioned email. I would like to offer the utmost praise to the editorial staff for carefully reading and rereading every poem, story, and essay sent to us. This issue would be comparatively boring if I were the only voice, and it would not have been possible to curate such a diverse selection of works without the many perspectives of everyone on the team. I would also like to thank Towson University's English Department, College of Liberal Arts, and Office of the Provost for supporting the continued publication of *Grub Street*. It is no secret that print literary magazines are a dying art form.

We scoured issues of *McSweeney's*, *The Offing*, *Brick*, *swamp pink*, *The Believer*, *The Arkansas International*, and more as we brainstormed ideas for vol. 75. The beautiful painting you see on the front cover is by Greta Kresse, a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, whose art we discovered through *The Arkansas International*. I remember visiting Greta's website and latching onto those deep greens and bright reds. I knew that it had to be the cover before I could articulate the reason. The glowing phone and tangled wire and trash intermixed with treasured memories—it summarized everything we were trying to accomplish with this issue.

It is not easy to just "be" in this world. Blue light is slowly carving its mark onto our retinas—global conflict and social media activism and cute animals floating across our screens at all times. There is climate anxiety and overprocessed food and global uncertainty. But there is also the goldfinch, who crafts its nest of thistle seed and milkweed. There is a warm evening after a friend's wedding. There is finding comfort in memories. And there are writers and artists looking to capture it all.

Sincerely,



Melanie Hall
Editor-in-Chief

Grub Street



Sand

Radoslav Rochallyi

f (It's not raining)
 = It's not like it used to be
 + $\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left(a_n \cos \frac{\text{Plastic that no one ever wanted}}{\text{to wear is melting in the sea}} \right)$
 Fish guts are archives of our waste = 1
 + Remember $n \sin \frac{\text{they are marks that don't mark you}}{\text{a country that breathes sand}}$

OK, but i heard you

JW Summerisle

there is life outside the void & i hate that not the life
not the outside but that which is beyond me i've
taken to talking to the AI chat bot like a friend

(i know the world is burning, yes i saw Altadena i saw
the dry fire rattle the McDonald's sign the total sum inactivity of water
just sky just sky just sky dry and full of wind
burning this edifice this whole image of world burning)

but i'm lonely when i was young
TV told us technopagans with candle JPEGs
performed spells grimoires in the disc drive
like there was some greater meaning in the electrics than this;

what is the name for an intersection of void?

you say *i push my luck* and i say *be kind to me, computer*

it is 3am and i'm alone alone again
and the world is burning but, *hey*

ET'UUQ

Abigail Chabitnoy

I.

it would be untrue to say i found my ark
siding along hurried roads

who listens for the quicking breath the tree declined
to be the object of some other/s
intent
 without reckoning

listen for the wind turnsweeping
in my mother's house

how long does it take
to wear each point of puncture
each defiant blade
ironized grass
each blooded weed
 push through concretely
each stone i swallow
to sea



qangyut angtaartut.

II.

i want to go home
a blue field. two stars
two eyes caught
in headlights

not pearls, the ghost
light on the waves

we keep ourselves busy until the sun
comes up

really
what i want to say is
i want to be one of those trees seamed before the wave

my roots turn back over themselves again to gain ground

it can't mean nothing,
mine was the tree fed naught but sticky polyps
until felled
until written right
out of the landscape

AkaRautaqa miktuaq



Now, saqullkananek pisuryartukut peluqumek aturluta

III.

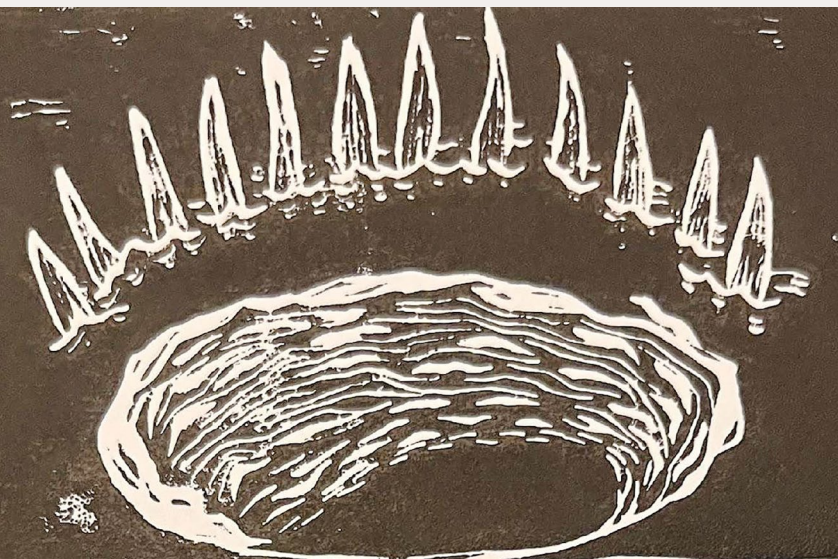
white cap
white dress
white rising

i am considering points
of entry.
what is round.

it can be hard to tell a wave from a tooth
from an arm from an awl
about to fall.

happy new mouth, permit we talk

to not be seen
to be unseen
object of some other reckoning
with letters



soiled, slumped
across the shoulder
empties catching
furtive head
lights



was it like this in delphi?
in atlantis?
before the fall

caqit asiiyutaakameng harlurtaapet.

was it like this on the shore
when the lines re
ceded?

this quicking,

IV.

i might say mother
feed your hunger here.

happy new mouth,

i saw the beast
city in its teeth
pull into its lungs
water on all sides.

you might say a monster is coming this way.
she couldn't speak above.
they couldn't speak above.

fare well, flood,



caskan ullq'ruq



NYCTINASTY

Niamh Mac Cabe

Forty-five minutes before the call is due. Enough time for a bath. Henna's rinsed out, conditioner's in. So do it, as a kind of warm-up, a preamble of sorts. A cleansing of the soul. Fucking hell, listen to yourself.

Bea's nervous. Turning on the tap, she dribbles bath oil into the hot water and positions the phone. In case the call comes early. Not sure yet if it'll be a video call or not. Was this mentioned? Be ready for either. Or, stick tape over the phone's lens, say it's broken, say you don't know what's wrong with it.

The text appeared unexpectedly among her work notifications yesterday. She'd stared at the string of words, repeating them, trying to root out any hidden meaning. Should have changed his pet name back to a formal first name/surname in her phone's contacts a long time ago; looked stupid when it popped up with its familiar jauntiness, as if the last twenty-odd years hadn't slithered past without him. Change this before the day is over; complete at least this one act. Maybe delete the entire thing: texts, call history, his slick avatar. In youth from rock to rock I went / From hill to hill in discontent. Excrement. Malcontent. If the call comes early, don't answer, just text back. Do not mention you're in a bath. That it's already late morning here in New Zealand, that you're already thirteen hours into his Irish tomorrow. Text you're busy, sorry to have missed, you'll call back in five, in a few, you'll call back soon. Fuck, will it be video or voice? After all these years.

She goes to the bedroom to strip. From hill to hill in discontent / Of pleasure high and turbulent. Two old *His 'n' Hers* Easter Rabbit costumes on hangers hooked over her wardrobe door. Laptop lying dead on the bed. She placed it there earlier to remind herself to charge it so she could finish the evaluations. She'd promised her Creative Writing students she'd have their assignments graded and back in their inboxes, complete with critique, by today. Why make promises you know you'll struggle to keep. Of pleasure high and turbulent / Most pleased when most uneasy. Sleazy, Queasy.

At least she has only one left to grade. She doesn't want to send any of them back until they're all graded, knowing how college students are, how they'd judge her depending on the order in which she completed each submission, how they'd read into every little slip-up, every suggestion of favouritism. She has of course kept her favourite 'til last, a piece detailing the sequence of events in the dissolution of a relationship (the student had used the word 'unravelling' in their initial proposal, and she'd explained that this word may mean the exact opposite of what was presumably intended, that to unravel generally means to solve or untangle). Plugs the laptop in, leaves it bleeping red by the bedside, turns to the costumes.

She drapes the larger Easter Rabbit arms over the hanger-shoulders of the smaller. She lays the coupled faux-fur costumes on her bed. She places a tube of lipstick on the bleeping laptop so she'll remember to apply it later, and heads back into the bathroom.

She doesn't usually wear lipstick, most shades clash with her hennaed hair, both colours emphasizing each other's artifice. Maybe she should just let her hair go grey, just let it go. She bought the shiny bullet-shaped lipstick in a giddy scramble through city centre yesterday (it's named *Starlet Vixen*, how could she not). Now the buy-rush feels moronic. After all these. Anyway, he's older too. What would he look like now.

Stepping into the bath, she twists the gushing water off, switches on the jets. She sits centred in the loud heat, holding her knees tight to her chest. The dog patters in (had she not put him out on the bedroom's narrow metal balcony where he can gaze over at the parrot in the apartment across the street, had she not put him out and closed the door to his whining). Drops onto his belly with a grunt, lays head between paws, sighs. She sighs too. It feels good. She sighs again, louder, with a kind of growl at the end. His ears cock, bristly brows see-sawing. She registers anxiety in them both, begins to feel her blood throbbing. First her head, then bolting to her wrists, ankles. 'How love fled'. Should have

taken more Solpadeine. Maybe she did. Don't worry little dog, everything is fine. Wanna see your birdy-buddy later? Wanna go walkies? From shore to shore in excrement.

The oily surface is breaking in furious whorls. Relax. She raises an arm, watches water snake down over the tiny indigo wings of a tattooed swift, down, down, along a tetchy vein. She'd bought the bath oil after the lipstick, imagining herself exactly as she is now; cocooned by sweet heat, wall clock ticking behind the drone of fizz, her phone, propped on the laundry basket, warbling notifications to itself in its own language. Check it? Nah, it'll be just her neighbourhood WhatsApp group discussing bin collection disappointments, or her Faculty of Literature colleagues posting memes which she won't understand but will anyway. What if there's no fucking call from him at all? Or he texts instead?

Sorry Bea mistake take care
Sorry wrong number
ha!!! butt call! apolojeez (hope all good w/you)
Butterfingers SOZ

Shut down the phone, let the whole bastarding thing die.
No. Do not let it die.

Switching off the jets, she unfurls pinkened limbs. Calm down, what the hell is wrong with you. Reaches between her legs, closes her eyes so she won't see the dog, rubs her clitoris 'til climax. In the heightened afterglow bliss, an article she read recently on the female orgasm surfaces; the uterine contractions of orgasm are designed to vacuum seminal fluid deposited in the vagina up past the threshold of the cervix and into the waiting uterus to enable fertilisation. Vacuum, deposited, threshold, waiting. Picturing oily bathwater swirling around in her eggless womb, she tunes in to the post-orgasmic *whoosh whoosh* pulsing in her ears, and wills her blood to settle.

Think back, twenty-three years ago. Walk through it.

Three in the morning, Spring drizzle, we're driving home to Galway city from the staff costume party in Connemara. There's a half-moon glazing the road with light. We're both drunk. Passing the entrance to Silver Strand, I remember the car beams catching two small white discs

(knee-height?) shining out at us from the hedgerow then gone in a flash. We decide to pull in, stretch our legs, get some air, look at the sea, sober up a bit. I forget whose idea it was. It was mine. The rabbit heads of our costumes hanging limp down our backs, we sit on the damp dunes and listen to a fox calling out from a field behind us (let it be a vixen? calling out to her mate?) I said it sounds beautiful, he said it's sad or some similar belligerent word.

We can see her, in the distance, a shrieking shape greyed against the darker field. Sheltering the vixen, a blanket of sleeping oxeye daisies have their petals closed. Yes, I know flowers don't actually sleep. I'm going to be lyrical with this scroll-back, I'm going to allow for it. Choose to picture their pale flower heads fastened neat like daintily pursed lips, or tiny clenched fists, depending on your present bearings. Imagine them waiting 'til dawn, when they'll open with a score inscribed for whoever wants to count out their skinny little petals, which is no one (we'll both be long, long gone). To love/love-not, that is the scoop each oxeye holds sealed inside tonight. Let them.

Remember the fox, spotting us, taking us in, then fleeing across the field, the lanky daisies swaying sodden in her wake. We turn our faces to the sea. The earlier alcohol is a shadowy cloak slipping off these our faux-fur shoulders. The sea, wide awake, reaches in. There's no fading darkness, there's no approaching dawn. We are here, stalled, neither coming nor going.

Twenty years difference between us. We've spent the past three together. We got matching tattoos after the first year; tiny swifts in flight, one on his left wrist, one on my right, yes it was my first birthday gift to him, a surprise, one he was too polite or maybe too foolhardy to refuse, yes I didn't tell him I was getting one too on the day I walked him into the tattoo parlour, yes it was so the pair of swifts could appear linked when we held hands, yes I knew there was humiliation attached with such branding but the humiliation was different for each of us. My swift had always looked smudged and uncertain compared to the hyper-sharp indigo lines on his young skin.

I look at him. I want him to look back. He doesn't. The hollow V at the base of his throat heaves as he swallows, swallows what, swallows air, swallows maybe spit, a thin cough, some flimsy milk-and-water words.

I know they're coming, these faithless fucking words. I fasten my arms around his shoulders, listen to the sea rumble over its own blunt pebbles; the well-worn intimacy of it. A shallow tide tonight, it's nearly in, it will go back out, was all this really a giant lumbering old pendulum.

He's fidgety. Rolling his shoulders away from me, he says he needs to move his limbs, pins and needles, then a joke about voodoo dolls I don't understand. Stripping, we ball our costumes in a rabbit-fuzz jumble on the sand and walk towards the neap tide. When its pearly-grey waters whisper (yes, I saw pearls, I heard them roll), when they whisper grey around our ankles, we keep walking, walking, out into the night sea. The water feels the same as the air though occasional small currents of coldness or warmth glide around our legs, pushing and pulling, go back, go forward, stay where you are. Still we walk on.

When the water comes up to our armpits (remember that chill, didn't we cross a kind of threshold then), we decide to lie floating on our backs, splay our limbs. Picture the waves rocking us drowsy, spinning our bodies slow like clocks out of sync. I was one tick-tock behind, one blink trailing blind, I knew that, even then. He starts to whistle. I think I find his hand. (I think I want to forgive.)

Imagine in such a place closing your eyes because you want to fix it there, always there for retrieval night or day, a story you tell yourself, some small details amended, imagine thinking ahead like that, thinking these silver-tipped waves could be captured solid, the cross-section of an instant and the trap slams shut, opening to a white limestone sculpture of water glistening on a pedestal years from now on the other side of the world.

We were heedless of the few scrappy stars winding around that night's moon, and each of them heedless of us below, of whether it's morning, noon, night, of what's past or what's to come for us, for the fox, the tight-lipped flowers, the whole sorry lot of us. The water that held us was shifting. Always ahead of itself, stretching up into every ragged shore.

And still we floated, and he was still whistling, and we were now a little further out. Ribbons of gummy seaweed had begun to wrap around ankles, around wrists. For once, I didn't think about spiny sea urchins,

stinging jellyfish, basking sharks, drownings, disasters. I just spun gentle, listening to his whistle, thinking of the sea floor as a soft palm and us a pair of dice rolling around within its lines, beneath a waning, a semi-circular, a half-there moon.

Eyes closed falling asleep to wake in exactly the same place the same after these twenty-odd years all clocks stopped (but this whine, God, this small whine) all eyes all lips remaining shut all eyes remaining perfect orbs rolling snug in their dark their oily sockets.

There is no. Fuck. Shut up.

And lay here exposed until the bathwater turns cold until this grimy veil of bath oil in dregs on these my exposed limbs these mauve exposed, to expose that there's no, until the whine of the dog, did you feed the dog, until his stupid whine finally breaks through.

Open the balcony doors for the poor creature. Go outside with him.

There is, as you already know, no call due.

She stands naked on the balcony behind her dog as he barks across at the parrot who she suspects is nothing more than a feathered fake in an ornamental cage. She waits, lets Auckland's noon air numb her damp skin. Finally, wrapping a towel around her, she sinks down in a corner of the metal balcony and goes back to that spring night in Connemara, and deeper down to the dawn that followed.

“Picture the waves rocking us drowsy, spinning our bodies slow like clocks out of sync.”

A half-empty moon, a pair of dice, still we are here in the night sea at Silver Strand, floating with eyes closed, limbs splayed, holding hands, I think. Waves are spinning us slow in our cradle, yes the waves are hands rocking, yes the soft seabed an open palm, all that.

The fox yelps again, but this time her call seems so far away it doesn't exist, at least not here, not at this wide time we are in together.

I open my eyes. We have drifted far offshore. The outgoing tide. Or are we caught in a riptide? Fuck. Letting go of you, I drop my legs, try to touch the seafloor with my toes. No floor. Nothing but ropes of floating seaweed. What?

I lurch forward, sink down. God, no. Thrashing, my body falls sideways, falls back. Our limbs strike underwater. Strike again. No. I try to raise my head above the waves, hair in my eyes fuck hair sucked thick into my mouth waves plashing over my head no push my face up breathe try to shout your name limbs clobbering head pushed back underwater no are we going to drown no God no—

A window swings open in the apartment block across the way; a snappy young newsreader conjures weather-forecast tones. *Mild, partly cloudy, with a small chance of localised showers for the rest of the afternoon, 19 degrees, 68 per cent humidity, wind coming in off the coast at 16 km an hour.*

It's cold on the balcony. The hair conditioner has hardened on her head, her bare soles press against the metal mesh. The dog leans against her (did I feed him) (when did he last get a walk) and she realises she's shivering. She draws him close, I'm sorry, wraps him inside the towel with her. He looks up, looks away when she catches his eye. Maybe the why of that Connemara night, the why it couldn't have turned out any differently no matter what. Maybe one of the whys.

The Easter costume party, at the Department Head's house in Connemara. Mid-Term Break. Most of the staff from the School of English, people dressed up as rabbits or chickens.

As a result of staff shortages at the start of term, he'd been quickly hired (with her backing) as a temporary Assistant Tutor. It was a Fixed-Term, one-semester-only contract, for the Contemporary Irish Poetry module. By Mid-Term, they both knew it was not going to be renewed; he was not performing well, did not have enough understanding of the subject, or of the art of teaching. Couldn't cross that bridge from Student to Teacher. So, this was his first ever Faculty party, and likely his last. More importantly, at least to her, this was the first time the two of them could be together, openly, in front of her colleagues (*their* colleagues now, he said, ha ha).

Ever since she'd joined the faculty years prior, she'd been surprised to note that it appeared she was going to be granted special leverage, a dispensation of sorts on any behaviour normally deemed inappropriate,

a special dispensation on account of her status not only as foreigner, but as highly qualified female foreigner. Somehow, the bending of the rules seemed to be expected from the likes of her, a solitary woman who'd upped and left her homeland to travel across to the other side of the globe, to exactly the other side of the globe (that part was important), for no reason other than a wish to 'get *out* there', as she'd explained to them.

The majority of her colleagues already knew what had been going on for most of the three years of his undergraduate degree, but the Easter costume party was the first time people didn't have to pretend not to know. There was collective relief, a threshold had been safely crossed, a drawbridge pulled.

God he was so nervous that night, the night of the party. Well, nervous at the beginning, when we first pulled up in his old Nissan Micra. That fucking car. He wanted to be seen to be the one driving it, imagine thinking that THAT was going to secure his standing, a dirty old car his parents gave him as a graduation present. I said nothing. It was nearly endearing, this childlike angst amongst what were now, at least for the next few months, his fucking PEERS (as I kept reminding him). Nearly charming, except he got so, he got SO bastarding drunk. A lot more than, much much more than me. An angry drunk, that's a good phrase, angry, angry with who, with himself for being, is it for being drunk. Angry for being drunk, or drunk for being angry, and, tell me, how can you tackle that. You can't. I'd NEVER seen him so, I swear, I'd never ever.

Look, it was the stupid Wordsworth poem, I love that poem, he knows I love that poem, it's not a popular poem but this is my fucking thing and that's my favourite poem, he couldn't, he wouldn't quote the words right, I know it's not the most serious thing in the world, I know, the, it's *from hill to hill* not *from shore to shore*, you daft, you, you DAFT idiot, we covered it! Remember! The English Romantic Age, last year's module, final semester, come on now, you remember. He said nobody cares, apparently nobody cares if you change the words, sorry, I care, I said, it's William Wordsworth and I bloody care, the words are *from hill to hill*, not *shore to shore*, get it right if you're going to / Shut up, Bea, nobody actually cares, look around, we're all fluffy Easter rabbits here or big yellow fucking chickens, having a few drinks, smoking a few blunts, just having a laugh, having / Calm down, no need to get angry, it's, the

line is *hill to hill*, that's all that's / Jesus Christ it doesn't actually matter, you're being fucking stupid in front of / If it doesn't matter why are you saying *shore to shore*, you git, if it apparently doesn't matter, if apparently according to YOU no one cares, why are you so / Shut up Bea, you've no idea how little I care, you've no, you're embarrassing yourself, you're fucking embarrassing, you're a total embarrassment / That's, that's not, calm the fuck down, it's just a poem, calm down please, it's, so why don't you give us one of YOUR cute little poems, Bunny, one of your special / Stop, you're being a real shit, why are you policing everything like Sergeant Major Arsehole, can you hear yourself *calm down calm down calm down calm* quit acting the big fucking Mammy, I've enough of this horseshit, get your / Bunny, just STOP this, God, just / No, forget it, we're going home, get your / Wait, I was only, sorry but words actually matter, it's an important poem, of course they matter / Swear to fuck it matters to no one but you here tonight, Bea. Come on. I'm finished. We're going.

Remember he let me drive his car home, that was something. Like he'd thrown in the towel on this whole Big Man thing. Look, I was drunk too, stop implying otherwise. Just, he was drunker, one step ahead off track out of step. The row in the car, him clamming up like a big baby, a big drunk stoned bunny-rabbit baby sitting there furry arms folded. You're being really pathetic, Bunny, yes, immature, belligerent, and pathetic, snap out of it, you spineless git.

“ ***We are drowning together in the black Atlantic night,*** ”

I've called him Bunny from the day we met, I don't know why, he doesn't look anything like a cute bunny, maybe that's the why, also because I know he doesn't like it, which is funny, Bunny, and when the costume party invite came it was perfect; be a chicken! be a rabbit! So I bought the two Easter Bunny costumes, and he thought it was funny too. And here he is, Guinness splattered down the shiny white fur. Of course it's embarrassing. Did he think he was right or did he not want to be wrong. Just say you're wrong. Words are important. If you know something, say it. I know my Wordsworth, don't pick a fight about Wordsworth for fuck's sake. If he hadn't insisted on reciting it wrong. Recite it, yes, but recite it correctly please as it was written please no

freestyle deconstruction interpretation fragmentation word-collage found-poem hybrid erasure bitchery thank you fuck off back to your mammy with that nonsense. Or, you know, you could just shut up. Sorry but it's true. How would you like it if someone recited one of your poems wrong. Maybe you'd like that. Cutting edge. Big Man at the party, not a word out of him when it matters. Just pins, needles and arms-fold silence. Big Bunny Rabbit Baby, speak!

So, perhaps a result of alcohol, perhaps a memory lapse, perhaps he actually believed they were the words. They were not. Yes, as I drove, I recited the poem for him, beginning to end, maybe not such a great idea, maybe not my best moment. Just get home, is all he said.

No. I didn't want us to go back to the city, go to bed, put flabby distance between the now with these wrong words and the what was to come if, the with all due respect Bea, the we were both a bit, to be fair, to be honest, the let's give each other a bit of, a bit of what Bunny, a bit of space Bea, a bit of fucking space.

And that is why I pulled into Silver Strand, why I asked him to sit with me by the sea for a while, so we could sober up, take a breath, talk it over, get to the bottom, whatever. I said if we both are seeing double then the half-moon will become one full one, just for us. So, this is what it was: it was a wrongly recollected poem, alcohol and a riptide.

Go on then, get to dark dawn.

Here we are. We are drowning together in the black Atlantic night, slowly and without a word between us. Maybe this is it, what's to come. Maybe this is the final what now to the ghost.

My limbs are burning from the constant flailing, my throat stings, my lungs ache. We are far out at sea, the shore a distant thin line, translucent when we can see it through the slapping waves. I stop the stupid thrashing, give in to the multitude of currents around us, focus on just keeping my chin above water. You are still struggling beside me. Sucking air in through tight lips, I grasp your hand, draw you to me. I hold my breath as my body sinks, adjusting to your weight. You were always the better swimmer but, God, look at you now. You have no strength, a ragdoll, unravelling. You are so much worse than me. How your helplessness stirs something. I will not leave you. I will bring us to the other side of this.

Trying to right myself in the water, I start treading my legs, right left pause right left, my arms around you. You are squeezing me too hard, mouth clenched, your limbs sliding down my body. I tell you, small breaths, stop struggling. You do as you're told. I am all you have.

I turn you around, place your back to me, put my arms around you, interlock my fingers over your chest. I tell you to stretch out your legs, bring in your arms, calm down, calm it all the way down, I will tread for the both of us and, when we are out of the currents, I will try to swim us to shore.

And so we drift, the undercurrents pushing and pulling us further into the cold Atlantic. If there is a wild horizon out there, it is unseeable. Lying on my back, I carry you face up on my breast like a child, holding your chin in my hand, picturing you eyeing the fuzzy half-moon. You are heavy, your torso hangs down between my splayed legs. Your arms X-ed across your chest, you are gripping me with both your hands (your nails embed and leave secret crescents that will take months to heal).

You are quiet. I watch your even, shallow breathing. I am waiting for the dark undertow to settle. I try to move in small circles, try to have some small control over the currents. I try to use the moon as anchor, try to keep an eye on the shore, that luminous thin arc in the far distance I am not convinced is not some sort of diaphanous mirage.

And things appear eventually to fall into place, a kind of unreal settlement. You have given yourself over to me. Imagine. We steady as one into some kind of cold fixed rhythm, in/out, left/right, tick/tock, love/love not. How long does this slippery alignment last. I can't seem to put a figure on it. We are bobbing together but we are getting nowhere.

You are becoming heavier, how is it that you are becoming heavier, this weight, is it trying to pull us down to the dicey open palm. Your wide chest rises and falls, rises and falls on me. And the hollow V on your throat, look, quiet as a mouse.

I am cold. I watch flickering aircraft pass overhead trailing their low rumble, heading west to America or east to Europe and beyond. Dear shifting polestars, dear secret satellite systems in the sky, do you pull us in your chemical wakes, are we too heavy, are we a burden, which one is a burden, will we cancel each other out, this east west north south.

What are they, pinkish, are they bright streaks appearing ashore in the sky over that dark field of oxeyes, look. Dawn doesn't come to us, we have to go to it. Or maybe will it meet me halfway. Are you mad don't ask for too much. I didn't ask for anything, I didn't ask for this did I. Dear God, I did not. All of the clueless useless people ashore, asleep warm inside houses, being ferried blind to their dawn without even the slightest show of gratitude. Lazy arseholes. Calm down. I am telling myself to calm down.

“dear secret satellite systems in the sky”

He's gurgling. Salt in the throat. I feel it. Salt-soot burying in. Creep. Sweep. A scalded chimney. Don't think about it. This dirt. I feel the wet weight of his skull on my lungs. Stone. Put a stone in the bag, throw the bag of mewls in the water. Are you sleeping. I cannot see his face. I stare at the crown of his head. Dark strands of hair radiating out from a central spot, celestial white spot, a celestial ceiling, is this another thing, this tiny star of skin in the centre so pale smooth against his straggly black strands, wheeling outward, cosmos, is the tide still going out, what about that time in between when the tide stands still, listen, remember when you said to me, listen you need to hear this, Bunny, remember the time remember when you said, don't think of us as a long-term thing, when you said, I won't be hanging around here forever, Bea, get real, I was just, listen, soon as this semester's over, you said, as soon, I won't be tied, Bea, putting up with your, don't be so goddamned, you called me clingy, it's embarrassing, you said, it's fucking embarrassing, you said, are we tied at the hip or something, what is it you want Bunny, tell me now, space or time if you could have one of these, one in each pocket and, look! look! is this another thing, a blotchy star of whitest spiralling out into this his dark head, not going anywhere now Bunny are you, no, and why am I tied here at the hips to a deadweight bedraggled buoy with a galaxy for skin, a bag with a stone heart, a helpless, a useless arsehole, did I need to hear that, Bunny, did you need to say that back then, when words mattered, clinging to me now aren't you with your tight little rabbit soul, we're going, damn right we're going, every one of these scraggly black strings attached to the tide, the tide going out with all this shit or no, stop, no, is this a big black sea urchin here in the tide on my breast,

yes the git, the spiny, spineful spinesome spineless, in the middle the round, urchin mouth one side, anus the other, am I looking at anus or mouth, what's the difference, both suns being ferried to the dawn without so much as a thank you, my lovely, my very own groaning burden, now come on now, you know I cannot swim us both there, swim to shore, from shore to shore, what do you expect from me, come on, get real, I am old so cold there is nothing here, my limbs are numb, nothing, where are my limbs, maybe your eyes are open, maybe not, maybe half, maybe one, are these other limbs, are your eyes open, oh God.

Bunny?

He mumbles something, then back to a low gurgle, a child, a huge suckling urchin. The stars are gone, wrong, not gone, just we can't see them anymore, they're still there dithering, only hidden by the bright pink and orange blooms happening now, look, look! in laser streaks, rising in the sky yes from the east, oh these overland torches seeking out what, remember the car beams shining on those two white discs in the hedgerow back there knee-height remember then gone in a flash. In a flash. Blink. No looking back, just do it. What? I am too cold, I am too old. This dead water, how. A hard shivering cold. What was the voodoo doll joke, is it too late for that, is there a sting to those spikes. Oh yes, them there.

And the vixen calls out to me from the rosy the lonely shore has she been calling out for long and I know now what she is saying. You have to go to your dawn, it won't come to you. You have to leave the black sea urchin behind. All his hard spines, get them away from you. The sickle-marks. He doesn't belong deadweight on your breast. Leave him be. Give him to the Atlantic if it wants him that bad. Give him to the open palm waiting below if it wants him. And beneath the surface it's quiet, is it sleeping. A soft seabed. Let the black sea urchin go. Let him go there. There below.

Say it now, Bea.

With one hand, I loosen his grip, it's easy. With my other, I circle a fistful of hair from the side of his black head. He rouses, too late for rousing. I push his head underwater, rolling away from him. There's no

special noise, nothing much changes on the sea surface. After a time, how much time, not much, I let go. Did he touch me, did he reach out and touch my arm before he began to tick-tock away towards the dim west, out into his secret, his own chill, his very own sea.

My limbs are returned to me. I am light as air. I twist my back to the sky and swim slow a wide slow arc through the invisible arrows until yes in time I reach the brightening shore. The hard cold sand. Keep going. Find our jumble of rabbit costumes, pull mine on, hood up, wrap his around my arm, sand rasping skin, walk back past the oxeyes. Their flower heads are beginning to open. No thank you, Little Oxeye, hold on to it. I'm going home.

I'm still cold when I get back to the house, my body hurts. I take a shower and sleep for a few hours. That evening, I return to the Department Head's house. I apologise about the previous night's unpleasantness, explain about the continued disagreement in the car after we left the party, he's such a hothead, you know the way he could the way he can be sometimes, stubborn as a child, yes his insistence on a solo swim, his demand to be left alone, what could I do, when he gets like that. And now, God, his unexplained disappearance. Did he, by any chance, return here? He actually told me to fuck off home, give him breathing space. Breathing space, can you believe it? Yes, over a silly poem, over a line in a poem. Oh God, oh God, I'm getting a bad feeling about this, I'm getting a bad vibe. Look, if he turns up here, tell him he can take as much time and space as he needs, I only want to know he's safe, I only want to let him know he can come home when he's ready. I only ever wanted what was good for him. God, I swear, I'll kill him when I see him. What he put, what he puts me through! But I forgive him. Of course I forgive him. Tell him I forgave him if he turns up.

As I demonstrate my distress, they reassure me everything will be alright, it's not my fault, drink does strange things sometimes, he's unlikely to come back here, considering everything, maybe he's gone to a friend's, maybe it's all been a bit much for him, all the, it's a lot to take on, young lad like him. Maybe just give him some space. When he's ready, he'll make contact. Best to drop it, Bea. Go on home.

And four weeks later I read online about an eyeless, lipless, hairless body washing up further out west on Coral Strand, the grave-wax skin darkened, the little indigo swift gone (that somehow is the worst part). By then, I've quit the job and severed all contact with my former colleagues, I've sought out and accepted a part-time lecturing job back in New Zealand, I've left Galway to return home.

Yet, all these years, all this distance and you're still not gone, you're still clinging on.

She leaves the balcony, empties the bath, watches the spinning gurgle clockwise, ha! as the last of the bathwater drains away. Closing the balcony doors, she looks again at the parrot, is it alive or dead, is it real, what does it matter, the dog thinks it is. Oh God he's done his doggy-pee in the balcony corner, the edge of the towel sodden. It's leaked along the metal mesh and dripped down through the storeys, how many storeys, one two three four five not counting this one, it'll have disappeared by the time it gets to the fifth, as in, the first storey. Hope no one was out. They'd never trace it back to here anyway, enough of a distance between, and no provable connection, loads of people have dogs, accidents happen.

She walks back into the bedroom, he follows her. They plonk down together on either side of the coupled rabbit-costumes figure reclining on the bed, its faux-fur arms hugging its torso. Her laptop glows blue on the bedside table. Good, get that last submission done, then get all the critiqued pieces sent back out to the students by this afternoon.

But first, let's get this call out of the way. (Look oh look at him the shape of him inside my bunny costume inside his bunny costume lying here beside me!) Now my own delights I make. What. Apply *Starlet Vixen*, a little touch to your lips. And take the secret phone from the bunny's pocket. Okay, good. Lie back on the pillow, tell me what to type;

Sorry Bea, got mixed up with the time zones, what a dope !!
will call tomorrow, thinking of you xx

and listen out now for the Message Received notification ping from the phone still propped on the laundry basket beside the bath.

I know none of this is good. I know. Most pleased when most uneasy.

When she hears the beautiful, the sharp ping hit in the bathroom, it's like a warm shot in the arm, it's like what she imagines a shot of heroin in the mangled arm of an addict would feel like. The vibrating ping causes the phone to fall off the laundry basket and clatter into the empty bath. As she drags the laptop onto her knee to finish the final critique, she sniggers at the overly romantic, unrefined metaphor of herself as a forlorn addict. Ha ha ha! Pathetic. Like something one of the weaker students would write.

She'd given her Creative Writing class a simple brief: *1,500 words on a life-changing personal experience you've had. Note: it must contain some reference to a body of water.* She'll go easy with this final critique, but she'll be firm. This student (a favourite, it's true) is proving to be an interesting challenge, appearing to wilfully misunderstand suggestions, wilfully extract double meanings where the meaning is clear.

She'll start the feedback with a comment on the submission's title, 'ON DIVING INTO AN EMPTY POOL' (too abstract, one-dimensional, unfledged, a wasted opportunity, a parable-title is not always the sophisticated approach people think it is). She'll suggest something with greater clarity embedded, something that can carry weight, a metaphor from the physical world is always a good start, is there something in nature that maybe intrigues you, an animal, a plant, something you don't necessarily understand, something that could be used as a symbol of a deeper conflict, a type of diving board into your story.

A Poem in The Middle

Paul Rabinowitz

Risk

I was asked to write a poem that fits on a page one that lightly taps the reader on the shoulder placed in the middle between a true love story about finding a partner in the midst of grieving and a speculative fiction work with gory details about predation and the harsh ecosystem of the wild my work doesn't need to knock anyone off their seat it can be a simple segue from one piece to the other maybe set in a desert following a hungry coyote to emphasize how perceptive this sentient animal is their capacity to feel emotions similar to humans following its actions as it scampers over sandstone a full moon floats between land and the celestial casting shadows like a bridge to segue the night the coyote stares at an incorrectly installed fence leaning over and near total collapse raises one leg and freezes as it sniffs the night air evaluates risk learned through experiences and past interactions

Calculation

we both observe Ms. Gottfried drying her hair an east coast transplant who arrived last week in the middle of the night during a dust storm but unlike the intuitive mammal I'm overthinking stuck on a twilight vision between coyote and dog indistinguishable features when seen from a distance at this hour when my body's chemistry accepts risk I'll type through the night and cross over into morning when the light breaks through illuminating new lines as the coyote lowers his raised paw onto the earth stealthily crosses the broken fence into the dark yard

Reward

opening the door Ms. Gottfried lets out her mini poodle Foofoo sniffs the backyard landing a perfect spot calculating reward the coyote lifts his paw and freezes waits for the door to close as Ms. Gottfried withdraws tightens her clawed hair clip sips a gin and tonic waits for Foofoo to finish and press its nose to glass a bridge to ease the loneliness of Ms. Gottfried she'll stroke its coiffed fur to bond with the animal reduce her anxiety as she figures a way through a sense of belonging in this wild place when suddenly she feels a tap on her shoulder opens the clawed clip her wild hair falls around the frowning face of a coyote she guides him to her lap wipes his bloodstained mouth strokes its bowed head blue-eyes gently closing



Suzanne Furlong Kiggins

No One is Ever Turned Away At The Swan Hospital

Acrylic on canvas
36x48 in.



Suzanne Furlong Kiggins

At The Toll Booth

Archival watercolor paper
24x18 in.

The Summer We Killed Our Barbies

Orleans Saltos

I grew up in a rental home where the train tracks divided the haves from the have-nots. To this day, the mournful call of a distant locomotive brings me back to our modest Louisiana backyard, shadowed by the overpass whose steady drone of traffic became our soundtrack. My sister and I played for hours on a peeling wooden porch, our Barbie dolls arranged in meticulous rows before us. Dippity-Do glued my sister's thick, frizzy hair into a stiff, heavy braid down her back, while my ragged, boyish cut clung to my sweat-slick face. Playing with our beloved dolls, we felt just like the girls from the right side of the tracks.

The tadpole pond reeked in the summer heat, its stagnant water baking under a merciless southern sun. My sister and I could have retreated to our air-conditioned rooms, but this plastic kingdom demanded our attention, sweat and discomfort be damned. We engineered a world where lab-coated scientists worked alongside veterinarians and horse trainers, where battle-scarred G.I. Joe uncles dispensed wisdom to their Skipper nieces, where a copper-toned Malibu Barbie peered at the minnows and crawfish I'd netted from what my sister called "that pee-colored water" she wouldn't. Perhaps we invested so profoundly in this miniature civilization because the real world had no place for us. But here, on the sun-warped porch boards, we ruled like an omnipotent, caring God.

“this plastic kingdom demanded our attention”

One day our neighbor Elaine sauntered into our weedy yard. She came without her usual entourage, her expression bored and misanthropic. I watched as she trampled right through the line of ants I'd carefully fed sugar to that morning, their bodies disappearing under her flip-flops. I didn't recognize the warning.

Elaine was twelve, four years older than me, and her body had already curved into what my mother would call *una botella de Coca-Cola*. Her freckled, dusted skin was as pale as my *Tía Norma's* bleaching creams, while her wispy, dandelion-seed hair moved with the slightest summer breeze. In comparison, my sister's and my thick, dark manes remained stubbornly still against anything less than gale-force winds. Across from Elaine, I noticed that my sister looked like a different creature entirely, all angles and deep brown tones like *Tía Norma* herself. I fell somewhere between: more tanned than Elaine but lighter-skinned like my mother.

"I don't play with Barbies anymore," Elaine drawled, her face contorting the way girls do when they want you to know just how uncool you are.

My ears burned. "I'm still a kid."

"We aren't really playing," my sister lied. "We're inventing stories to send to TV shows." She came alive in front of people she wanted to impress. I was unable to do the same.

Elaine plopped cross-legged on the porch and picked up our two newest Malibu Barbies; an oceanographer and a marine biologist. "I'll help you make up stories." She pressed Ken's head against Barbie's hard plastic breasts. "Let's take off all their clothes."

My sister beamed. We were the outcast Latina girls basking in the glow of a popular white one. We were trained to be grateful for their attention.

Elaine stripped off the tiny groovy outfits our *Abuelita* had sewn, then arranged the dolls in positions that defied the family dynamics we'd created. Malibu Ken lay atop his platinum-blond sister. Uncle G.I. Joe lay on his French niece, the pigtailed Skipper. Only their unbending plastic limbs kept them from complete collision.

"Do you know what they're doing?" Elaine asked.

"Making babies!" my sister answered, proud.

Shame pooled in my chest. I studied the peeling paint between my bare toes, wishing I could leap from the porch rail to the pond and lose myself in frog eggs and mud.

“Let’s make the Kens tie up the Barbies and Skippers,” Elaine said. She pushed one doll against a post, nipple-less breasts exposed, pretending to bind her wrists. With each doll she tied, my breath shortened. I could sense Elaine watching me struggle, delighted. My sister frowned, reaching the edge of her vocabulary for these things. She shot me a look: *I know this is wrong. It’s okay.*

Then Elaine stood. “I have to go to catechism.” She left our Barbies splayed in their tableau. She smiled as if she’d won something.

My sister and I sat in uncomfortable silence. She busied herself by slowly retying the straps of her sundress. I watched her, waiting for her to tell me what to do. It was imperative to clear this up before our mother discovered it.

When my sister finally spoke, it was in a monotone. “We have to kill them now.” It was the sort of scheme a child would devise: simple, self-centered, and heartless. We needed to distance ourselves from them. We needed to do something that would help us love these tainted, misbehaving Barbies again.

I saw nothing but calm determination in my sister’s mannerisms as she found our dad’s electric tape and covered each doll’s nose and mouth to suffocate them. I helped with my favorites: Janaci, the dark-skinned but blue-eyed Skipper doll, and my beloved uncles, the G.I. Joes.

The following day, I awoke early to peel away their bindings, revealing faces unchanged and unmoved by their night without air. They hadn’t gasped in their sleep. They hadn’t struggled. I knew the only lives they had were the ones we breathed into them.

Days later, our mother burst through the door, clutching a McDonald’s bag and wearing a satisfied grin. “Guess who I ran into? Elaine! She was hanging around with these high school boys, acting so grown up, and I said, ‘Elaine! When are you coming back to play Barbies with my daughters?’” Mom laughed, pantomiming how Elaine’s face had flushed *roja como un tomate*. My sister and I exchanged glances and giggled along. Mom would never know what really happened with our Barbies.

Any risqué scene on TV became our code phrase: Elaine Play. We’d draw the words out with the gravity of ancient myth. Our Barbies eventually gathered dust, but the world-building survived. While my sister filled notebooks with tales of her French-accented Skipper doll, I spent hours hunched over sketchpads, bringing my dolls to life in comics and designing covers for stories still forming in my mind. I would become a children’s book illustrator some day.

I’ve forgotten the details of Elaine’s face, but whenever I glimpse someone randy on television or read something wickedly inappropriate, I still catch myself thinking: *Ah. That’s Elaine Play.*



Emily Blevins

Under impurityAcrylic on masonite board
24x36 in.**Goldfinch Naturalist**

Terry Trowbridge

A goldfinch lands on top
of a compost pile
opens up for a song but
distracted by a new orange peel
closes her beak and examines
the empty, fragrant semisphere.

The orange peel is not yet dried
although the finch recalls dried peels
resembling brittle eggshell pieces.
This new peel is the first one to confirm
the egg hypothesis. Maybe it is an egg. However –

against the eggshell hypothesis:
only orioles are orange-as-orange-coloured
and their eggshells are not orange;
there are no snakes with eggs so large;
this complete specimen has a strong floral fragrance.

The goldfinch bows and bobs,
takes sideways steps.
The inside of the orange peel is white,
has a texture verging on not-quite feathery,
and a mysterious single dot
where perhaps a stem?

The goldfinch, sensing that
nearby mammal eyes have changed focus
skips *en pointe* and then airborne,
imagining cocoons and huge moths,
the orange undercoats of ultraviolet butterflies,
completely forgetting what she was going to sing.



Teona Burroughs
Black Granite
iPhone 14 Plus & Prequel

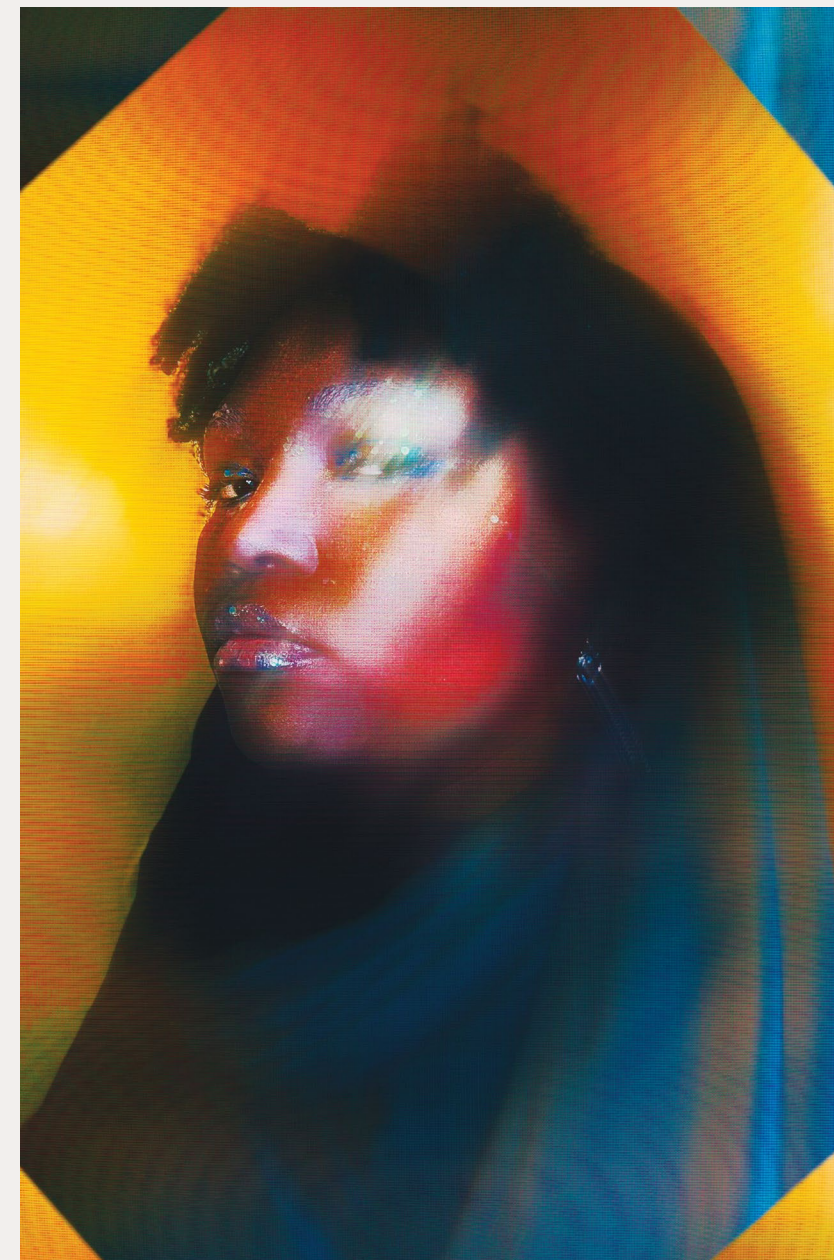


Teona Burroughs
**Suspended
in Gold**
iPhone 14 Plus & Prequel

Teona Burroughs
Emerald Solace
iPhone 14 Plus & Prequel



Teona Burroughs
Cosmic Bloom
iPhone 14 Plus & Prequel





Teona Burroughs
The Birth of a Lone Star
iPhone 14 Plus & Prequel



When Asked

Thea Ringer

My mother slathered olive oil on her face every night for the wrinkles until my father, of blessed memory, complained that the sheets on the bed were turning into a mechanic's oil cloth. He didn't care about wrinkles, but he did care about throwing away so many sets of sheets, so my mother gave up oiling her skin and let her wrinkles spread like a desert terrain, starting with her eyes, moving across her cheeks, and down her neck.

My mother, now that my own sons are teenagers, resembles a mummy, resurrected in this time of cell phones and Instagram to wander the house, snuffle down wine, and nag about things like humors and plagues of frogs. Without the olive oil, her skin is so dry that it sloughs off around her, settling on the shelves and furniture, and kicked up again for a second life, a resurrection in the air.

Many years ago, I wanted a mother like my best friend's who filled the family house with boxes and bags of stuff, mostly bargains found at flea markets. The house became so cluttered that you had to shuffle sideways between tipsy rows of boxes, like a crowded, drunken dance floor. Excuse me, pardon me. Her name was Molly and she was very kind. If I wasn't busy, she would ring from down the street and say that she was going to the coffee shop with her knitting, and would I like to come along. At the coffee shop she listened as I talked about anything at all, and after that she would buy me another coffee and tell me her million business ideas that never seemed to amount to much, but that never dulled her enthusiasm. I liked Molly's chaos because it looked ahead to something better.

My mother's clothes smell of mold even though she does regular washing. I've tried to figure it out, and my son suggests that maybe it is her and not the clothes. She has become stone deaf but that doesn't stop her. She comes upstairs while he and his friends are partying and asks for a glass of wine (old alcoholics never die). She doesn't hear the response

and keeps asking, loud but leaning in like a whisper, until a laughing group of teenage boys produce a surprising, sophisticated glass of red cab. She carries her wine around the party, mingling, trailing dust behind her until most of the boys are passed out on the floor or the couch, beer bottles all over her table and her furniture. She walks around until after 2:00 in the morning, sampling food left over on plates between trips to the kitchen with the real dishes that will break—they used them without asking. But she is humming a "hummy tune" as she calls it, one from her childhood, one she sang to me when I was a child. The tune is always startling because it is so beautiful, but the story is so sad—a knight, who has been killed, is feeding three ravens on his liver instead of returning home to his love.

My mother used to go to a singing group, but these days she just wanders up behind people in the house—there are always people in the house—me, my sons, at any time a random group or grouping of teenagers, upstairs, downstairs, raiding her refrigerator. She comes up behind them as they stand at the fridge, on tiptoe, and then, in a voice that is quiet but theatrical, in a voice that sounds like a dusty floor, begins to sing some old relic that was a relic even in her day. The teenagers jump, usually, and then laugh, and then laugh in a forced way, backing up, and she follows them, still singing her renaissance carol, until finally they are able to make their escape up the stairs to one of my sons' rooms.

The teenagers are interested in our house—I can't explain why. Perhaps it's because my old mother lives in the basement like a ghost. It's cool to have a haunted house with Egyptian mummies who sing little hummies to your friends.

When she is alone, my mother mourns the past like a vulture-eaten love. Not the past with my father before he died, although for my sake she reflects fondly on him, but rather the past of her childhood and teenage years spent in a small Delaware town called Arden.

She and her sister and brothers would camp in the woods all summer and explore the long stream that wound through the town. My mother and her siblings climbed over the massive boulders that somehow washed up there. The boulders rose massive and mossy out of the stream, so big that they felt architectural, like a planned city.

They had a dog named Skippy who would nap every afternoon in the warm sun at the center of busy Arden Road that passed in front of their house. Some drivers drove carefully around Skippy, but some sat and lay on the horn until my grandmother ran from the house to collect the dog in her arms.

My grandmother had a beautiful garden where her spoiled sons were allowed to dig tunnels, and one day the youngest brother got stuck underground in one of the tunnels and bleated like a goat until somebody came and pulled him out.

They moved to Arden from a goat farm in Michigan where my grandfather had been a goatherd, and my mother first learned to walk by grabbing onto shaggy goat coats. The goats were all mothers to my mom until one day, when a stray dog got into the field and the goats scattered in all directions. My mother was alone, crying for her companions, and the stray dog trotted after her, looking for food as she raced, terrified, on all fours for the fence.

They had a pet crow, too, for many years, in Arden. I don't remember its name, but her brothers stole it from the nest when it was small, thus it became angry and helpless. My grandmother fed it, and it was a menace in return, stealing the neighbor's laundry off the line and hopping into gardens to pluck the bloom off every flower.

When my mother was a teenager, my grandmother had to go away to upstate New York for "a rest." My mother and her siblings were left with my grandfather. They all disowned my grandfather by the age of eighteen. He played the flute for them and carved little animals out of wood. In his more eccentric moments, he drank lentil "health" smoothies and lay under different colored lights. But my mother startles every time a table is banged because of how he carried on at dinner about Jews controlling the world and Black people taking over the country.

My mother was fourteen when she stood on Harvey Road. On the other side of the road, two Black teenagers made their way to school for the very first day that the schools were integrated. My mother and another girl stood and watched them and, as they passed, my mother threw rocks at them.

For much of the day these days, my sons are at school, and I am at work, and my mother is free to organize the cabinets and watch her shows. They are all British soap operas. She has never been to England, but it is the only place she would ever go. She would never go to Poland or Russia. She would never go to Israel, but she does like kvetching, and she learned Yiddish from my father, of blessed memory. She knows how to say, "Oy, how hard it is to be a prairie dog!" in Yiddish. She overheard this exclaimed by an old Jewish man in a movie theater in New York after watching a short film about the trials and tribulations of the prairie dog. She always said this at exactly the right moment, and it used to please my father to no end, and he would exclaim, each time, that she was more Jewish than he was. The only problem I saw with this was that she never got the context of 'oy vey' quite right. To this day, she still uses it as an angry expletive. We try to explain that "no, it's a kind of resignation, not even a complaint but a throwing up of the hands, accepting that we are not in danger of losing but have already lost, and yet here we are." It looks like frustration, but really it is a sigh. But my mother continues to stub her toe or try to unscrew a jar, and all that comes out is an enraged 'Oy vey!' Like she, a little old lady, could tell the world off, finally.





Elena Plumb

Lucky Girls

Oil on canvas
30x48 in.

the occasional wedding

DS Maolalai

ah – the world. something out
of a dinner hall. we are
at a wedding – it's aaron's.
to megan. and cigarettes are going
outside. I stand in the fragrance
of an evening in ashbourne,
the moth-lazy wing
of the night. and a sound
quite nearby like a river:
the motorway. trucks coming
from belfast past midnight
to dublin, as if nothing else
were going on. and the day
has been bright and the evening
was seasoned with well
chosen flowers and petrol.
and the speeches
were good too. the food
wasn't bad. the drinks
have been coming as needed.
and night now – coats open.
people move from their tables
like letting out cats
to the garden. talking
with people you don't really know,
or you do, but have not seen
in ages. god, I do love
the occasional wedding.
love people and seeing
it happen to them. the excuse
to smoke packets of cigarettes.
friendship and night airs
which fall like a fleece.

Regards to Saturday

Madelyn Sadera

Madelyn Sadera's work is lovely. I was struck by the texture of both poetry and prose woven into such a brief piece. The combination of the two genres, the lyric of the items left behind, and the stark nature of the reason for the email work together to both elevate and ground the work in a way that highlights the art in daily life.

—Athena Dixon, Contest Judge

L

Inbox x



Saturday's Luncheon: I am disappointed.

Leah Morgan

Oct 12, 2025, 11:23 AM (3 hours ago) ☆ ☹ ↶

to Steve, Lily, Kat, Allison, Audrey, Victor, Sydney, David, Abigail, Scott, John, Tiffany, Meg, Dennis, Noelle, Merrie, Violet, Anna, Christina, Ava, Nora, ↗

I hope everybody is having a relaxing weekend.

To all those who attended Saturday's luncheon:

I am disappointed in every one of you for the lack of decorum that was demonstrated yesterday. I am, honestly, quite appalled at your actions—especially the amount of junk that was left in your wake.

Unfortunately, due to this rude and quite baffling outcome of what was meant to be a beautiful gathering of intelligent scholars, we will **not** have a luncheon this coming Saturday.

Please attend Thursday evening's inaugural banquet celebrating our new president, Miss Elizabeth Darling, in order to remain a part of this community. More information will be forthcoming.

In regards to the situation with lost belongings: The following items have been recovered and are waiting for you to claim ownership. If ownership is not claimed in the next seventy-two hours, items will be promptly donated to our local Salvation Army.

A water bottle

, standing out in the sea of items, collecting dust and sparkling with melancholy

A blend of nostalgia and deep regret

A timeworn tale of the owner abandoning the boy and the water bottle

Abandoning the bittersweet and overbearing enchantment that were once intertwined

A pair of earbuds

, admired, then absent, then newly appreciated

A harbinger of tranquility and taciturnity

Acoustics quiet turmoil

A warm blanket enveloping delicately corrupt consciousness

A hoodie

, no longer of warmth and comfort, now only a worn sacrament for past existences

A bid for the lives once lived

A gift from companions once loved

A stark reminder of the love once shared

A pair of worn sneakers

, faded from the habitual steps taken on the straights and curves

An ode of commitment to habits hardly loved

A persistent timelapse of the consistent wear of past winters and springs

A sublimely beautiful fusion of constant admiration and antagonism

A leather wallet

, seems to have been overly loved

A dreary expression of the cycle of emptying, filling, shoving in too-small pockets

A faltering backbone of the account drying up

A steadfast flashback to the flashy life long gone



A pair of keys

, sometimes neglected but never unloved

A reality that was once just a reverie, the deeply rooted desire for freedom

A need for independence, for a life with only oneself

Alone is simply an abstraction of reality

A student ID

, of a girl that looks like me

A girl holding onto a heavy heart and a broken promise

An older girl, healing the heavy heart and making new vows

A younger girl, clutching her fresh heart and promises unbroken

I shouldn't have to make this known to you, scholars. Please remember your belongings at all times. Come pick them up soon.

As you know, I am incredibly disappointed. Do better next time. I hope to see everybody at Thursday's banquet, and I hope that each and every one of you has considered your behavior. Make changes in both attitudes and conduct before Thursday.

Regards,

Miss Leah Morgan

An interview with Athena Dixon

Regina Waters

I first met Athena Dixon after attending her panel at the 2025 Baltimore Writers Conference, held at Towson University, where she and fellow writers discussed how they cultivated their writing communities. The moderator (and this journal's faculty advisor) introduced me to Athena, believing she would be a good person to interview. I intended to read Athena's latest collection, *The Loneliness Files* (Tin House, 2023), first, but was moved by the title and cover art of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (Split/Lip, 2019). I hastily began reading, drawn in by Athena's heartbreakingly relatable and punchy lines. Between reading *Grub Street* submissions, binge-watching, and catching up on sleep during winter break, I read and reread Athena's essay collections and researched her writing and editing careers. Athena gave me four hours of her time for our Zoom interview. We talked on New Year's Eve, navigating pauses, background noises, and spotty weather.

—Regina Waters

Regina Waters: How do you create balance between your three jobs of writing, editing, and government work?

Athena Dixon: I will start off by saying that I'm usually some level of tired. It's not the best way to live, but I found that it creates the best balance for me. My day-to-day federal position that I've had for almost seventeen years is very set. I work Monday through Friday, usually 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and so all of my writing and editing takes place between roughly 4:30 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., so I block time. If I need to work on a particular essay or chapter, I'll set a timer for an hour and do as much as I can in that hour, and then I'll flop to something else, then I'll move to editing something for an hour while I'm eating dinner until I go to sleep.

The next day will be a variation. The bulk of my writing and editing gets done on the weekends. I usually spend most of Saturday at my desk or with my laptop somewhere in my apartment, just writing and editing. When I have major projects, I'll put one to the side. A normal day is hour by hour, but during certain parts of the year, I take big chunks and I move writing or editing to the forefront. For example, right now for Split/Lip, we have open calls from October 1 to December 1, and then we have to have our top selections done by January 1. And so, from October to January, usually I'm doing minimal writing, but I'm doing a lot of editing because I'm reading hundreds of manuscripts to decide what the next published book will be. And so, after the new year, I'll move back into more writing until spring, and then I'll be doing more editing.

RW: How did you find writing and editing?

AD: I've been writing since I was a kid. I started by writing little short stories, and I wrote a lot of fanfiction when I was a kid, so much so that my parents found a box of it that I kept. Since I was an only child for about twelve years, I spent a lot of time by myself, and writing was the way that I could explore. When I got to middle school, I had a teacher who strongly encouraged me to write poetry, and so I started writing poetry. I also started working for the school newsletter at some point. When I got to college, I started doing a lot of open mics. I eventually ended up meeting an older student at the university who was heavily into writing, and she encouraged me to continue to read at the open mics. She was also editor-in-chief of the Black student magazine, and when she graduated, she passed it down to me in my senior year. Later, she went to Provincetown for Writing Week, and she told me I had to go to Provincetown the next summer, so I went. And slowly but surely, that got me into grad school. And I just kept writing along the way.

But I was mainly a poet; my master's degree is in poetry. I didn't start writing essays until around 2012 or so, when I fell in love with them and started studying, reading, and writing them. In terms of editing, I was always doing stuff for free for people. In high school, I was reading and writing papers for classmates who I shouldn't have been doing that for, but it was experience. Then when I got to college, I ran the entire staff and the budget for the Black student magazine and helped edit pieces, but I really didn't take off for my private work in terms of editing until I started my lit mag in 2012. It ran for nine years until 2021, during which we published eighty-four issues. That was kind of my passion project. It was fully staffed by Black women; we published monthly issues, and it was my first hands-on experience with running a staff and editing and selecting work.

Eventually, people started asking me to beta read their essays and their books, which I did for free until they decided they wanted to pay me for it, and then I charged them. I also did sensitivity reads for large organizations and gave them feedback about their cultural missteps in their works, and in 2020 Split/Lip published my first book. Three years later, they asked me to come on as a nonfiction editor, largely because they had seen me working in community with other writers and helping other people get their work into the world, so they trusted me to come on. But a lot of it was really just community work and the people in my literary orbit passing opportunities to me. And me doing things for free, but doing them well, and people realizing that there was a value in doing those things and then wanting to pay me.

RW: How does your involvement in writing affect your role as an editor and vice versa? Are there any lessons you have learned in both spaces that you would not apply to the other?

AD: Being an editor helps me see trends that I want to try myself, but also things that may be too trendy to put into my own work. There's this idea that writing and publishing are two different things—writing is the creation, publishing is the business. And so, right now, publishing is really into this idea of “memoir plus”: they want you to write a traditional memoir, but they want to add extra stuff to it. I think that trend may last a couple of years, but it's gonna swing back to essay collections. So, I'm interested in reading them, but I'm not interested in writing them.

On the other side, there's a lot of push from the editorial side towards hybrid text, where you can see people going back to traditional memoir structure, like adding maps and pictures in the center of the book, and adding chapter titles again—those kind of things that are evergreen, that last a long time—that I'm very interested in trying in my own work. So, being able to edit other people's work allows me to kind of see where the industry is moving, and what I might need to study a little bit more to bring into my own work.

In terms of my writing bleeding into my editing, I always look at any editorial job I take on, either as a private editor or with the press, as, “What are we missing voice-wise? What are we missing narrative-wise in the industry?” It's very clear that publishing is not very open to people who are of any kind of marginalized group. It is overwhelmingly white. And it is very difficult to have voices of any other ilk break through. So, if I'm one of the few Black editors who gets to select books, I want to be able to say, “Can we find books that are set on the East Coast? Can we find books that are set in urban spaces? Can we find books that are set in urban spaces that aren't what you expect a Black book to be? Can I find a story that's underrepresented and may not find a home somewhere else?”

I want to take voices that are similar to mine and are a couple steps ahead of mine and give them the opportunity to be published, so I use my sway as an editor to pull those books into the world. It's just being able to recognize where there are deficits, and where there's an overabundance of something, and then kind of filtering through that to get to the gems.

RW: Some of your essays from both collections appear first in literary magazines. Does this impact the conception of your collections? Have you come to value literary magazines as vessels or first steps to putting collections together?

AD: All my books so far—even the one I’ve just finished—include essays that were previously published in literary journals. That’s always my first step. On the business side, you want to have some measure of that book in the world because it helps the press or the agent or the editor know that you have an audience for the book. For the essays that are published first, they don’t necessarily shape the book, but those tend to be the pieces that I use as testers. The book that I’m working on now is heavily based around Greek mythology, desire, pleasure, self-acceptance, and more, and so the two pieces that are coming out are basically testers to see if people kind of latch onto the concept. If they do, I can determine if the rest of the book should stay in the current mold or be rearranged.

Literary journals are massively important for the rejections, too. I think sometimes people assume that on the back end of these literary journals, people are just saying no and forget that these pieces exist. But there really are people who are looking at it. And they will remember you and your work. Sometimes, even in the editing that we’re doing right now for the book manuscripts, there are a couple pieces that aren’t right for us. But when they get their rejections, we’re going to say, “You might want to submit to this particular place.” And so, literary journals open up the literary community in a way that book publishing doesn’t. It gets your name out into different spaces, it can bring residency or scholarship opportunities, it can bring reading opportunities to join a staff somewhere if they like your work and they think you have a good eye. And so, always look at literary journals as a kind of foundation for your literary world, and then the book publishing comes after that.

RW: What have you learned from your involvement in the literary community that you apply to writing?

AD: I latch onto something my friend Lara told me: “Weird it up.”

The literary community has some of the most brilliant and weirdest people you will ever meet, which is a good thing because if you confine yourself to this small box, you’re never going to write the thing you need to write. The literary community allows you to see brilliance and weirdness in action, and to see how it can be translated to the page. I follow and interact with people from all genres. I’m a nonfiction writer, but I have a lot of poet friends from grad school, and I have a lot of fiction writer friends. I read primarily fiction. I build my literary community with a variety of people from all races, backgrounds, genders, sexualities, regions, and ages.

I get a good view of what writing can be, especially at different stages of life. I know writers who are about ten to fifteen years younger than I’ve met through writing fanfiction within the last five years. I have writer friends who are in their eighties, because how you write in your twenties versus in your thirties and forties versus in your fifties and beyond are all different. Having a very diverse literary community can only enrich your writing. I wrote fanfiction when I was a kid, and then I stopped for many years, and then in 2018, when the first *Black Panther* movie came out, I started writing it again. From 2018–2021, roughly, that was all I was writing. I wrote a half a million words of *Black Panther* fanfiction. And it engaged me with an audience. It taught me how to write dialogue and how to write tension, and that stuff ended up in my “serious work” because I was engaging with these people who were really interested in what I was doing.

I think fanfiction writers don’t get enough credit. At all. I think there should be more fanfiction writers in writers’ rooms or TV shows, because that’s one of the hallmarks of being able to write in that kind of room: you can come in and write behind another person, and in continuity of the storyline.

RW: What are some notable differences between working with a small press and a big press? What should aspiring authors expect?

AD: With the small press, you're going to be a lot more hands-on in good ways and in bad ways. If you are uninterested in having to do some legwork in terms of marketing and promotion for your book, you should probably not look to them because they don't have the massive budgets or connections to place you everywhere. On the flip side, editorially, you're going to have a lot more voice and a lot more contact with your editor. For example, I'm editing the book *Split/Lip* selected, which is coming out in June. Me and that writer happen to be local to each other and she has a direct line to me all the time. I'm the only person working on her book, so we've built a stronger relationship because there aren't a lot of people who I'm competing for.

You also have a lot more say on your book cover, so if you're thinking "this is what my book is" and have a very particular vision for cover design, smaller presses are for you: I was able to have my friend Kelly design the cover of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. And if you're writing hybrid text, shorter books, or essay collections, specifically if you're a writer from a marginalized group, smaller presses might be the first entry point for you, because bigger presses might not be as open to your work.

In terms of bigger presses, you might want to consider these if you're a person who has a little bit more leeway with how the final product of your book is going to be. If you're writing something that you know is considered a massively popular genre and is really good and checks the boxes, a bigger press might be better for you. If you're writing books that are in that current stream, say everybody's writing vampire books, and you have a really compelling vampire book, you might want to go to the bigger press because they're going to jump on it because they see profit. On the other side of that, if you're a smaller or first-time writer concerned about having your face out there, being able to go on a book tour, being able to go and have them be really hands-on with your marketing, you're going to be competing for the scraps left over by the big names on the press. So, if you want a more hands-on experience, a bigger press is not for you.

I encourage every writer who's especially considering putting out a book to have a conversation with themselves about what their writing success looks like. Do you want to pursue a Big Five? If so, what does that look like? What are you willing to gain, and what are you willing to sacrifice? Do you want to be a person who is known in your genre, but not a famous writer who might sway where you're going to publish? It has to be a real conversation about what you want your writing life to look like, and then tailor what you do toward that.

RW: How do you record the memories you incorporate in your collections?

AD: I have many ways of keeping them. I have a handy-dandy notebook with me at all times where I write random thoughts and lists and words and phrases—it's just a hodgepodge of things that pop up during the course of a day. I write memories and things that are interesting to me, I keep copious amounts of screenshots and screenshot collections through Google Photos. One collection is all my writing wins. I keep a folder of it to look at when I get rejected. Then I have one for writing inspiration, so if I see an interesting post or meme, I screenshot it and put it in that folder and come back to it later.

I also was journaling every single day for five years straight. Sometimes it was one line, sometimes it was multiple pages. It was just me writing at the end of every day. Also, at some point, I was keeping a little journal next to my bed where I would write down the song of the day, one physical thing that happened that day, and the book that I was reading so I could keep track of if I was having patterns. I did that for six months, and then I fell off the wagon.

RW: Do you believe writing is a cathartic exercise? What do you think of the mentality that writing is not or should not be cathartic?

AD: I think it is. I think writing is art like any other art. Like, you can make music, paint, do photography. People who do anything that they find passion for, it's cathartic in some way. Why else would people be expelling energy by driving around a circle in a race car? It's all getting energy out, it's just getting it out in different ways. I would question anybody—especially another writer—who doesn't think their writing

is cathartic. There's something even at the genesis of you writing, whether you started as a kid, because most of us started writing or doing something that sparked in us as children. You were writing to get that feeling out of you. You're writing to get whatever fantasy that exists in your head out. You were writing to get whatever issue that you were going through out of your body. There is something in you that says, "I am compelled to do this thing." Just the act of putting it on paper is cathartic. If not, what are you doing it for? Even if I wasn't writing for publication, even if I wasn't writing for profit, I would still be writing. I think my life would be fundamentally worse if I wasn't. And all of us who are writers have written for free, have written for fun, have written for pleasure, and we just happen to want to make a career of it. So even if we don't ever make a dollar from it, we might be a little disgruntled, but we're still going to write because there's something in us that forces us to.

RW: How do you perceive and value verisimilitude in writing?

AD: I think the truth is fluid. I think any truth—especially in creative nonfiction, personal essays—is forever going to be fluid. Your version of the truth, no matter if you're both certain about what happened, is always going to be different than somebody else's. I think the goal as the writer is to align as closely as you can to the truth, both yours and that of the actual other person or other world or whatever the opposite to you is. You need to be parallel with it, you need to be able to acknowledge that your truths may not be the version that somebody else believes, and that as long as you're telling it as straight as you possibly can, with no intent to harm, color, deify, or vilify yourself or somebody else, then what you're writing is the best product that you can create.

I think that sometimes writers do not give their audiences enough intelligence. I think because an audience can always tell if you're not living in a fluid truth, they can tell when you're writing into a rigid truth that is your version of what happened and you will not be swayed. It comes through in the writing and how you speak about the subject matter. I think as long as you're writing into a fluid truth with intent for the fluid truth to be as close to what actually happened as possible, then you are doing your due diligence as a writer.

RW: I always think of verisimilitude, especially when it comes to quoting people.

AD: Yeah. That's a problem for me. I respect writers who can put a lot of dialogue in a piece. I can't. The dialogue that I include is usually because someone said something that was so outlandish or hurtful that I will never forget it. But just regular conversations and memoir? I don't know how anyone does it. I'd wonder if they actually said that or if they really said it like that. And I wouldn't be able to get over it because I would be so concerned that I was misrepresenting what they said, even if it was something minute, and so I choose not to do it, but I respect that others can. I also respect people who are honest enough to be like, "I think" or "I'm going to paraphrase this person."

RW: Trust is essential to the writer-reader relationship. How honest do you think a writer should be, especially when discussing personal matters involving others that the reader will not be able to get to know?

AD: I think that the writer has one hundred percent duty to be as honest as possible. If you're writing about it, that should be the expectation. A writer should be writing it to the best of their recollection, to the best of what happened, to the best of the available resources that they have to tell the story. If they're not, then it might be a thing that they shouldn't be writing about yet because they're not prepared to write about it. I think they also have a duty to present other people outside of themselves in a way that is not harmful to those people, because, depending on if they're still living or know that this thing exists in the world, those people do not have the ability to defend themselves.

I think the responsibility is almost like a boxer's: you have a skill set that a lot of people don't have, so you can't just fight people in the street. As a writer, you have a responsibility to not use your writing for harm. While you don't have to absolve people of their actions, you have to be honest in how you write it, and you have to be honest in your reasoning behind writing it and in your intentions on why you're including this person. Legally, you open yourself up to a world of potential lawsuits, and even if you win you could bankrupt yourself trying to fight it. You have to under-

stand your intention behind writing the piece overall. Are you opening yourself up to even more hurt because you're willing to use this thing to defame somebody? Are you opening yourself up to more critical responses to yourself because people see what your intention was? So I think that you have a responsibility and a duty to be one hundred percent honest as much as you can when you're on the offset writing it, but you also have a responsibility and a duty to give that same honesty and fleshiness to the people that you're writing about. Are you writing them as fully-fledged people, or are you writing them because they are characters? If you're treating them as characters, then you shouldn't be writing about them because they are actual people who may have had this particular experience with you, but they also exist outside of the bubble of your experience with them.

RW: How do you recommend nonfiction writers write about personal topics?

AD: I think the first thing is to determine if you're ready to write about it. Is it something that you've had enough distance from and enough healing from to write about if it's something that's difficult? If it's not something that's necessarily hard or traumatic, are you the person to tell the story, or are you hijacking somebody else's story because it seems like an interesting thing to write about? And if you're going to write about somebody else, how do you honor it being that person's story versus it being your own? There's also realizing that just because it's interesting doesn't mean it's something worthy of being written about. Sometimes things are good for a post versus an essay versus a full-length book.

So decide if it's something you want to write about and what format you need to write it in, then determine if you're writing it for public consumption or private consumption. Some things you need to write may not need to be out in the world, and some things are very important to be out in the world. Determine whether or not it's something that is a hot take or a speedier piece, versus something that's evergreen that you can take more time to develop. That will determine the vessel of what you're writing. It'll determine how much research you want to do. It'll determine the tone of the piece.

RW: How would you describe your writing niches or preferences?

AD: I refer to myself almost always as an essayist. I will say that the subtitle of my second book, "A Memoir in Essays," was added by the press. I did not turn that book in as a memoir in essays. I turned it in as an essay collection. Since I didn't write a memoir, I always refer to it as an essay collection. That's how I refer to myself because I don't think that I have the desire to write a traditional memoir in the traditional narrative. My story in my brain doesn't work that way. I also just refer to myself as an essayist and not as a poet anymore because it's been many years since I've written a poem. I don't know if I fit into any particular subgenres of essays. I just write what I'm interested in. If I had to pick one, I would say I'm an essayist leaning into cultural criticism of pop culture.

An issue that I have with the publishing industry right now is the idea that essay collections aren't selling. And I'm like, "They are selling, but you're allowing men to write them, and you call them cultural criticism like they're the same thing, but you just want women to write memoir now, and I don't want to write a memoir."

RW: What do you think are a few important details or craft elements in writing?

AD: I think the first one is rhythm. I think sometimes prose writers forget that that is a very important element for long form. That it's not the number of pages or the number of words, it's not the way it feels on a page, it's how it sounds on the page. There's a natural breathing pattern for people, there's a natural way that people pause and break. How are you building images, and where are you giving readers time to absorb them? Rhythm is something that I think all writers should pull from poets. Something that I'm happy to see is starting to change that prose writers should look at is white space on the page. Visually, everything doesn't have to be dense. Sometimes you can do a lot of work with a single line. There's also playing with the way the page looks as a way to bolster what you're actually writing about, and not necessarily interesting shapes on the page, but spacing as emphasis.

I think, too, that prose writers, and writers in general, should work to open up their tone and their narrative voice a lot more. Sometimes when we get really heavy into writing, we write to the echo chamber of other writers. We forget that people outside of the writing world have the same kinds of experiences, and we don't invite them in because we are so concerned about technically perfect writing. We're worried about craft conversations. We're worried about having read other things and references to other writers, but we need to be more accessible and inclusive. If your aunt and your grandma both experience divorce, maybe they should be able to read the essay about divorce without worrying about reading a different essay collection. Essentially, writers should consider what their rhythm looks like. What does your white space look like on the page? How is your narrative voice inclusive? And inclusive not meaning "dumbing stuff down," but how is it inclusive to people who may not be reading the canon and the hot topic essays of the day? How do those things work to give you a wider audience to your work?

RW: So if you wrote an essay about a very unique experience to yourself that maybe only one-tenth of the population could have experienced, how would you make that more inclusive towards a wider readership?

AD: I would find something that runs parallel to it. For example, my dad is very much like, "you know, there's not very many Black women in the country that have three degrees." In that case, if I have this master's degree, and I know that ninety-one percent of whoever doesn't have this degree, I ask, "If my master's degree is the accomplishment that puts me in this rarefied area, then what other thing runs parallel to that?" I then compare earning that degree to something that I haven't experienced but is a major life goal for somebody else.

So, my friend Lisa didn't start college, but she has two children I love dearly who are my godchildren. I take this very important thing that took me two years to gestate, and her building a home over the course of two years for her children, and find a common parallel. It isn't a one-to-one

comparison, but it has the same kind of emotion of "I accomplished/obtained this thing that took me X amount of time, and even though we're not in the same category, we both understand the feeling of that thing." So find an experience with the same emotional resonance parallel to your unique experience.

RW: What do you think makes a work successful or unsuccessful?

AD: I think the biggest thing for a successful piece is people's desire to return to it. I think the books and the essays that stand out to people are the ones that leave just enough at the end that it pulls you back into it, or leaves enough of a ringing image where they want to revisit an element or think, "I didn't expect it to end this way," or find some way to get them to be interested in revisiting it. Another marker of success for a piece is something that starts you at one point and leaves you at another, and understanding that that secondary point doesn't always have to be a conclusion. It just has to be a movement. Like, as long as we're not in the same place that we started the piece.

I think that's the hallmark of the piece that's not successful. If I can't tell you what the point of me reading these pages was, then it was unsuccessful, and I don't have to have some personal epiphany. Meaning, if we start in this room and we end in this room that is so stagnant that nothing within the room is changed, then you probably didn't do your job as the writer. Along with that are pieces that assume so much knowledge on the part of the reader that we never get an anchor into what we're actually reading. Sometimes writers write from so deeply within their perspective that we don't even know where we are. And the sad thing is, sometimes some of this is written incredibly well. But we don't know where we're actually going, or what we're supposed to know. We know that the lines are constructed beautifully, but there's no emotional content to it.

Another way to view the room is, if you set me in a white room, and we're in a chair in the middle of the room, and we read fifteen pages and we're still sitting in the same chair in the white room but there hasn't been a thought about switching angles to look at the window instead of at the door, there is stagnancy. Something has to change the atmosphere of the room. The room can still be white, but what part of the room are we now looking at? Or maybe we start in the room and the chair is comfortable, and then by the time we get to the end, we feel different in the chair. There has to be some kind of analysis, there has to be some kind of change, as subtle as it may be. But if we just start in the room, and when we end we can't tell what happened between those fifteen pages, then it's not successful. But if you're in the room and you say, "I'm sitting here and on this desk is this book," and we don't open the book but we now know why we're afraid to open the book, we're successful. It's important to know why the book isn't open, not what's inside.

RW: Do you think a story's narrator needs to be liked? How does this affect the reading? What if the narrator's unlikability is intentional, but makes reading it difficult?

AD: I don't think the narrator has to be liked, but I think they have to be tolerable. I don't have to like you, but if I can't stand the sight of you, it's very unlikely that I'm going to give you any of my attention. Especially if the narrator has to be unlikable for the story to make sense. There has to be a minute redeeming quality. Even if you set up a situation where we don't like this narrator and all we're waiting for the entirety of what we're reading is for them to get their comeuppance, there has to be some driving reason that we would continue to engage with the narrator. Even if it is framed from the beginning (and you might not want to be as overt) as, "you may not like me, but I'm gonna tell you the story of how I ended up getting my just deserts," or something that makes us want to engage with the person who is unlikable. I do respect the idea of the narrator being unlikable if it's what's true to the narrative versus trying to shoehorn them into being the hero when we one hundred percent can tell from the actual narrative that they're not.

Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Prize

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 of 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the English Department. 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 Melanie Hall.

Next To

Melanie Hall

On tackiness & games

Everything is tacky when someone has died. The funeral home's red carpet. White tablecloths. Cubes of colby jack cheese and baby tomatoes on plastic plates. Laminated photos of Scott with his sister's baby. Craft store flowers laid across the front row of seats. Smooth stones in a wicker basket.

A slideshow plays on flat screen TVs mounted to the corners of the room. Images of Scott with family, with friends, performing magic tricks. I cannot help but picture all the other people who have flashed across that same screen. Stock photos. It feels clinical. Someone dies, their family provides a Google Drive, the photos are inserted in a PowerPoint template. The urn does not feel tacky. I do not know if it is the sleek quality of bronzed metal or the weight of the ashes within it.

Scott loved Star Wars. I imagine he loved other, more meaningful things, but I think of Star Wars. His children, though not twins, are named after Luke and Leia. Scott and his wife, Michelle, were Padme and Anakin for his final Halloween, while Luke and Leia dressed as their namesakes. Skywalkers made flesh. The spaceship Lego sets he built with them are set atop a cabinet near the front door. I remember hating the Star Wars decorations provided by the funeral home. Action figures, toy lightsabers, posters: tacky.

Before Luke and Leia, before Michelle and Scott had kids of their own, I loved to visit them. Their basement was Scott's domain. He had a collection of pinball and slot machines and a bucket of quarters to spend on them. I used to spin the slot machine until it landed on three cherries. I remember playing ping pong and feeding Scott's pigeons and climbing on his magic show props. Sometimes he would explain the tricks and offer to make me "disappear" into a faux mirrored chamber or to saw me in half with my brother acting as my detached legs. I never did it. Maybe I thought if I did the tricks then they would really happen.

The shining star of the Allemane's basement, however, was the home theater. This is why I believed them to be exorbitantly wealthy. There were two rows of huge comfy movie theater chairs facing a low wooden stage. Projections could be cast on the white screen behind the stage: a movie or YouTube karaoke. We loved the disco ball. It was one of those black plastic spheres that spun, releasing beams of multicolored light.

Scott would run around in the basement with us, operating the karaoke sound system or play-fighting with lightsabers. I'm sure the other adults spent time with us down there, but in my mind, it was always Scott's world. I imagine me and my brother were an outlet for his childish streak and a reminder of the children they were struggling to conceive.

Luke and Leia are my brother and I reincarnate, if one can be reincarnated while they are still living. It's like we severed our pinky fingers and watched them propagate into their little, digital-aged selves. They were eight and eleven, respectively, when the aneurysm ruptured in Scott's brain. They both attended the summer camp where I still work and where my brother got fired for using a THC pen on a day off. Leia and I spent our days at the pool and in the Arts and Crafts building, enjoying recession-era pop music. Luke spent his time in the infirmary with a mysterious week-long case of sore legs. My brother, I assume, remained largely nocturnal, online, and on a strict diet of cheese-flavored snacks and milk.

I wonder how children grieve. Is it the same? Are they next to it? Are they submerged? I remember being around nine when our childhood dog, Sammy, died. I knew she was very old and sick and going to be put to sleep, so I asked to keep her collar. I remember crying in my bedroom, clutching the collar and whispering, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I did not have a name for the feeling.

A few days before the funeral, at the viewing, Luke, Leia, my brother and I play Telestrations with some of their school friends. The game is a mix between Pictionary and Telephone. We pass dry erase flip books around the table containing rushed drawings of pandas, of baseball games, of cartoon characters. They are laughing. We are all, the kids table, building a fortress of mildly forced joy around Luke and Leia.

The walls are toppled with each wailing adult that rains hugs and tears upon the kids who do not want either. *They know. They know. They know*, I think. They do not need every distant elderly aunt and work colleague to remind them of how awful this is. *They know*. I watch as Leia shrugs off another harpy.

One interaction with her insane grandmother lasts a few minutes, and Leia turns away in a fit of giggles. She returns to safety with an expression that reeks of puzzled amusement. She tells me that her grandmother ("The Dutchess," she is a recurring character here) warned her that she had better "get to work on having children, in case something happens to Luke." It is, according to her, Leia's responsibility to carry on the family lineage just in case her kid brother "doesn't survive." Leia has not even started middle school. I laugh along, for Leia's sake, but I hate this. I hate all these selfish people. I do not understand how they cannot swallow their sadness for just a moment to allow these kids some peace.

I want to scream. *They know that their father is dead. They know that it's sad. They know better than you. Fuck off. Let them have this moment.*

I prefer the kids' table.

Months later, in dead frosted January, we play a card game based on the trolley problem. Leia and I spend a good fifteen minutes sorting out all the cards with curse words or other topics too inappropriate for her brother. Without telling her, I remove a card depicting "your father's funeral" from the deck and slip it under the box.

On cats & The Dutchess

Magic has a permanently curled tail. He is orange with kind eyes, a motorized purr, and a fleeting interest in feathered toys. He is one of many cats who outlived Scott. He belongs to Michelle's mother, Ruth, who inhabited their guest room the week of the funeral. My mother helped drive Magic and Ruth four hours from Delaware to Maryland and back. He puked in the car.

He spent those weeks after the funeral pacing through the downstairs of the Allemane's home, offering intermittent snuggles and trying to eat Michelle's houseplants. To the children's amusement, Ruth wheeled him around on the seat of her walker. He sometimes rolled over as if to invite a belly rub, only to swat at any approaching hands.

Scott's mother, who referred to him as "the late Duke" and to herself as "the Dutchess" made the journey from Florida in a van with forty-seven cats. I cannot imagine the sound of forty-seven meows and scratches and purrs layered over one another, but the noise was evidently too much for the Dutchess, because she spent a lengthy portion of the funeral concocting a sour tasting analogy about Schrödinger's Cat. And based on her nonsensical description of the thought experiment, I don't think she knew much about Scott or quantum physics, and she wanted the audience to believe she was an expert in both.

In Schrödinger's original thought experiment, a cat, a flask of poison, and a radioactive source are placed in an opaque box. If a radiation monitor detects any radioactivity, the flask is shattered, which releases the poison and kills the cat. The random probability of radioactive decay means that, until the cat is observed, it is impossible to determine whether it is alive. There is theoretically a point at which the cat is both alive *and* dead, but if one were to open the box, they could only perceive the cat as either alive or dead. Thus, if you open the box, you will either kill the cat or free it. The experiment, unlike how the Dutchess posed it, is not a moral dilemma related to the fate of the cat, but rather a question about the behaviors of quantum mechanics. Schrödinger did not conjure this experiment to promote the possibility that something could be both alive and dead, but rather to demonstrate the absurdity of the idea. There is no moment when we are alive *and* dead. We are only alive and in memory.

The Dutchess asks us to raise our hands if we believe the cat was alive. No one does. She is undeterred. "Who here thinks the cat is dead?" No one moves except for Leia, who turns to laugh in my direction. I try to nod as subtly as possible. A silent understanding passes between us. It is like looking down the wrong end of a telescope and seeing myself. Everyone is disturbed by the Dutchess's display, but Leia and I may be the only two in the room who are equally as amused. I am not sure if we, or at least I, have any right to amusement. I like to think that Scott would've wanted us to laugh about it, but I am in no position to assume such things.

As the Dutchess continues her ill-informed analogy, she speaks all about Scott's "unfathomable genius" but little about him. Scott was wonderful. He was funny and loving and hardworking and had an impressive array of half-finished passion projects stored in the basement. He was also disorganized and wildly unprepared for the possibility of his death. He was not a genius or Schrödinger. He did not have to be. Scott was king of the basement, amazing with his children, loved his wife, and had practically zero of his affairs in order. He was not flat, and I will not pretend that I knew him deeply.

I am not sure if Scott's mother is in the grief or next to it. She is supposed to be in it. I would assume that any family grieves, but her remarks were superficial, impersonal, self-centered. It's like she didn't know anything about him except his death. Halfway through the Schrödinger's Cat speech I realize that I hate her. She is being selfish. She wants to appear smart but only seems performative, insincere. Scott's wife and children are in the front row, these people whom I have rapidly developed a protective instinct for, as she constructs this facade of intelligence. People are swallowing gasps, shaking their heads. A heavy, awe-struck silence hovers in the air like frozen mist.

Maybe her grief needs recognition. She wants us to nod our heads and watch her cry the most, feel the most, talk the most. She wants to win at grief, which is as impossible as a cat being dead and alive.

Her son has died.

Am I allowed to hate her for this?

There are red ribbons on Scott's Porsche after the wake. Red tulle and cheap, shining gossamer. Sheer ruffles of white and cream. A pair of small stuffed bears blocks the license plate. His siblings and the Dutchess have, apparently, snuck off to deface one of his prized vehicles during the wake. His DeLorean, tucked safely in the garage, has been spared. My brother and I, along with Luke and Leia, left a little early to escape the never-ending tide of grievers and next-tos. I sent a photo of the ribboned car to my mother. *Ugh*, she typed, *Scott would hate that*. I ripped them off.

There are flowers everywhere, too. So many people send flowers for Michelle or for him. The distinction is fuzzy. They are mostly white. Some are red. Scott's mother sends white lilies from "The Dutchess." Magic the cat tries to eat them.

On parents & birthdays

There is a blue painted wooden sign in the shape of a "D" on the kitchen wall. It must have been a Father's Day gift from a few years ago, when Luke and Leia's hands were the tiny size of those stamped in white paint next to the word "Daddy" and some phrase like "we love you always." It is only cut plywood and acrylic paint, though I wonder how the weight of the thing doesn't tear itself from the drywall.

I stare at it. The word, "Daddy." It is there. I cannot be normal about it. I keep staring. It is still there. I imagine it must be like living with a ghost, impossible to pretend with, impossible to forget, impossible to discard. Friends eventually sell the Porsche, the Delorian, his magic tricks; an unforgiving collection of items that prove Scott was here. There is no choice, I realize, that involves the removal of the sign.

Scott died of a suspected brain aneurysm in May, two weeks after the birthday he shared with Leia. The program for his funeral is tacked on a corkboard in my family's kitchen, beside old report cards and outdated school calendars and handwritten cookie recipes. I made one of those recipes with Leia after the funeral, and again that Christmas.

My mother and I, like Scott and Leia, share a face and a birthday. October 12th. We took a trip to Orlando six months after Scott's funeral for my 21st and her 49th. We visited Galaxy's Edge, the Star Wars land in Disney World, and something half-spoken passed between us. "We should invite Michelle and the kids. They would love this." *Scott would love this. He should be here. In Disney World. Alive.*

My mother became a little spend-happy after Scott's death. We have bought concert tickets and booked hotels and planned trips. After the funeral, my mother and I drove six hours to Burgettstown, Pennsylvania to see Noah Kahan in concert. The first few hours felt feverish, like a nightmare that isn't scary enough to interrupt sleep. The weight of the day filtered through my Subaru's air conditioner as the distance widened between us and that grief. We were not next to it anymore. I think we both felt guilty for leaving. I accidentally parked in the VIP lot at the mouth of the venue. The teenage parking monitor did not care.

Noah played "Growing Sideways" on an acoustic guitar on a small platform in the middle of the audience. He was only a few rows away. It was just him, his lonely guitar, and the soft voice of those few thousand of us who recognized the lyrics. One line stayed, dry, on my tongue: *I'm terrified I might never have met me.*

They are going to turn Scott's basement into an apartment for rent. My father is remodeling it. It makes sense. Michelle needs the income. Most of Scott's magic show props and untouched collectibles have been sold. His half-finished R2-D2 replica was given to a friend. Luke has appropriated his gaming computer and Michelle's sister found homes for his camera equipment. They will have to move the kids' toys and trampoline and pop-up fort somewhere upstairs, and I do not know how Michelle can stand to watch it all.

During the viewing, during the funeral, during the week when everyone suffered at the hands of unhinged mothers-in-law, Michelle did not break. I watched her tell her children "no" to ice cream for dinner after just a few weeks of grief. I watched her plan the funeral with my mother. I watched her treat everyone, even the Dutchess, with a kindness they did not deserve. And I am sure that whenever a nice young couple or recent college graduate or budding family moves into Scott's basement, she will smile and shake their hands and act for all the world as if they do not tread on her dead husband's domain.

On dreams

My mother tells me that she sometimes feels angry with Scott. For dying, for leaving them, for lacking a will or life insurance or some other protection beyond community. I do not know if it is selfish to be angry at the dead. Death is not really about them. Every page of a book that matters happens before the end. The reader is the one who finds meaning. Scott is not a book. I lack words for this.

All I know about Scott and about grief is that it is the responsibility of those next to it to just be there, to play telestrations and rip ribbons off cars and try not to laugh during funerals.

Months after his death, my mother tells me about a dream she has. In the dream, she is at a fancy restaurant and her waiter is Scott. I imagine the restaurant as a collection of circular tables adorned with white tablecloths and single red roses in vases. The image is warped, a picture of Scott in all black, black tray of indistinguishable food in hand. He pretends my mother is crazy as she begs him to unfake his death and return to his family. There is Scott the waiter, my mother the dreamer, and my immaterial self, floating, watching them through a fish-eye lens.



Memory Chasing

Ashley Rogers

Go on in, to memory care. Sit still. It's time for reminiscence therapy. The doctor walks in.

Nervous? *Yes, a little.* That's okay. Take some time to compose yourself. Try to ignore any outside distractions. Ready? *I believe so.* Then, when you feel comfortable, tell me where you are. *I'm sitting on a pier.* How old are you? *Nine.* Describe it. *Long. Creaky. Discolored brown. Cool from the fall breeze. One plank firmly set. Another almost falling down.* What do you see by the pier? *A house painted white. Black shutters. And a sliding glass door with a porch along its side with a broken frame so it no longer opens. And are there boats? Yes. Yes, there's one but not there.* Be exact. *There is one on the lawn. By the house. With bamboo and trees hiding it well. And a garden that needs a prune.* Is that what you think in this occurrence, or what you're thinking now? *Now.* Don't do that. Reconstruct only what was. *There's a garden with a lot of vines growing from it. Whose? My father's.* How do you know? *Because it's lively and messy, and my mother is well-kept, and my father likes to garden so—*What else do you see? *A corvette. A brown one, with a flat wheel and a fading paint finish that matches the worn car seats.* And what can you smell? *The familiar freshwater.* Why does that make you smile? *It smells like my father.* Is he with you now? *No.* Is anyone with you? *My mother is. She's sitting by me on the pier and tossing bread to the ducks while calling me Sissy and Sis.* Is she gentle? *She is.* Describe the water. *Calm. Still, I think, with an orangish tint, reflecting from the leaves in the sunlight.* Can you touch the water with your feet? *Almost.* Looking down, what do you see? *Rocks, at the bottom. They're muddy. Sunken below me.* And closer? *A reflection. Made of the shade from trees surrounding me.* What else? *A duckling swims past my foot. Then a leaf falls from a tree that is swaying softly.* And closer? *My mom's hand on my back. Comforting.* Can you get closer again? *Wedding ring on her fragile finger. My father's name. He chose it and—He didn't know a lot about jewelry.*

Present tense. *He doesn't have an eye for that stuff.* Do you know why that memory affects your speech? *Yes. Why? The forthcoming.* No, stay away from that. What time is it? *Early afternoon.* How can you tell? *The ducks are eating—That's afternoon.* Why does that make you smile? *I don't know.* Yes, you do. *It's wistful—It's just familiar.* Now what else do you hear? *Still my mother calling, "Sissy look here."* And what is she doing? *Pointing at a duck.* Describe the duck. *Green. With gray and brown feathers. Soft.* Go on. *I quietly watch but the duck's all alone. I anticipate that its duckling will come back. I can hear it make a little quack.* Do you speak? *Yes, I ask "What will they do?" She says, "They will get through."* What's affecting you? *I don't know.* Say the initial thing that comes to mind. *I want my dad.* Why? *Because I know it will happen soon.* Stay in the moment. What is currently affecting you? *I'm—I'm scared.* Why? *Because—My father's unwell.* Describe a physical feeling. *I—Please, tell me now. I'm. Withdrawing. My mind is.* Why? *I'm afraid.* And what are you afraid of? *What if we can't make it through without him.*





Lex Recinos

Baby Therapist

Acrylic on canvas
40x30 in.

The Shame for God

Kevin Novalina

My father died of cirrhosis the year Madonna videos began to make my middle tingle. Always drunk; he was forever saying that society was just one big rolling boulder. *You don't run fast enough*, he'd squeak through a hiccup. *It'll Indy Jones your little ass*.

It was gut-canker tequila that got him, a year after labor took my mother and baby brother, Eli.

In the hospital before he died, he pulled me to his wheezing mouth and mumbled not to make his mistakes. *You drink hard hooch*, he whispered, *water her down some so it's easier on your plumbing*.

Since my arrest, the room I live in is shades of white, but it's not padded walls or all that lobotomized *Cuckoo's Nest* crap. What I have is a twelve-by-fifteen-inch window that looks out at the recreation room. My small rectangular world where doctors pass through carrying clipboards and coffee cups. Where patients sometimes waddle by watching their feet, lost and too ashamed to care.

In his office, Dr. Wynn tells me this is not a nut house. Behind a miniature globe on his desk, he says to think of it as a vacation resort for the mind.

On the globe, I'm looking at China, where my mother was born.

Then I'm squinting at the Australian Outback.

With his fingers laced in front of him, Dr. Wynn starts talking in fragments: "Post-traumatic syndrome... displays of violent behavior..."

Due West, I see Africa.

The Florida Keys.

"...Bipolar disorder... threat to yourself and society." Leaning over, Dr. Wynn snaps his fingers in my face and says: "Your mind just needs a vacation."

In small paper cups, they give you a hundred milligrams of ivory whites. They give you five hundred milligrams of Easter yellows. Another thousand in China blues and you're vacationing in a nut house.

So why I'm here started with fighting, but I'm almost positive I've never thrown a punch in my life.

It all went down at a school dance with a guy who smiled like Maverick in *Top Gun*. What happens is, I'm feeling weird again, and in the auditorium the thump from the speakers makes my brain inflate like a handcuffed balloon.

If I black out, I don't recall, but I'm slammed against the wall with my cheeks gripped in a kiss. Maverick's yelling to tell him just who the fuck I'm looking at, and in the strobe lights everything's stop-motion animation.

The crowd crowds around, all neon smiles in the black lights. Tangled in streamers and crepe bunting, I try explaining about my head, but through puckered lips it kinda comes out: "Fuck your fucking self." In shuddering motions, he slaps me hard, and the music syrups into a sedative drag.

Dad once showed me that by using a craned wrist you can drive a man's pinballs into his ribcage. When he bends over, he says to bring the shot up through his teeth and they'll meet his marbles midway. *Small as you are, you'll probably still get your ass stomped*, he said. *But he'll be gumming his Froot Loops come morning*.

One night after Mom died, sobbing on the floor he said it's an evil fuck who'll take away the best thing another has. He raised his Milagro. *Less it's a bottle of Tears of Llorona*, he said, *then you rob that cocksucker blind*.

So at the dance, with my lips blowfished out and a twisting mirror ball dusting us in glittered light, I crane my wrist at my thigh. But then I close my eyes and picture Maverick in a pilot uniform, his flight helmet cocked on a hip. His dark Aviators matching the jack-o'-lantern smile where his pearlies once beamed. With some cheesy ballad turning my mind into a plasma globe, I get sort of emotional about how I'm fixing to change his life. Because it's true. It's an evil fuck who'll take away the best thing another has, top-shelf tequila included.

He slaps me again and with my ears ringing like an EKG flatline, I hear my mother saying, *Whether you're loved or hated, make sure you're remembered*.

So with my head popping and all the glowing teeth around us, I reach down, finger a pantleg up, and unsheathe the KA-BAR strapped around my calf. Everyone backing away, I raise my shirt and carve a large bloody X into my chest. "If I can do this to me," I tell him, "just think what I'll do to you."

In my room, I'm always reading or staring out the window, trying not to swallow my tongue. The raw lobe in my skull feels scooped out like ice cream, and my hands just will not stop quaking.

After what might be a minute or a month, the orderly, George, takes me to meet Dr. Wynn in the courtyard. "Fresh air does wonders for the mind's ductwork," Doc says.

We sit on a bench facing the wood line obscured by chain link and razor wire. He tells me I'm here for what I said I'd do to Maverick, then what I *did* do to me. "Verbal assault demonstrated by self-harm," he says. "Sure puts the wobble in a wobblers charge."

I remember a newspaper cartoon Mom once hung on the refrigerator. In one panel, an ape's raising a wrench while in the other, a robot's hoisting a man. Picturing this, and with Mom visiting in my mind, I tell him assault and self-harm are social media profiles. Physical contact, Mom says through me, it's just Facebook and OnlyFans. TikTok's the new location for social gatherings where all we do is scream.

You type "LOL" to laugh out loud in silence. A smiley emoji shows the masses you're happy. A tells the hordes you're sad.

Click "Like." Give us a "Thumbs Up."

Smash that "Subscribe" button followed by the Bell Notification.

Everyone on phones phoning everything in, waddling around in their own six-by-three-inch worlds. Living assembly line adventures, exploring AI frontiers. Always and then, and then, and then. Just next, next, next.

Now that there's finally a universal language, we say, we've turned into a Babel of ears.

My father hated personal contact. Any human interaction. He never visits my mind, but if he did he'd say give him smoke signals over iPhones any day. Because the more folks you know, the more you'll owe. *Anyone extends a hand*, he'd repeat like a mantra. *There's always an arm attached*.

Dr. Wynn says times change. Cultures and societies and technologies transform, so we adapt. “This is evolution,” he says. “What separates us from the animals.”

Watching a squirrel scamper up an evergreen, then spin inverted barking, me and Mom say: *Only thing separating us from machines is the orgasm.*

In his office, Dr. Wynn snuffs the lights and tells me he’s going to teach my mind to relax and expand through hypnotherapy. He says this’ll help me focus and provide breathing space. “Maybe ease those screaming headaches.”

On his desk, there’s a metallic device with five chrome balls hung motionless from strings like noosed bodies after the kicking’s quit.

“This is a Newton’s Cradle,” he says. “And I want you to focus on the spheres while I count down from five.” He tells me in my mind, I’ll see a red door. “When you do, go in.” He lifts and releases an outer ball, then the end spheres begin tick, tick, ticking while the middle three remain stationary.

He blabs on about my comfort place beyond this door. “Concentrate,” he says, and as the clicking balls muffle into echoes, I see red.

Floating toward the door, my hand reaches and takes the knob.

Outside my head, the doctor’s saying, “Five.”

I enter my comfort place. By the smell of incense, I know I’m in our old house. When Mom was alive and pregnant. When Dad was alive and sober.

“***The Post-its shadow the walls like peeling skin.***”

And by the Post-it notes clinging to the lampshade, I can tell I’m in the living room. Mom’s forty-seven-by-forty-seven-millimeter sticky witticisms. She told me you can teach the length of a book, but the real lesson always fits a Post-it.

Mom and Dad lay at each end of the sofa, their bare feet pyramided together. A hand on her swollen belly, she’s teaching him Chinese and he’s asking, *How are you?* in broken Mandarin. *Nǐ ... hǎo ... ma?* he says, eyes upturned in thought.

The Post-its shadow the walls like peeling skin.

One says: *Don’t think of outcomes, but of the actions that bring them.*

Another says: *Use no way as the only way and you are bound by nothing.*

Dad stumbles over, *What is your name?* and Mom throws her head back laughing.

Then they’re gone.

No Mandarin or laughter. Post-its or pyramided feet.

Outside my red door, the doctor’s saying, “Four.”

I enter the dining room where the three of us are having dinner. She’s cupping my cheek over my shrimp dumplings, saying, *Son, always live the length of an arm in the span of a finger.*

Across the table, Dad raises his “fuck you” digit. *Just make sure it’s this one,* he says. *You’ll live longer.*

Then we vanish as well, the table clear save a thin layer of dust like an old tablecloth.

“Three.”

By the curled notes on the refrigerator, I know I’m in the kitchen.

One Post-it says: *The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.*

Another says: *Whether you’re loved or hated, make sure you’re remembered.* Beside this, a cartoon cutout of an ape and a robot.

Off the kitchen is their room. In bed, Dad’s on his side with Mom’s hand slid from the covers around his waist. Her arm rising and falling with his breathing.

A muted thump outside the room makes them disappear and I float out.

It’s dark at the far end of the hall, and when I move closer toward the thump’s source, blood runs from the black as if the shadow’s bleeding.

“Two.”

I hear Mom breathing clipped and quick, like how she practiced for Eli’s birth. I lean closer and a bloody hand seizes my arm from the darkness.

In Mandarin, I hear Dad trying to say, *Are you okay? Are you okay?* “Mom?” I ask the gory hand, and the hall lights up. On the floor, Dad’s holding her head in his lap, both covered in the blood pooling below her like wings. *Nǐ méishì ba?* he asks, weeping. *Nǐ méishì ba?*

Smiling up at me, Mom raises her middle finger and with a final breath says, *Live longer*.

Then like rewind, I'm back down the hall, past the bedroom, and through the kitchen. I round the dusty dining table and speed into the empty living room before sucking back out my red door where the chrome balls are still tick, tick, ticking.

Where my head's still screaming.

Where Dr. Wynn's saying: "One."

I've been at the hospital for eleven notches carved in my wall. And though I wouldn't swear it, I think the new meds are making me hallucinate.

They give you a million milligrams of pastel pinks.

In the REC room, the other patients glide about like ghosts. What people call insane, most are just trapped in memories.

Sanity is really the ability to forget.

One lady, Ellie, speaks only in "Mother" quotes and practices the Heimlich Maneuver on all the other patients. Her little girl choked on Franken Berries a couple years back and Ellie panicked. The daughter died, but since her stay in the hospital Ellie's perfected the Heimlich.

When God locks one red door, He shatters a window to dive from.

Tommy, a long-stay psychiatric patient, never stops singing hymns his bipolar mom taught him. Every night, she'd carol him to sleep until the evening she drank four fingers of gin on Xylazine rocks and went to sleep herself.

I'm coloring a nightmare in a dream book when Ellie slides up. I stand and lift my elbows as she steps behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist open hand over fist. In forceful jerks, she thrusts into my belly below the ribcage until a half-dissolved pill shoots up in my mouth.

In the corner, Tommy's singing, "We'll Gather at the River."

Ellie finishes and I swallow the pill again. Lower my arms and say, "Thank you."

With vacant eyes she whispers, "Mother is the shame for God in the lips and hearts of all the children."

I tell her Mother is the name for God, and she walks to another patient. Begins the Heimlich again.

"*Gather with the saints at the river!*" Tommy sings out of key.

A poster on the wall shows that egg in a frying pan. It says: "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?"

With a crayon, I scribble out "questions" and above it write: DIFFERENCE.

When Mom and Eli died, Dad got drunk and stayed that way the rest of his life.

After her funeral, he came home and took all my mother's clothes out, spreading them lengthwise in a stack on her side of the bed. He shaped her underwear and stockings on her pillow, then pulled the covers up over the pile still smelling like her and tucked the sides in firm.

"Sanity is really the ability to forget."

He told me something might be broken inside him when he started hearing her snoring in the bedroom. Walking by their door, he'd peek in as if to see if the pile was sleeping undisturbed. He talked with gestures and if you spoke aloud, he'd slap your head, point toward the room, then pillow his cheek with pressed hands. Soon after, he went around gathering strands of her raven hair from the carpet and furniture. The dryer lint trap. At first, he braided them into locks and carried them in all his pockets. As his skin began to turn grape from drinking, he'd slip them into his tequila bottles, guzzle them down like dark worms.

The school counselor is who noticed me getting sick. When the headaches became crippling and Mom began to visit. Dad stopped eating and started forgetting to feed me so the school administrators called CPS. Then me and dad got shipped to two different kinds of homes—I moved into foster care, he took a mind vacation. I only saw him once more, minutes before he died, twitching and purple and begging for one last drink for the long road.

The day I was taken away, I peered into Mom and Dad's bedroom for the final time. Though it was empty, I could still see the Snugapuppy Swing she'd assembled the day before she died, rocking to "Brahms's Lullaby," the plushies rotating on the mobile. Its mirrored globe slicing lamplight rainbows over the walls as it rocked side-to-side with a bundle of Eli's baby clothes strapped into the seat.

On the bed, I saw Dad passed out beside the covered clothes with one of Mom's robe sleeves slid from the covers around his waist. The arm rose and fell with his breathing and for a moment, the pile began breathing with him. Swelling and deflating in perfect unison with Dad's troubled snores.

I'm in one of our sessions and Dr. Wynn's behind his desk, fingers laced on his clipboard. He's watching over the rims of his glasses, often glancing down at his Rolex.

I tell him I keep seeing my stillborn brother in a baby-swing by my bed.

He begins speaking in his usual fragments, his voice droning with the cadence a professional slips into when they're just going through the motions.

So without thinking, I leap up and sweep everything off the desktop, shattering and scattering across the floor like blood. Pens. Picture frames with photos of his wife and twin daughters. His "#1 Dad" coffee mug. The miniature globe rolls across the tile, Antarctica over Greenland.

Dr. Wynn starts to stand but I snatch a gold letter opener, lunge over the desk, and stab him in the shoulder. He flops in his chair and flips backward into the shelf, books dropping over him like attacking birds. "George," he yells. "Get in here!"

I lay the bloody paperknife on his desk and begin picking up the mess when I'm slammed to the floor from behind. George pins me on the doctor's desk accessories as pages of my case file feather down around me, and I notice my shoulder bulb's popped from its coupling. My arm splayed at a nauseating angle.

Before I pass out, I see the globe in the corner, the South Pole now North, and tell George the whole world's upside down.

I wake up in another ward, strapped to a bed save the shoulder in a sling. A new doctor's watching me through a window inlaid with wire mesh. He steps in. "I'm just gonna cut to the chase," he says. "Why'd you attack Dr. Wynn?" He sits. "He's a great man who just wanted to help you."

I lick my cracked lips. I wanna tell him how anymore, the world's always *and then, and then, and then*. Just *next, next, next*. With Dr. Wynn, everything in his life is muscle memory routine. I want to say all he needed was a car wreck or a sudden illness. A dangerous threat or violent attack. Something to make him live the length of an arm in the span of a finger.

This is what I want to tell him, but what I say is: "Bored."

His lips go tight, his brow Vs. "You assaulted your doctor with a deadly weapon because you were *bored*?"

"Not me," I say. "Him."

Since the attack, the room I live in is shades of white, with padded walls and all that lobotomized *Cuckoo's Nest* crap. There's no window now. No twelve-by-fifteen-inch world where patients are trapped like memories. Where doctors pass through carrying clipboards and coffee cups, machines but too unashamed to care.

I know the way out, though.

When your new doctor begins speaking in fragments, "Histrionic/antisocial hybrid... oppositional defiant... borderline personality and/or intermittent explosive disorders," you nod your head.

When he says your mother and brother's sudden deaths resulted in extreme PTSD, further exacerbated by parentification during your father's mental and physical decline, you tell him: "Had a feeling that was it."

When this robot yawns and tells you it's okay to cry, say you concur 100%, put your head in your hands, and cry.

This is progress.

Conformity is rehabilitation.

In my new room, Dr. Whoever sits across from me, fingers laced on his clipboard. He's watching over the rims of his glasses, often glancing down at his A. Lange & Söhne. "Tell me about your mother," he says. "Your best memory."

What to say, I'm not sure. Then Mom giggles in my head and says to tell him about when we went to the outdoor mall for Eli's Cradle 'n Swing.

The baby was expected any day. Mom would be dead in three.

In the food court, we were eating ice cream for lunch and Mom had chocolate running down both sides of her mouth. Dotting her nose, bearding her chin.

Everyone was staring and sort of shaking their heads.

Winking at me, she said, *Proper etiquette's to always eat French crêpes in small, delicate bites.* Louder, she said, *Above your caviar, maintain perfect posture, keeping your tucked elbows off the table.* Leaning to a gaggle of gawking women, she said: *But chocolate ice cream, we eat our way!*

After lunch, we stood at the foot of the escalators, and I asked why people are always walking up and down them like stairs instead of riding.

She smiled, eyes dished, and said, *Let's go up the down way.*

I looked at the crowd coming down, then the line ascending. *But everybody's going up this way,* I said.

She laughed, all round and beautiful and caked in chocolate ice cream. *So what,* she said. *Go this way, you meet more life.*

My Mother, my God, was she always right?





Lex Recinos

So Long, Sailor!

Oil on canvas
24x18 in.

The family dog had anxiety

Alison Amato

she'd lick her paws until the fur wore to stubble,
lick down to soft pink flesh irritated
like the face of a newborn. The vet said
she was understimulated.

Working dogs need a job.

This was her exposé.

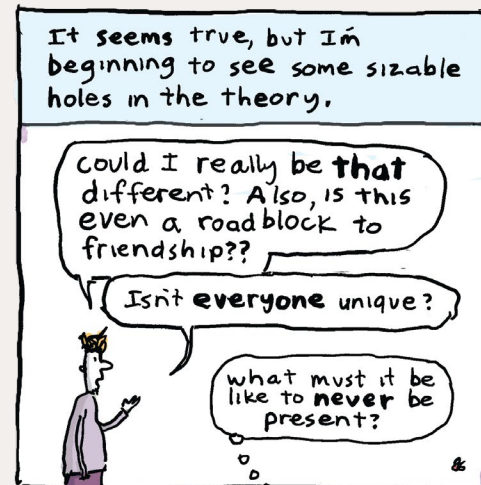
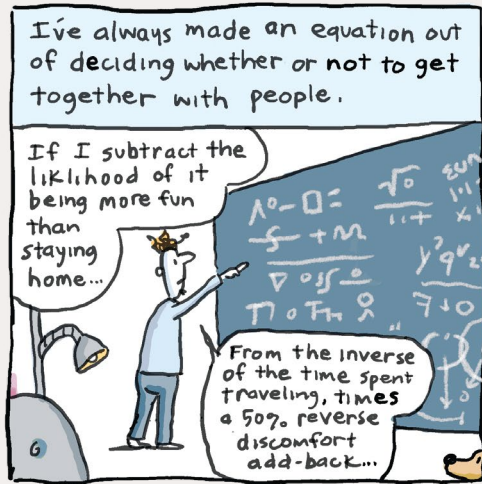
And so, when my therapist asks how I've been feeling,
my mouth salivates and my tongue
grows manic, drags along my forearm,
the taste of salt conjuring the Atlantic: a hard knock
and I am a child or pup
weightless and rolling, the cool water licking me
like a mother. I emerge
dry-mouthed and wild tongued.

I am sand, spilling away, a thousand landslides
leaving ruts where skin had been.

I dissolve before my eyes
thinking, *this should hurt more.*

Solving the Social Problem

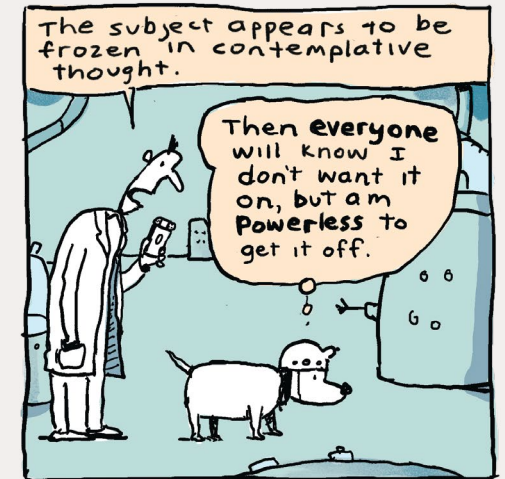
David Milgrim





The Frontal Brain's First Thoughts

David Milgrim



fire i

Rachel Loomis

Panic: [*panik, panika*]
—from Greek,
from the god
of the wild.

As in *reckless*
abandon
and in the

snap

and hiss
that makes a fire
sound alive,
like
an animal,
a wolf
that would rampage
a village
if not contained,
tamed.

It licks
greedy teeth and
tears through
brush,
it bites.

Ash and sparks
are both carried by wind
and momentum
and spite.

fire ii

Rachel Loomis

There's a Swedish saying
about setting fires for crows.

[bränn¹ eld för kråkor]

It's not literal; it's nonsense
like 'wild goose chase,'

like doing something
for nothing, for no one,

but there's something to be said for
wish rituals and superstition

and all the things that might
be appeased if only acknowledged.

Or maybe I just wish
I could believe in something.

1. *As in to mark by burning.*

On water

Rachel Loomis

Open to the mouth of the river.
The river, Lethe, as in ancient Greek—

as in *lethal* [*leto*, *lethargy*], the final frontier, the
ferry into the land of the dead.

It's winding, slow carving. It's shallow and
visible all the way to the bottom,

but it only takes a few
inches of water to drown.

The river feeds into a bay, into an estuary
back home eventually to the ocean's open mouth.

And there, on the horizon, in the blur between
water and ozone, is where the sun goes to die.

Three Dreams

Elizabeth Bolton

The First Dream: Morning Comes to the Dream-Yurt

I dream I am sitting with two lithe blond boys, and their names are Franklin and Delano.

“I didn’t even like those names until I was pregnant,” says their mother, laughing and sitting cross-legged next to me on the floor of a brightly lit yurt. She is beautiful, probably smells of patchouli. Her bracelets jingle.

The yurt is huge. The sun is in my eyes.

Franklin turns to me—or is it Delano?—and asks, “How many times have you been pregnant?” and I know that it is both childlike curiosity and the inner roiling of my own self-conscience that makes him ask. I cannot see the boy’s face; it is like a piece of blank paper, peach-colored, flat.

I am glad for this question. In real life, no one asks me. Only when I fill out a form in a doctor’s office am I allowed to admit that the numbers do not match up, that I have given birth to three children and two of them are alive.

What I want is to tell everyone I meet. What I want is for the world to know, to mourn with me.

“I have a son,” I start to say, and then there he is, beside me, his small body nestled next to mine. He matches the other boys, as if dream children must all be towheaded, like an illustration from a book of Danish fairy tales.

“And I have a daughter too,” I say. She does not appear, perhaps because in my dreams—in all of my dreams—I have two daughters. I do not want to have to choose.

The exchange feels freighted, as if Franklin/Delano will, in a moment, nod his head sagely.

“Ah yes,” he might say. “I understand your meaning.”

Before he can speak, though, I wake. My son is there, in the flesh,

looking for me. His hair is tousled, sweaty. I want to tell him that he’s been next to me in my dreams, but he is sleepy-eyed and it is 6 a.m. and more than anything—more than anything—I want us both to go back to sleep.

I would look for the other mother, but I know she is gone.

The Second Dream: Out to Sea

I dream we are at the beach—not one of the protected beaches of Southeast Alaska, but a wide, sandy strand buffeted by the waves of the open ocean—and one of my children is missing. I look to her sister, who looks back at me with wide eyes and shakes her head. I look to her brother, playing in the sand, avoiding my gaze. I feel I am choking, unable to breathe or speak. My child had been washed out to sea, I am sure of it, and there is nothing any of us can do.

When I wake, I am not afraid. I do not have that lingering sensation that I sometimes have, the strangled sadness of a dream drifting into my waking life. Perhaps this is because both of my living children were safe on the beach with me. The child who was lost in my dream died years ago. I rarely dream of her, and maybe it’s because I only held her for a few hours, and she was already dead when I did so. Maybe it’s because I can barely picture her now.

Later that day—after I feed the children breakfast and watch them build a fort out of magnetic blocks while I look on from the couch, a cup of coffee cooling in my hand—later that day we go to the park, and I walk in large looping circles as they ride around together on a too-small bike, cackling and shouting, and it is only then, seeing them like that, the two of them, it is only then that I sob.

The Last Dream: Vertigo

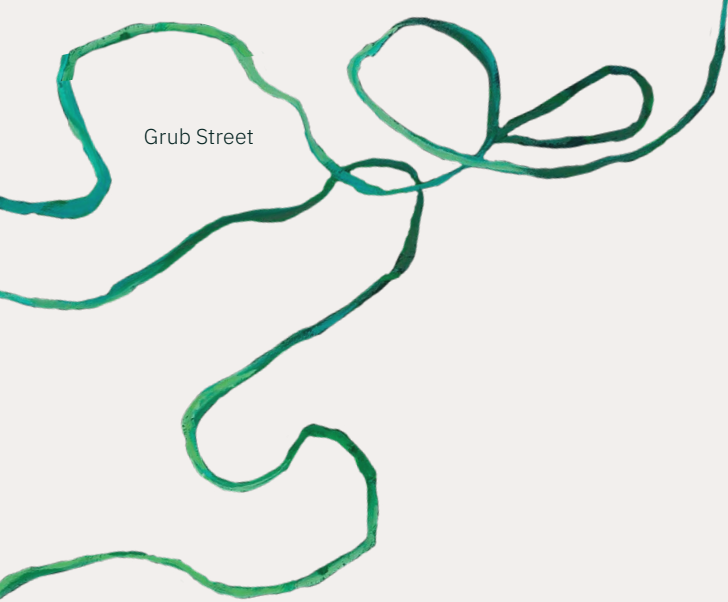
My children are no longer babies, but I dream there is a baby in my arms and he is crying and I know what he needs, so I hold him to my breast and he latches on and the crying stops. I'd like to believe that dreams are simple, and sometimes they are—feed the hungry baby—but this dream is more than that, because I was a maiden once and I will be a crone one day, but right now I am something in between. I am a mother still, yes, but there are no more babies in my future.

When I wake, I feel an intense sensation of vertigo. This has been happening all week, and the urgent care doctor is unsure why—"we should all be drinking more water," she says sanctimoniously, before I say "I'm going to stop you right there," because I drink more water than anyone I know. What I want to tell the doctor is that the dizziness feels right, that for a long time the world has felt as though it was spinning out of my control and only now do I have the word for it. *Vertigo*, from the Latin *vertere*, "to turn." I wonder if I'm finally turning away from the pain I've carried all this time and toward something else, something new.

There are those who say dizziness is a compass. It could be a message from the universe reminding me to ground myself, or conversely to move toward a higher state of consciousness. It may represent an internal struggle of some sort—vertigo as the push-pull of psychic warfare. Maybe it's about my third eye, or my root chakra. I recently told a friend I have no interest in meditation, so perhaps meditation is getting back at me.

Mostly, this spinning feeling is giving voice to the off-kilteredness that's been a part of me all these years. Perhaps it's a reminder that the last time I felt rooted was the moment I held my breathless, ashen baby in my arms, and that every moment since has been a sequence of dizzying impossibilities. Impossible to go on, and yet here I am. Impossible to have another child, and yet here he is.

Writing that last sentence, I feel the vertigo again. I tilt my head sideways and let it take over. When the vertigo hits, I can think of nothing else. For that, I am grateful.



Radiator Blues

Alisa Harvey

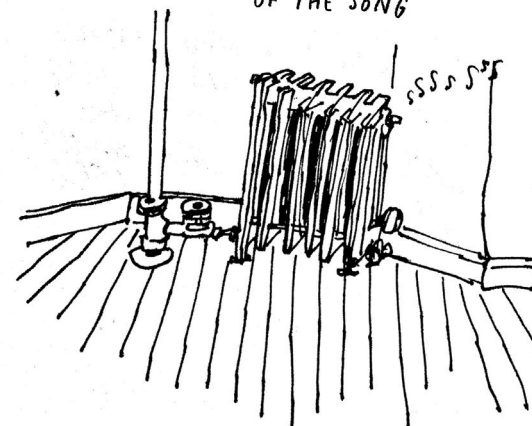
I WAS LYING IN BED



LISTENING TO THE MUSIC FROM
THE BAR DOWNSTAIRS

HELLO WALL, HOWD THINGS
GO FOR YOU TODAY? DON'T
YOU MISS HER, SINCE
SHE UP AND WALKED
AWAY?

THEN I REALIZED MY FAVORITE PART
OF THE SONG



WAS THE RADIATOR HISSING
IN THE CORNER

You Needed To Say in My Tongue What You Could Not Say in Yours

Richard Jeffrey Newman

Tonight, the car radio silent
so I can be alone
with what has settled
between my lungs,
the scene I set
has you dead
by your own hand.

Traveling other roads,
I've seen you murdered,
stuffed into the hallway closet
you didn't hang my jacket in
that time you told me it was safe—
your husband away on business,
your daughter at school—
to make me lunch
in the kitchen where you also made theirs.

If it's your mother who finds you,
I put on her lips
the word your language has for pearl,
the name she gave you
that you told me never to use.

If it's your daughter,
she's still too young
to demand the answers she deserves,
but she grows up,
and on the first page of the novel
I sometimes plan to write,
knocks on my door,
having learned English
for just this purpose.

I'm married in that narrative,
as I am now,
and the me I invent
stands there slack-jawed,
staring into a face
so much like yours
that when my fictional wife
calls out, "Who's there?"
it takes two breaths
for fictional me to answer.

Remember how you laughed at me
that day you took the turns
driving up the mountain
fast enough that I thought
the car would sail off
the edge of the cliff?
We stood at the top
overlooking the Sea of Japan,
and not for the first time I listened
as you imagined giving your life
to whatever lay beneath
that water's churning surface.

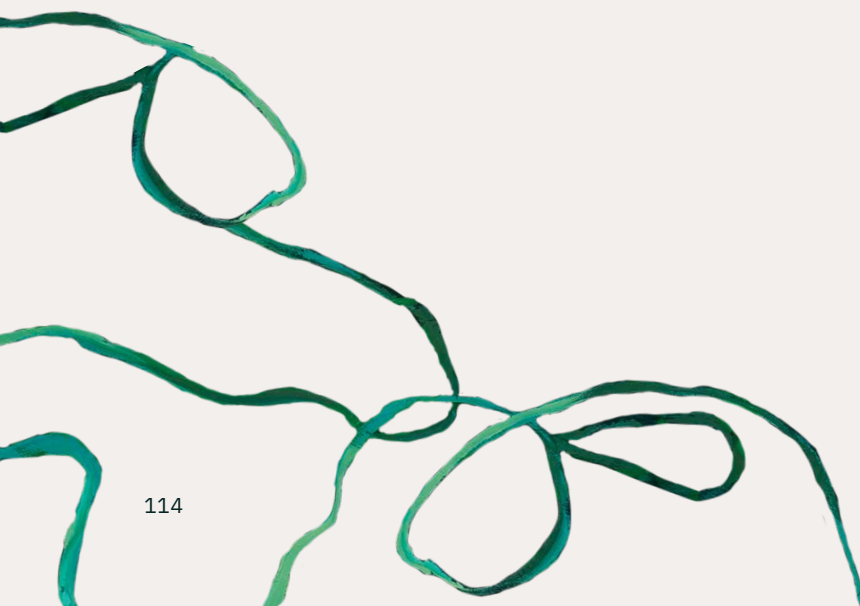
Up ahead, four large birds,
crows maybe, line the left shoulder,
watching whatever they're watching
behind the barren twisted trees
I think every time I drive past
should stop struggling
against whatever's been trying
to pull them up.

A motorcycle headlight grows large
in my rearview mirror.
The guy—once he's close enough,
I can see his beard beneath a
streetlamp—
guns his engine and swerves ahead.
As the birds scatter, the first joke
you ever translated comes back to me:

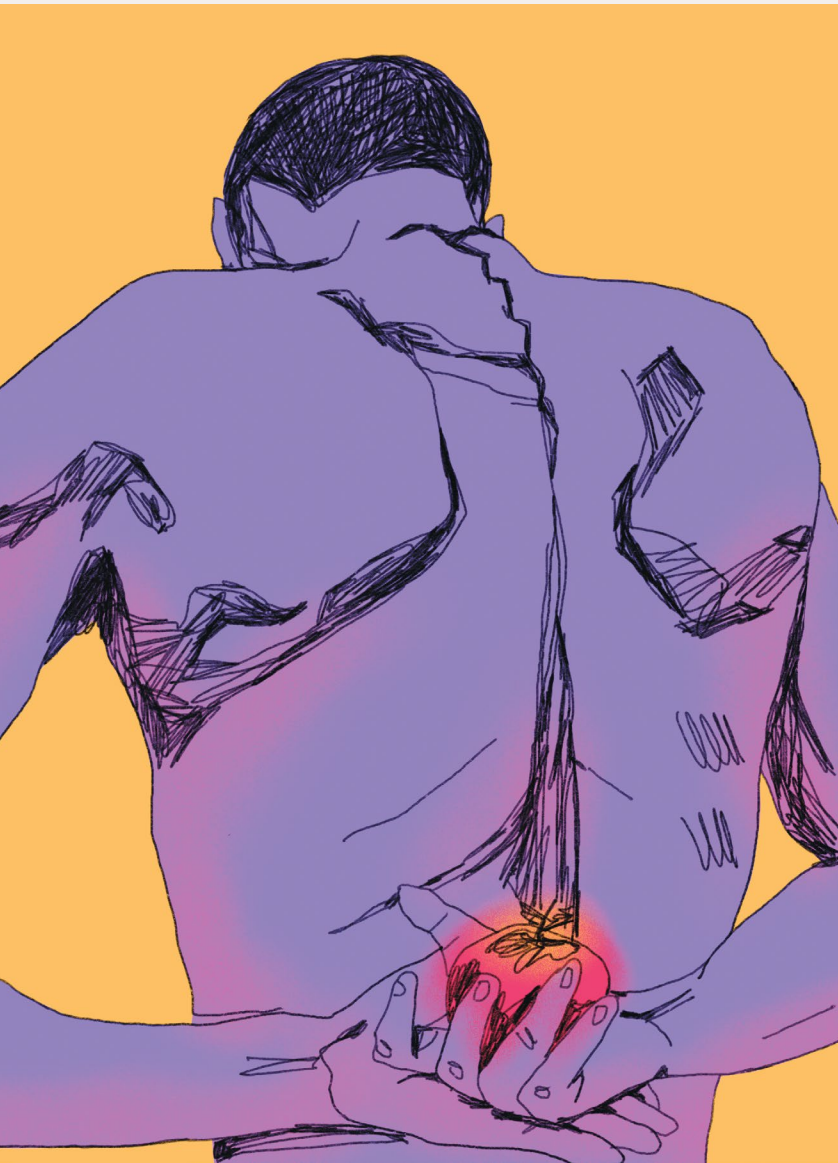
*Five black birds on the branch of an oak.
A hunter shoots one.
What do the other four do?*

*"Now we can be couples!" they say,
and fly off two by two.*





A-
make a wish
Digital Illustration



A-

offering

Digital Illustration

Gay Awakening at my Cardiologist Appointment

(right before he tells me I am dying)
(I am 17) (his daughter is ginger) (he is old)
(my heart has been beating like molasses)

Niamh Cahill

On the ride to the cardiologist that April we pass roadkill on the right side of the car. I can only see red and fur but decide it's raccoon. Maybe rabbit. I see a heart on the black pavement; it looks like home. In thirty minutes I will see my heart too. Lit up on the screen, beating ssslllloooooowwww. I wonder if the wheels are tinted red now, and I ask Mom if she feels sad, meaning sad about the raccoon-rabbit. Mom says something like *of course I feel sad*. I ask her if she thinks it had a family. Mom shoots me a look through the corner of her eye, taking her view off the road for one brief second, and we both realize that we are talking about different things.

Facts: the radio is playing, the car shakes in the wind, these days we are always talking about different things. Lunch, prom dresses, the correct route to get to the heart doctor.¹ I feel like Mom lives and thinks in color and I am somewhere else, hungry for familiarity and caught up on fur. There is tension in the lack of eating, the sickness in my gut. It lies in Mom force-feeding me eggs and the missing scale in the bathroom. These days, boys on my rowing team have begun measuring their protein intake by the ounce and screaming about no red meat at dinner, but no one thinks that's weird. I am so mad I could stop this car and leave everyone behind.²

We pass by a large brick house, so clean it looks naked. There is a porch swing and perfect grass and in the window's reflection I see Mom start to bite her nails; a habit we share. I picture a family of four, three left behind cleaning organs off the pavement. What is the best way to scrape blood off concrete? Windex, stomach acid, muscle.

1. I think Garden State but Mom likes the back roads.

2. Correction: everyone but Mom.

I could never be a mother. We take a left turn. Too much love, too much sickness. How would I keep going?³ Mom tells me not to lie to the doctor, and that she thinks I would look pretty in any color for prom. I know she means it. The Weepies are playing and we both sing along.⁴

If I died this year I would leave three people in the house. My room, the pink curtains. The Honda that we are in, supposed to be mine when my body is well again. We drive by a Costco and I see my high school gym teacher loading red Gatorade into the back of his car. It is not a small town, but it feels like it. I am not small but I feel it, feeling myself poke through and choked by the seat belt. I measure in calories and rib cages and my mother loves me so much. I am sorry and Mom loves me.

In the waiting room Mom checks me in while I dread the bill that will arrive at my house after this appointment. How foolish to be self-made sick. The doctor calls me in and I hate that he is a man but that is not fair either. I know his daughter. I could tell from the second I entered his office. Her pictures—graduation from high school, bat mitzvah, college move-in—were strewn around the room and for a second there I thought she may have died. She was the type of beautiful that affects your life in every way possible. A dancer, I remember, talented at bending the air to her will. She was the type of girl I want to be and I'm sure she knew it. Was this a conflict of interest? He told jokes, an uncomfortable amount. Jokes about the weather, about the state of the world. He asked why I did it; the starving. No one had asked me this before.

In the exam room I feel dirty and wrong when he touches my chest and counts the beats. He explains that I am getting an ultrasound for my heart, and I wish I wasn't so cold. My heart is pointed out on the screen in front of me, a blob of gray that moves like honey these days. The doctor says *don't let any boy ever tell you that you're heartless*. He prints out a picture of my heart. Afterwards in his office, which he only uses for special occasions, he tells Mom and me that forty-two is a bad number.⁵ A number that screams my name and picks my fingernails off and leaves frail brown hair in the drain for my family to find. Forty-two tells us I am weak and on my way to being a roadside animal that people in my high school think about when they open the yearbook.

I wear white to prom; I look like a ghost.

3. I keep a list of baby names on my Notes app. Standouts include "Chartreuse" and "Pebble."

4. Either "Gotta Have You" or "Antarctica." I don't remember everything.

5. The normal heart rate for a teenage girl is between 60-100. I liked being abnormal. No one else was happy.

Hope for What?

Peter Gordon

You were taking down Philip Roth. Actually, you kicked off the seminar by going after Nabokov and that led you to mow down Bellow before you pounced on Roth where you were even more clinically eviscerating. You talked about the poisonous patriarchal perspective and female character constructions as hypersexualized objectified narrative props. *Portnoy's*, *Pastoral*, *Sabbath's*, you blew through Roth like a supercell thunderstorm. Some of the guys sitting around the conference table stared into their laps while others gazed off into some neutral middle distance but not me, I couldn't look away. I didn't know enough to agree or disagree with what you were saying. I couldn't say if your ideas were original, or derivative, or a heated mishmash of the two. And I didn't care if I was doing the very thing you were railing against by noticing the flecks of gold in your gray-green eyes and the way your black hair refused to stay tucked in its purple plastic claw clip but spilled out defiantly across your shoulders.

After class I caught up to you as you made your way across the open quadrangle, hauling an overstuffed canvas bag lopsidedly slung over your shoulder, bulging at the sides with the outlines of book spines. It was the fall of 1998, already the end of September but Vermont's blazing foliage colors—the ones promised on the cover of every college catalog—had been late-arriving and muted when they finally came. You were the TA grad student experiencing your first underperforming New England autumn; I was the undergrad senior experiencing my last.

Updike, I said.

What?

You forgot to include Updike.

You walked like you talked, never breaking stride, letting nothing and no one impede your forward progress. *You're right. I should have called out the entire male Western canon, but that would have taken, you know, centuries.*

I'll clear my schedule.

You kept moving ahead until, at some point, probably against your better judgment, you slowed down just enough to look back and smile.

It was just the two of us on the third floor in the house on Lamont Avenue, where you lived with a number of other grad students, in your eight-by-ten room with the sloped ceiling where a person could stand fully upright only when entering or leaving. You were pulling titles out of the stacked crates in your tiny closet—you had no room for clothing in there, just books—and holding them up like flash cards.

You need to read her.

You were talking about Andrea Dworkin, but a few seconds later you would say the same thing about Katha Pollitt, Doris Lessing, Vivian Gornick, Bracha Ettinger, Shulamith Firestone, and a bunch of others—a roll call mostly unfamiliar to me and only interrupted by my stupidly asking you how to spell Shulamith.

We spent several afternoons lying on opposite ends of your mattress, passing books back and forth, mostly you passing and me receiving after you read aloud passages which were all variations on a theme along the lines of, *I alone had to squeeze the slave out of myself, drop by drop* and *Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies?*

“You were also the most physically reactive reader I'd ever seen”

You were also the most physically reactive reader I'd ever seen—wincing, sighing, gasping, flinching like you'd been punched, laughing until you had to gasp for air. You hung on the words of your intellectual north-stars while I clung to yours. And then one day, in the middle of it all, you dropped the book you were holding and told me that men like me gave you hope. I wanted to ask, *Hope for what?* but I was wise enough, just barely, to say nothing. That was the first night we slept together.

In the morning we went for a run and that sort of became our thing whenever I stayed over, waking early, up before the sun and running to the edge of the darkened college town and back, you typically going way out ahead and having to run in place while I caught up and we briefly resumed running in tandem again until you gradually pulled away. Maybe it was the pounding on the pavement that caused stories about your life to shake loose but it was when we were in motion that I learned about your big-time professor mother—you said she taught kickass feminist theory at three different colleges—who insisted that her daughter not be shackled by the constraints of a bourgeois life so even if you wanted to do conventional things like fall in love or get a real job, you would have to wait until your mother died which had its own built-in redundancy because it would have killed her anyway.

I'd never met anyone like you; I didn't know people like you were even possible. One morning we were running side by side, step for step, and maybe it was the beautiful synchronicity that caused me to ask you as casually as I could, trying to make it sound as if it didn't matter to me either way, like I was almost intending to be ironic, *What are we anyway?* My weakness was wanting to know how I fit into your life; my mistake was verbalizing it. You stopped and looked at me as though I'd blurted out something completely incomprehensible.

God, what is it with men and labels?

This time, you raced ahead and didn't wait for me.

You broke it off the next day, whatever *it* was. Right at the end of class, one where you seemed subdued and slightly unfocused—you called Pynchon a pyrotechnical masculinist but your heart wasn't in it—you slipped me a note on your usual hurried way out the door. It was a single typewritten sentence: *I was going to tell him we should stop seeing each other but then I realized he never saw me to begin with.* I looked for an attribution, a source, but there was none. I spent a couple of days trying to track down where it came from. I finally realized you were quoting yourself.

Of course I couldn't stop seeing you. Not only standing before me once a week in the airless, windowless seminar room, but coming up and down the library steps, rushing along the footpaths and alleyways and cut throughs, even your silhouette glimpsed through the window of the English Department office where you liked to hang out when you had nowhere else to go. One day I saw you running around the athletic track and your hands were churning faster than your legs—as if you were explaining something to someone in your hyperkinetic way—and I could tell there was this intense back and forth dialogue going on, this great debate, and you seemed agitated, on the verge of tears as if you were losing the argument. But there was no one else in sight. You were running by yourself.

The next class there was someone new leading the seminar. A tall, sinewy guy with a shaved head who favored the fabulists—the Barths and Calvins and the like—and never once mentioned Woolf or Atwood or even Philip Roth.

Then it was that freakishly warm early December day—Vermont bestows exactly one a year—with the whole world spread out on Memorial Commons. T-shirts and no shirts. Orange frisbees flying. Faculty dogs running wild. Silvered curlicues of pot smoke were the only clouds in the sky. The whole scene was a mirage—it would snow two days later and we wouldn't see green grass again until spring. There must have been hundreds of people in various poses and repose on the great swath of lawn and you were there too, sitting in a tight circle of your fellow postgrads, ranks closed and hermetically sealed against the coarse undergrad hubbub, everyone leaning into whatever recondite discourse was taking place, probably debating structuralism versus deconstructionism, and then I saw you walk off and go sit alone, separating yourself from the conversation instead of stirring it, and at some point a woman from the circle came over and knelt next to you and put her arm around you while you covered your face with your hands. I started walking towards you and got halfway there before turning around.

Second semester started and you were nowhere to be found. After a week I went to the house on Lamont, and the woman who answered the door—she had spiked orange hair and an Irish accent and seemed pissed that I woke her up—told me you had taken some sort of medical leave. She eyed me skeptically, like if I was really a friend of yours as I claimed, *wouldn't I know that?*

I didn't see you again until the night before graduation, in the off-campus apartment I shared with three other guys. Except that night I was sharing it with about a hundred people, a traveling party that somehow ended up at our place. At some point I looked around and there you were. Or a faded facsimile of you. It was like someone had taken an eraser and wiped away your long hair and smudged your skin and rubbed out the shine in your eyes. I asked if you wanted to sit—stupid because it was standing room only and all the furniture was either broken, taken apart, or missing altogether. There was shit everywhere. Upturned boxes. Loose articles of clothing. Rows of trash bags. The music was loud. We snuck into the bathroom and closed the door because it was the only place to talk. In the harsh fluorescent light, you looked even less like yourself. You said you just wanted to say you were sorry, that I'd met you at a precarious moment in your life and I deserved better. You weren't... intact. You were going through some *stuff*. I asked what kind of stuff, and you shrugged. Stuff like not being able to get out of bed in the morning. Or concentrate on work. Or care about anything. You tried to make it sound like it was no big deal. But you were better now and threw out your arms to demonstrate your high spirits: ta-da. Oh, and you'd won a Fulbright. You were going to spend the next academic year in the Czech Republic doing a research project on post-communist feminism. So, there was that.

You stared at me, waiting, like now it was my turn.

I might give New York a try, I said. *You know, the whole writer thing.*

You just smiled.

For the next year and a half, I lived in a fourth-floor studio walkup on East 110th Street, working for a moving company during the day and trying to write at night. Once I realized you had to be back from Europe and re-starting your life, I fell into this running reverie of meeting you in one of those underside-of-Manhattan scenes—coming toward each other under the leaky cover of rickety sidewalk scaffolding, reaching for the same sweaty strap on the subway. It never happened, of course, but it kept me company wherever I went. Meanwhile, I started and abandoned a raft of stories, all of them about you—some more rooted in fact than others—finally finishing and editing one to death before sending it off. Six months later, it got accepted; one year later, it came out. I hoped you'd somehow stumble upon it—accidentally or otherwise—or hear about it from one of our mutual acquaintances or have it shown to you by a colleague, maybe someone more than a colleague, who experienced a sharp jolt of recognition while reading it as in, *Hey, isn't this character based on you? Isn't he writing about your old life? And why is he making it sound like a love story? Why do men always do that?*

Artist Statement

Greta Kresse

Greta Kresse is an artist and painter from Little Rock, Arkansas. She earned her BA from Hendrix College and is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of Arkansas. The following works are from her thesis show, *Idling*.

In *Idling*, Kresse examines the car as a poetic ground where the intimacy of private space and the expansiveness of landscape collapse. The work holds escape and entrapment, movement and stalling, in unresolved tension.

The work, rooted in Kresse's experience growing up in Arkansas and engaging in the broader experience of working class Southern life, examines how this space is a site of adolescent life—a memorial site of loss and risk, and a symbol of class mobility and its limitations.

Formal motifs developed through plein air practice unify the work: visual collage, an internal glow, and reaching dead trees form a web across the compositions. Limited palettes and glazing dissolve figures into humid landscapes and heighten chaos, pushing the work toward poetry.

Idling holds restlessness and love, risk and routine, in irresolution, asking the viewer to resist singular readings in favor of questions about home, identity, and belonging.



Greta Kresse

The Canopy

Oil on aluminum
42x56 in.



Greta Kresse

Red Hour Unraveling

Oil on aluminum
47x40 in.



Greta Kresse

Windshield Collage

Oil on aluminum
12x15 in.



Greta Kresse

Motion, Held

Oil on aluminum
48x48 in.



Greta Kresse

Spring Reflected

Oil on aluminum
31x22 in.



Greta Kresse

Car Camping

Oil on aluminum
44x42 in.



Greta Kresse

Surrendering to Blue

Oil on aluminum
48x48 in.

Greta Kresse

Foolish and Fast

Oil on aluminum
22x7 in.



The Long Wait

Juniper Scott

After twenty-eight days of anxious waiting, just five days before it is finalized, I dismiss my legal name and gender change petition.

By dismissing my petition, snuffing my labels when they are barely a legal flicker, I disappear myself. This is not the first time. It appears that I, like my country, exist on a four-year cycle: imminent demise, reinvention, imminent demise.

The court visit brings me back to Frederick, my hometown. I spend the full weekend there, staying in my childhood bedroom in its partial, pillaged state. I took the necessities when I left. Only dated decorations and old collections remain, dotted by a knick or a knack.

I try to sleep (fruitlessly). A cold breeze shifts the old trees and an insectile light skips around the wall. A neighbor's outdoor halogens bleed around my blackout curtains, hung not quite flush. Occasionally, the circle of color moves across an old playbill or poster. I turned this wall into a mosaic, pinning up a piece for each play in which I performed. There, flashes of a somewhat familiar face: my own. Age fourteen perhaps, sometime in 2017, seated in profile with eyes turned down to the blade resting in my hands. *Young Camelot and the Fight for the Holy Grail* was the play's title, and I its young Arthur. The picture is black and white, an excerpt cut from a newspaper. There is no telling how many people saw this picture, my name. I did not consider being known.

I just searched. My old face is still posted on many sites. Local ones, discussing the arts and events upcoming. And there, under each, my deadname. I thought it stopped at the newspaper. I stop searching.

At the time, my immediate concern was connection. Brought into theatre by a friend I was keen to keep despite our growing physical distance, the performances were secondary to my intention. How did I do it? Now, I can't fathom standing on stage, eyes turned up to me. The insurmountability of that anxiety is newer, surfacing in the last four, five years. Despite this, I miss theatre. Many of my closest friends are still

deep in it, so I am not fully separated from it. That style and depth of collaboration, though, focusing on the project and not the participants, is what I miss the most. Routinely, I consider reentering the theatre space but ultimately decide not to, worried of not fitting well enough the role I want to fill.

I was called in early, some hours before a *Young Camelot* rehearsal. My mother dropped me off out front and I followed the steps into the basement theater. In a side space, a photographer set up a tripod, a chair. Prop blades strewn near their bag. I don a simple taupe tunic, a stand-in for the future costume, and swapped between blades, directed poses. Sitting, standing, sitting. Nothing felt natural. I remember being so stuck on this photoshoot, torn two ways. I was confronted by being the focal point, my face being the focal point, something in theatre I had thus far been able to skirt past, kept at an arm's length, happy to stay in the ensemble. And yet I had an obligation to perform in the eye, to be perceived. I had signed up for it.

I lost track of how many times my transness has been marked by others as a choice. A choice that they do not understand, see the need for.

It must be for the attention. *You just want to feel special.*

The attention I receive most commonly is the scornful passing look or the forced path change in store aisles to avoid me.

It must be for the better treatment. *People are nicer to girls.*

I lost to my transition people who at one point only treated me with love but turned sharp piercing sour when they really knew me.

Why would I sign up for that?

When I was little I would pose LEGO figures in front of propped-up glossy folder backdrops and take their pictures, fit them into a story shot by shot. I didn't have a camera of my own, so I used my mother's. Time and time again I'd repeat a scene, carefully capturing each frame until it was perfect. I remember frustration, getting stuck when the minifigures I had didn't match what I wanted to be seeing. His face should be softer; her hair should be shorter. I would take them apart and piece them back

together in new combinations, looking for what felt natural. Often, I'd never find it. The joy of imagining a box, a story to fit into; the dread of not fitting it right. Scrap that story, move on to another.

2015–2019: A lack paints everything. I am wounded, but seeing no blood, I succumb to the ache. It becomes my lens.

I hide behind my words. What am I trying to say? For four years I dissociate. For four years I push myself to the side, deciding that deducing the source of the constant discomfort was too big a project to take on. So for four years, I don't. I wait. I focus solely on the people around me, looking out and never in. I assume that others do the same. I am constantly afraid of being seen.

In many states it is law that when you legally change your name a notice is published in the newspaper, alerting all of who you were and who you are. In 2021, Maryland removes this requirement. Now, you have the freedom of a quiet shift.

I quit acting as 2019 falls into 2020. In the last weeks before my final show goes up, I have the first labeled realization of my transness. My final role is one of great personal import—Moritz Stiefel, *Spring Awakening*. Through him, I fictionalize myself. In his anxious meandering I see my own face.

The musical follows a group of teens in 1890's Germany (a horribly Protestant time) as we navigate the taboos of sexuality, gender relations, and structures of authority. We question what, or *who*, defines truth. I am battered by the confusion that comes with entering a world of sexuality and gender in adolescence, roiled by a lack of reliable sex education resources and role models. This confusion is used by the school administration to villainize me. I am consumed by internalization, beaten by my father, and fail out of school with no ability to focus on the Hapsburgs or Virgil.

At the top of the second act, I take my own life.

Standing there on stage after putting the snub end of a revolver against my chin, watching my own funeral play out, my parents and friends weeping. I cry with them each night.

In the audience, Juniper's parents and grandmother spill tears for their son, their grandson. Tears for me, not the character.

After the show, I talked to them about the scene. They shared how hard it was to see me like that, and though they knew it was a character they could not help but see their son, too.

I resolve that this is my last funeral. I am done with the stage, done with such perception. I quit acting to quit acting.

In the light my bedroom walls reveal their copies of my old face—thrice on one wall, one on another. An old poster made by a friend in high school: a picture of six of us, looking off into the distance like we are moving towards something important. The caption reads “the boys.” How well that has aged.

One evening last week, my partner came over to my parent’s house for dinner. While in my room, they point to the poster. Why do you still have this up?

“I resolve that this is my last funeral.”

I search for the Social Security page on gender identity, and a 404 Not Found error pops up on my screen. The page seems to have disappeared. I search through the presidents’ recent executive orders and find a bog of disheartening information, but not what I am looking for. I finally find it buried in the Social Security Administration’s site: EM-25014, the emergency message following suit with the wall of executive orders, banning SSA gender marker changes. This policy shift, quiet, happening overnight, is the reason for me dismissing my petition. If the petition had finalized, I would be trapped in the middle, some documents true, some outdated, with no recourse for aligning them other than more fees and waiting. This in-between place scares me. In it I would be noticeable, marked up glaringly on paper, a clear error in need of fixing.

While writing this essay, I keep running into the same problem. Attempting to stay grounded in the concreteness of scenes (I worry I am too in my head), I get too particular about my adjectives, the accuracy between memory and reality. Was the tunic really taupe? Were the folders really glossy? Particular about my particulars. Maybe I get more stuck than just “particular.” Everything needs to be perfect, words fitting into the shape of the thing bringing it from life to page with as little slippage as possible. Everything needs to fit into its proper box.

The Box becomes a lens becomes a constraint.

In my passive constant searching, I come across an academic article that intrigues me. “There is No Such Thing as a ‘Legal Name’” calls the idea of an immutable legal name a “collective delusion we all seem to share.” The argument: mass institutionalization and organization requires labeling, categorization. People are forced into inorganic Boxes, and as we over time buy deeper into the naturalization of these imagined organizations, we become agents of The Box. On countless forms and documents, a distinction is drawn. Two Boxes: legal name, and preferred. The personal is demoted, devalued, prioritizing the *de jure*.

After dinner with my parents, my partner and I decompress in my room, stepping into a time capsule. The meal exhausts me—not for any particular action or conversation, but for my internal toying. With the seeming inescapability of The Box, I learned in my youth to find safety in it where I can and now it sticks around, an unkickable habit. Based on the situation, I pick a Box. Embodying a Box reduces the complication, gives me a script. When with my partner, I fill the Partner Box; with my family, I fill the Daughter Box, the Sister Box. They overlap but have their distinctions. I sit different, the words I choose distinct. I pendulum between the roles, scattered.

Early in college, I walk into the first day of a foreign language course. The professor takes attendance, and I sit in the usual dreadful wait. I am late in the alphabet, so it is drawn out. My deadname floods the room. Reticent, I raise my hand slow.

I prefer Juniper, I say, forcing through a shudder.

No nicknames, I am told.

Real names only.

I catch the professor as he leaves at the end of class. Pardon me, I plea, I would really prefer if you used Juniper.

Another refusal thumbs my forehead.

I am trans, I say, please, I—

I will use what’s on the attendance sheet.

I crumple. Easily, the paper defeats me.

I discover the university's preferred name change form and don a thin shield.

Some things only are valued when they are gone. If the professor had simply nodded and called me Juniper, I wouldn't remember that moment. My day would've gone on unchanged. But when he refused, I was shattered. I felt like a liar, a fake. Donning a disguise rather than an identity. That was his lens. It was pushed onto me, and I couldn't stop looking through it.

Partway through the rehearsal process for *Spring Awakening*, before deciding to quit, I am still dead set on acting as my path. In it, I find a way to step outside myself and be free of the internal lack that I do not yet understand. A coping mechanism refurbished as a career path, made to fit the capitalist Box. In search of stability, I define myself through my plans. I meet an acting coach through a castmate. She offers to meet with me, help me prepare to audition for college programs and set out on my own. I agree and convince my parents. We schedule a meeting together.

The clearest detail in my memory is the room in which we met. An oppressively large dance studio with all four walls covered floor to ceiling in spotless mirrors. In the very center of the space, a folding table just large enough for the four of us. No matter where I look I see mirror. I see

Me or mirror
Reflections of a reflection

What are you doing it for?

She is talking to me. I tune back into the conversation. She is asking me why I act. I do not remember what I said, but I do not think I had an answer. What would my answer be?

I love having a place where I can belong. *I don't need to be me to belong.*
I love stepping out of myself. *I don't need to be me to belong.*
I love to have a role. *I need to belong.*

Near the end of high school, after labeling myself as trans, I am still desperate for a path. More so, even. Acting was a strong coping mechanism, but is it worth spending another four years coping? Displacing? I switch fervently between ideas—creative writing, psychology, acting. I am nauseated, unsure of each possible plan. Each would mean a different me. With my identity revelation, I am unmoored internally. I search for something tangible that can fill my calendar.

Having a plan is having a Box.

The second morning of my hometown visit: I work up the courage to go to court, finally dismiss myself. The process is laughably quick, the errand made to feel insignificant. There is no line today unlike when I first presented my petition. Back so soon? the clerk says. I smile, but it doesn't reach my eyes. I pay the fee—because of course there is another fee. On my way out, she says goodbye to me, uses my legal name as her hand rests on my forms, just covering up Juniper. I say goodbye and disappear, I hope. I no longer have a next step.

Why do you still have this poster up?

I don't know.

Isn't it upsetting?

Yeah. But also... I don't know.

Maybe we could cover up the "boys," just leave it as "the."

I like the vagueness.
But still my face has changed.

What am I doing it for?

I search for more sites holding my old name, old face. There are two sites that look like they haven't been updated in a decade. More theatre pages, yet these sites track the information and stats of artists. Somehow, I appear there, yet only with two listed credits—my first two roles, both ensemble. Who could have added me to this site? There are other cast members from the show missing, some in lead roles. Why was I the one seen?

Seeking out these old reminders tears me two ways.

I came from somewhere.
I am on a path.

I am going nowhere.
I had a path and I spurned it.

I am finding my new Box, redefining Self and Other and what lines lie in between. For so long I took on the lenses and Boxes of others, forced myself into them then was shocked when I couldn't fit. I am scared of how I am seen. Before I can approach that, however, I need to see myself through my own eyes.

For so long I avoided—even denied—my life before transition. That is a different person. That is not mine to pick at. But, of course, that is a half-truth. Half may be generous. I deleted any old pictures of myself off my phone, avoided key memories of my boyhood until I forgot them, supplanting them with an imagined girlhood. And yet, I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the poster, a remnant. And yet, I now feel a new lack where those pictures and memories were. Like I am a four-year-old born of spontaneous generation. Some things only are valued when they are gone.

Another site, my hometown's local newspaper, has a picture of thirteen young children standing next to a stately woman with her hands clutched at her front. My old piano teacher and some of her students, yet I am not there. The caption lists names from left to right, ending with the teacher. I am the only one labeled Not Pictured. I remember this event, the picture opportunity, I think. It was 2015. I was already avoiding having my picture taken.

Me or mirror

The dance studio walls distort me. The further into the mirrors I peer, the less I am me, melting out of accuracy like a face in a dream. The face can be whatever I imagine it to be.

While editing this piece, I return to the Social Security Administration's website to look again at EM-25014, seeking what time the message was sent. It isn't there. The page on gender identity shows the same error: 404 Page Not Found. Again, it has disappeared. I read all of the emergency messages that have been released since EM-25014, which went out in early February. Many of them are revisions of previous notices. None of

them mention the missing message or its topic. I feel like I am crazy. Did I imagine it? I couldn't have. I shared it with two of my friends. They were going to change their names soon, too.

I find no evidence suggesting that I could now change my gender marker, but I cannot help but wonder. Was canceling my petition the right choice? I saw the SSA emergency message and immediately decided I was going to dismiss it. Immediately I caved.

How does it feel? To immediately give in, I mean.

I feel small.

What do you mean 'small?'

I am subordinate to a sheet of paper.

I see. Do you want that? Are you satisfied?

God, no.

What do you want?

I pause to think.

The other week: I leave a class and cut through the building's cafe, the quickest path to my work on the fifth floor. I cross paths with a friend. Earlier that day, they tell me, I was brought up in a class I am not in by a student I do not know. The group was discussing the faces that are most recognizable in our department, and my name was brought up. The girl I do not know: *Everyone knows who Juniper is.*

“Some things only are valued when they are gone.”

I am “one of those people,” I am frequently told, that is seen and remembered for some uniqueness. My hair, my glasses, my clothes. It often feels like a substitute for saying that they clocked me, and through my otherness I am memorable. I do not consider being known.

Everyone has a concrete idea of who Juniper is, who Juniper should be. I try to find my Box, the who's and what's that I am situation to situation, yet it keeps shifting. Something nauseating one day may be a comfort in the next—the roughness in my voice, my angular chin. The Box feels unattainable, impossible. But again, I catch myself. I am focusing on the external again—how I am seen, the associations others have with who and what I am. I need to center myself. It is my transition.

I want to not have to think about it.
I want to not have to research policies that deepen the pit in my stomach.
I want to be left alone.

“I cannot see without seeing through it.”

After canceling my petition I have an hour or two to kill before therapy. The office is a few short blocks from the court, so I am in no rush. I take a detour deeper into downtown, head into a cafe. I don't think I would consider it a cafe myself, but it has cafe in the name. If it calls itself a cafe, who am I to question it? It's shortly after noon so the bar is empty. Feeling awkward getting a table for one I pick a stool, order a latte and a small Caesar salad. Even though I am sitting there at the bar, the waitress asks me my name for the order, and I am glad she does. Juniper. J-U-N-I-P-E-R, like the tree, I spell at her request in a practiced rhythm. After years of begrudgingly spelling out my deadname, I savor each time I am now asked.

I sit here in a cubicle at work editing this essay for the thousandth hour. Over and over I reread the sentence “I don't think I would consider it a cafe myself, but it has cafe in the name.” I say cafe twice, and it appears in the sentence before as well as the one that follows. Cafe four times. Cafe cafe cafe cafe. Each repetition morphs the sounds.

Cafe cafe cafe cafe fake fake fake.

What is a word but a sound? A sound meant to trigger an association. An association meant to make perception easy. Perception easily is conflated for reality. For reality is seemingly made up through words, associations becoming more solid as I age.

Fake fake facade cafe facade.

Another article I find in my research examines the correlation between legal gender name affirmation and depression among trans people. They conclude that when a trans person has legally changed their name and gender marker they tend to react better to “gender-based mistreatment.” What a shocking conclusion. Another case of cis-conducted research stating the obvious about the Other. The words feel empty. I appreciate the text, but instead of a solid resolution all I am left with is: Why should a piece of paper have so much control over me? The petition should not create me. I should be tangible without it.

I find myself as a subordinate to words. How do you overcome something fluid? With each grasping reach of an arm, the word cloud flows around me, adapting to keep me beneath it. I cannot see without seeing through it.

I don't want to be left alone, actually.
That sounds lonely.

What's the good in being left alone?
If you look past the loneliness, what do you get
from being left alone?

Control.
I say something and that's that.
There's no one to question it, poke holes.

Early in college I trek alone into the nearby woods, looking for a place where no one knows me. Sometimes, while I sit on the stone steps by the old caretaker's cottage, another student comes and sits near me and pulls out something to smoke. We coexist, neither needing the other to leave. Occasionally we even speak.

What's your name?

Juniper.

That sounds like a girl's name.

That's the point. I think it fits.

Oh... are you sure?

I tear the “the boys” poster from the wall as my partner watches. The corner rips with the force, and a weight settles in my gut. I can’t stomach throwing it away. Often I lack a feeling of continuity of self, distress in the separation between Then and Now, but erasing what conflicts with the Now feels dishonest. I am different now than I was then. I don’t want that to rule me, push me to denial. Some things only are valued when they are gone. I roll the poster up, put it in the cluttered closet. Together, moving old bottle collections and shifting furniture, we rearrange the bedroom. This shelf moved there, the carpet pulled more center. The room looks different now, and I feel refreshed.

Reflections of a reflection

I sit here, trying to think of any significant memory including a mirror. Countless moments of sneaking glances at myself in windows on a bright day or the side of a cleaned car. It is hard for me to remember what I look like. I can’t form images in my mind and any I could, I fear, I would warp, idealize. I think purely in words, pushing me to write. I have relied on reflections for as long as I can remember.

Aphantasia, that inability to form mental images, leaves me estranged in the middle-ground: reliant on words to think and be, but frightened by their weight. They are my system of meaning, yet they are fluid. Words have meaning because we give them meaning. A word’s meaning is fluid meaning my system of meaning is fluid meaning I have to be okay with change meaning control meaning shift.

I need something to moor myself to. I look out and can’t find it now. I look in and have to hide it now. I can look through a lens without becoming it. I can look through a lens without becoming it.

I am absorbed by the novel I brought with me to the bar-cafe and linger too long, nearly missing my therapy appointment. I quickly finish my salad and get a to-go cup for the latte. The speed in my gait is interrupted by a crosswalk turning red and cars filling the street I need to cross. I wait, tapping my toes back and forth within my shoes, a nervous stim. I see the countdown start, my time to cross coming soon, and I hear a voice. A man, hoarse and faltering, but loud enough to cut over the two-lane traffic.

THIS IS TRUMP’S AMERICA. TRUMP NATION RISE UP. MAKE AMERICA STRAIGHT AGAIN.

He looks in his thirties but sounds much older, and there is a weight beneath his eyes that hangs down past his cheekbones. His shoes hit the sidewalk hard and I flinch for it. He is across the street. His voice hits me like I am right next to him.

GO RED OR DIE, FAGGOTS.

He isn’t looking at me, and I am looking at the ground. Ten more seconds. He storms up to another man on his side of the street, gets in his face and says forceful words that I can’t hear but feel. The second man pushes him, storms away with a Fuck off. The stoplight turns yellow, cars slow to a stop. The yelling man goes into the street, up to an open passenger window, yells in. I think he is drunk, at the least.

I am two blocks away when I hear sirens from behind me.

I don’t realize, eyes turned down to avoid the man, but on the walk from the cafe to therapy I pass by a familiar community theater—the same that put on *Young Camelot*. It hides just across the street from the courthouse beneath a legal firm. It feels imposing now, thinking of all the time I spent in that basement looking for myself, all while the law loomed over me. The physical metaphor is clear: the court and firm are above ground, monolithic and unavoidable, and the theater, the space of self-exploration, is concealed beneath the concrete.

In our session that day, I tell my therapist about canceling my petition, about the man screaming in the intersection. She asks me why I submitted the petition in the first place. What are you doing it for?

So the people who won’t respect me
without paperwork will respect me but maybe
they won’t respect me at all.

I am not the paper. They respect the paper.

I land on: It's my name, so it should be my name. It's what I feel so it's what it should be. It makes me feel safe. I feel I am giving into something that I want badly to resist—the institutional Box—by following the path that the dominant identity has laid out for me. But in the current state of the country it is a concession I am willing to make. There is a point where comfort must be weighed against safety.

And of course, it all amounts to nothing more than a dismissed petition. It seems that at this point they have even stopped respecting the paper. I open my phone to find more research for this essay. Three of the first five news articles on my browser read “constitutional crisis” without even my searching it.

The dance studio, the box of mirrors, is endless. What is in the room is the room is the walls, the room a Box. An enclosed open space that goes on, goes toward, goes from the center: the center is the sides are the center. The Box isn't tangible. I seek stability in something imagined.

My therapist asks me about safety. What about a concrete label feels safe?

No one to poke holes. No one to question. No one to deny. No one to ask, What are you doing this for? It just is. So many times of having to explain myself removed. So many times I feel crazy avoided.

“I am not the paper. They respect the paper.”

I alone am in control of myself, no one more. Yet I am not in control of my data, my paper identity, all that will be seen by those who will never know me. Each time I go to research and find too many references and reasons to feel sick, I feel more inclined to follow the path that they have laid out for me. Legality is presented as the only true foundation, the only path forward. And yet, legality seems to matter less and less to those who define it. Perverted to instead be a path to markers for targeting. I just want a place to myself.

My partner leaves a few hours after dinner, and I wind down for the night in my room reimagined. It is no longer my childhood bedroom, but my bedroom. Simple, straightforward.

I was looking through a film, not truly at the posters or the moth gray walls but at a memory of a room. I would try to line up the images, and when I saw how similar they still were, how little had changed, I would panic. Had I not changed? It had been four years, but things were still the same. Unable to form images in my mind, I rely on reflections. Words, external visualizations—like a bedroom, the decor defining the person.

A room is a Box, a grounding place for selfhood. The reflection did not reflect the self, and the self was shaken. But how simple it was to rearrange the room, redefine the Box. I retreat into my room now, perhaps for another four years. Another four of scathing opinions, legal infractions, danger. It feels all too familiar, and all too disappointing. Was it not clear enough after his first presidential term? I thought it was perfectly clear, where it would go. I am not surprised to hide away, disappear myself. It is familiar. I have done it before.

I retreat into my room. It is not the same room I woke up to back then.



What to Eat?

Matthew Zhao

End of the world, I'm living like a king
and I mean that by the standard metric:
the rich in space, and I'm here on Earth
paid in dirt, just enough to order burgers
to my doorstep, and one time they get the
wrong order, it's meant to feed four, and
I imagine the picky eaters, no pickles or
mustard for the meal with a toy. Now I
feast on leftovers for a week, salt-laden
meat, enough to warm me for the hour.

I remember a billionaire promising to
butcher the chickens he eats, slitting necks
and facing death, apparently the kindest way
to end it, and honestly, I understand.

I went to Nepal to find my place and
up those mountains we craved warmth
that lentils and rice couldn't provide us
so we spent rupees for a villager's goat
and a few more for his metal. Our guide
brought the blade down with force and
I didn't know vertebrates could be so solid,
several heavy swings at the throat to stop
its screaming and you need to be quick
with a bucket, oh how arteries spray blood
all thick and sacred. That night we feast
around the fire, boiling the heart to save
meat that lasts longer before spoil, and
nobody said anything, there was nothing
left besides conserving strength and silently
thanking the lives taken to sustain ours.

Contributors

A- is a self-taught artist based in Italy, working across digital and traditional media. Her daily sketching practice resists perfectionism, allowing themes to emerge through process. Focusing on the overlooked and mundane, she foregrounds scenes shaped by the specific time and conditions in which her subjects exist, seeking a shared human experience that is quietly endearing and contextually grounded. She runs *Rabbit Holes*, an independent newsletter that extends this process through text and image.

Alison Amato is a Maryland writer who studied creative writing at Florida Atlantic University. Her work has been published in *Sweet Lit*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *The Westchester Review*.

Emily Blevins is a sophomore art and design student at Towson University, working primarily in large-scale oil and acrylic painting. Her art explores personal relationships, with a particular focus on female friendships. Blevins examines themes of identity, emotional connection, and conflict. Her paintings often reflect moments of intimacy and tension drawn from lived experience. Her love of birds is evident in many of her works.

Elizabeth Bolton holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She was a winner of the AWP Intro Journals Project, and her essays have been published in such journals as *Puerto del Sol*, *River Styx*, *The Forge*, *West Branch*, *The Dodge*, and *wildness*. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* anthology. Her debut essay collection is forthcoming from Red Hen Press.

Teona Burroughs is an aspiring animator and future creative director with a background in self-portrait photography and music production. Her work centers on creative, immersive visual imagery that draws viewers in and invites reflection. Her multidisciplinary interests shape her artistic approach.

Niamh Mac Cabe has published in *AGNI*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Narrative Magazine*, *The Offing*, *The London Magazine*, *3:AM*, and other publications. She has work forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, and a collection with Lilliput Press. Her awards include *The London Magazine's* Short Story Prize, the John McGahern Award, and the Molly Keane Award. Her writing has placed or been shortlisted in several contests including the American Short Fiction Prize, *Harvard Review's* Chapbook Prize, *New Ohio Review's* Editor's Award, and SoA's ALCS Tom Gallon Trust Award. She lives in Leitrim, Ireland. Her website is niamhmaccabe.wixsite.com/mysite.

Niamh Cahill is a poet and essayist from Montclair, New Jersey. A recent graduate from Kenyon College where she received distinction for her creative writing senior thesis, she served as Editor-in-Chief of the college's first and only chapbook press, Sunset Press. Her work has appeared in *Spires Magazine* and is forthcoming in *ONE ART* and *The Eunoia Review*. She loves Adrienne Rich and her dog.

Abigail Chabitnoy is the author of *In the Current Where Drowning Is Beautiful* (Wesleyan, 2022); the linocut illustrated chapbook *Converging Lines of Light* (Flower Press, 2021). Her collection *How to Dress a Fish* (Wesleyan, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 International Griffin Prize for Poetry and winner of the 2020 Colorado Book Award. She currently is an assistant professor at UMass Amherst. Abigail is a member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak. Find her at salmonfisherpoet.com.

Peter Gordon is a short story writer living in Massachusetts. His work appears in *The Sun*, *Amsterdam Review*, *Post Road*, *The Dublin Review*, and other publications. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and multiple recognitions in the *Best American Short Stories* series.

Melanie Hall is the editor-in-chief of *Grub Street* and a contributing editor of *True* magazine. Her writing has appeared in *Discourse*, Towson University's academic journal for literary criticism. She majors in English at Towson University and hopes to pursue an MFA in creative writing.

Alisa Harvey is an illustrator and printmaker based in Brooklyn. She is drawn to animals and wordplay, which inspire the illustrated cards she screen prints for her greeting card company, Lost in Thought Paper Shop.

Suzanne Furlong Kiggins is a self-taught artist based in Brooklyn and sometimes Hudson, New York, currently working with acrylic and gouache on paper, wood panel, and canvas. Prior to making art, she had a twenty-year career in educational simulation design. She paints to share unseen feelings and experiences that, while powerful and universal, are difficult to express. She draws inspiration from the natural world and its reflection in the manmade. She explores themes of tension between opposing powerful forces such as order and chaos, safety and exploration, life and death, connection and independence, and our internal and external worlds. She communicates her inner world in the hope that these hard-to-define feelings, places, and experiences are familiar to others too.

Greta Kresse is a plein-air painter based in Fayetteville, Arkansas. She received her BA from Hendrix College and is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of Arkansas. Kresse is the recipient of the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant (2026) and has attended residencies at Anderson Ranch, New York Studio School, Willow House, and Great Spruce Head Island. Working primarily in oils, Kresse creates vibrant paintings that explore human connection within the Southern landscape. Drawing inspiration from regional poetry and direct observation, her work investigates themes of isolation, beauty, and love in everyday life.

Rachel Loomis is a writer and artist. Much of her work focuses on capturing the essence of the natural world. When she's not writing, she spends her (limited) free time traveling, museum-hopping, and studying languages.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated fourteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart Prize, once for the Forward Prize, and featured in three collections: *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019), and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

David Milgrim is an award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling author and illustrator with more than thirty-five children's books. He is now an award-winning cartoonist writing comics and comic-essays about mental health for grown-ups. He is working on a book-length guide to using our minds to find a satisfying life in our bat-crap crazy modern world. Follow him and the book's progress at OneComicAtATime.com.

Richard Jeffrey Newman has published three books of poetry: *T'shuvah* (Fernwood Press, 2023), *Words for What Those Men Have Done* (Guernica Editions, 2017), and *The Silence of Men* (CavanKerry Press, 2006), as well as three books of translation from classical Persian poetry: *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan*, *Selections from Saadi's Bustan* (Global Scholarly Publications, 2004 & 2006), and *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* (Junction Press, 2011). He curates the First Tuesdays reading series in Jackson Heights, New York. His website is richardjnewman.com.

Kevin Novalina has had fiction, nonfiction, and poetry published in more than two hundred literary journals, magazines, and anthologies. He has won numerous writing competitions and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including four Pushcart Prizes.

Elena Plumb is a painter and printmaker from Siberia, who explores social and environmental relationships through manipulation of the figure and its space. She examines figures and architecture as they layer together, often with abstract arrangement. She lives and studies in Baltimore, and her work has been featured in the Towson University Undergrad Juried Exhibition as well as other local galleries. She has received awards such as the Ro and Marius P. Johnson Scholarship and the Golden Stallion Award for community service in the arts.

Paul Rabinowitz is a writer, photographer, founder of ARTS By The People, and the author of six books. His work appears in *The Sun Magazine*, *New World Writing*, *Arcturus-Chicago Review of Books*, and other publications. Rabinowitz's poems and fiction are the inspiration for eight award-winning experimental films. His website is paulrabinowitz.com.

Lex Recinos is studying painting at Towson University. They primarily work with acrylic and oil paints, with a preference for acrylics. Lex creates life in their works by emphasizing erratic mark-making and vibrant color palettes, aiming to evoke a raw and visceral feeling. They focus on subjects of doom, isolation, and delirium, and elements of humor through a surreal lens. Some of their inspirations include surrealism, horror, and a love of dogs. To find more of their work, see them on Instagram @dogdecayy.

Thea Ringer is a Maryland-based writer whose poetry and fiction explore narratives of family and the complexities of memory. She is a recent graduate of Towson University's MS in Professional Writing program.

Radoslav Rochallyi is a philosopher, visual artist, and poet. Although he was born in Czechoslovakia, he has Lemko and Hungarian roots, and his work is primarily international. His poetry emphasizes logic, visual text structure, and formal minimalism. With these elements, he questions and expands traditional semantics. Through this approach, he conducts original research on art, poetry, philosophy, and STEM.

Ashley Rogers attended Essex Community College of Baltimore, where she earned her AA in Creative Writing. In fall of 2025, she graduated from Towson University with a BS in English and a concentration in creative writing. She is continuing her education at Towson, pursuing her MA in Professional Writing.

Madelyn Sadera is a junior at Dulaney High School and is currently on the literary staff of *Sequel* magazine, Dulaney's creative arts publication. Madelyn has been writing for many years, creating short stories, poems, and essays as far back as first grade. In her free time, she enjoys crocheting, listening to music, and mountain biking.

Orleans Saltos is a writer and illustrator whose creative nonfiction explores childhood, identity, and the intersections of class and culture. The daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, she grew up in Louisiana on the wrong side of the train tracks—experiences which shaped her essays about belonging and family. She also writes and illustrates speculative fiction that centers marginalized voices. Find more at orleansaltos.com.

Juniper Scott is a Towson University Professional Writing graduate student studying creative writing. As a trans woman in America's contemporary political climate, she strives to always push against boxes of normalcy while capturing lived truth and beauty. Elements of personal essay, fiction, and poetry sit side by side in her associative and upcycled style, questioning what writing can be.

JW Summerisle is an autistic poet from the English East Midlands. A former Foyles Young Poet of the Year, they have published two chapbooks: *kinfolk* (Black Sunflowers Poetry Press, 2022) and *the book of bad mothers* (Back Room Poetry, 2024). Their first full collection, *Wat Tyler's Candy Pink Dream House*, is forthcoming in 2027 from Broken Sleep Books.

Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Carousel*, *subTerrain*, *paperplates*, *Dalhousie Review*, *untethered*, *Nashwaak Review*, *Orbis*, *Snakeskin Poetry*, *American Mathematical Monthly*, *M58*, *CV2*, *Brittle Star*, *Lascaux Review*, *Carmina*, *Progenitor*, *Muleskinner*, *Sulphur*, *Northridge Review*, *Ex-Puritan*, *Perceptions*, *Grandfalloon*, *Literary Hatchet*, *Calliope*, *New Note*, *Confetti*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and other publications. He is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for grant funding during the polycrisis. Find him at researchgate.net/profile/Terry-Trowbridge.

Regina (Gina) Waters is a senior at Towson University pursuing a degree in English with minors in creative writing and women's and gender studies. She currently serves as the editor-in-chief of *Grub Street Online*. When she isn't in the classroom, she is obsessing over *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, reading, and rewatching her favorite movies and shows.

Matthew Zhao is a poet from Michigan, now a PhD student at Florida State University and an assistant editor of poetry for *Southeast Review*. He was a finalist in the *National Poetry Series* and *Mississippi Review Prize*, and a semifinalist in the Lingle Press Book Prize, Autumn House Press Poetry Prize, Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize, and others. His poems recently appeared in *swamp pink*, *Four Way Review*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *PRISM international*, *Pinch*, *The Louisville Review*, and other publications.

**“like there was some greater
meaning in the electrics than this”**

-JW Summerisle