

Loomings
A Literary Journal

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— *Loomings* —

One-Hit Kid

Saharah C.

I have always hated fairy tales, especially the kind Mama would tell me before bed during the wintertime, the ones with princesses and knights and magical quests and mythical monsters. That kid shit. They were lies told to make me feel safe or make me feel brave, to make me feel like I could fight off anything if I turned into one of these heroes. But they never kept away the real monsters.

Bomb loves fairy tales – the gruesome ones. Princesses decaying in their towers, knights getting torn apart by dragons, magical quests ending unhappily and mythical monsters reigning over the land. She loves the tales about unsolved murders and vengeful ghosts even more.

Her name is actually Bonny Haystein. She has hair like a Fourth of July firework lit a forest on fire, and a smile so crooked that metal from a chain link fence couldn't fix it. We'd met on the first day of second grade when our teacher thought it was a great idea to put on name tags and introduce ourselves to each other. I didn't much care for saying 'Hello', but she came bouncing right up to me and pointed at my name tag. "How d'ya say that?"

"Ronny."

She stared at it for a second longer, then nodded to herself as if to say 'Yes, you are correct.' "Our names rhyme, then."

I looked at her name tag, the name 'Bonny' written out neatly in our teacher's nicest handwriting, but there was this thing wrong with my eyes that made the letters look different every time I blink. The longer I stared, the more the two n's smushed together, and the y at the end flipped upside down, making it look like—

"Bomb doesn't rhyme with Ronny."

At this, she threw back her head in laughter. “Ronny, can you read alright? My name is Bonny. B-o-n-n-y, rhymes with Ronny.”

I clenched my fists at my side and looked down at the floor, at my brand-new school shoes Dad had gotten me because my other shoes had a hole dug out from my big toe. I hated people laughing at me like monsters, like if this were a fairytale, and I’d be the helpless boy being rescued.

I twisted my heels, ready to walk away, but her hand grabbed one of mine. “Hey now, what’s wrong? I didn’t mean it, I like the name Bomb better, honest. Bonny is my great-grannies name, an old name. Don’t it sound that way?”

I unclenched my fists, feeling the nail marks in my palm sting. “Yeah.”

“Yeah, I’m Bomb.”

Maybe she wasn’t a monster. I learned that she always told the best ghost tales on nights I would stay at her house, a great castle fit for us, a twisted queen and her jester. Her room held the throne that looked out over the pond in the backyard that spread west to the main road bridge and about fifty yards to the east where the property cuts off. It was our kingdom that followed our laws, our will.

One night, sometime in March when it was too cold to camp in the backyard without our socks on, Bomb held a flashlight under her face, making the baby fat fade away into sharp angles and wide, wiry eyes. “Have you ever heard of the One-Hit Kid?”

I shook my head.

She leaned closer, close enough that I could feel the heat of the flashlight against my own cheek. “This story takes place right here, in our town.”

She cleared her throat.

He was just that, a kid. His daddy worked at the steel mill and his mama was a teacher at a preschool. To the town, to the schools, to the neighbor kids down the street, they were a happy family. It wasn’t until a few days after Christmas when something went wrong. Mama always made cookies for the neighbor kids, and daddy always had a ginger brewski with the

men, always at the last house in the cul-de-sac, but they never showed up. A neighbor lady went to check on the family and found mama and daddy dead in their bed, their cause of death being a single stab wound to the base of their skull. The murder weapon was nowhere to be found, and neither was the kid.

Everyone assumed he had escaped from an intruder that came into the house, and missing posters were put up all over town looking for him. As the search went on, so did these mysterious murders. They all had the same wound at the base of the skull, they were all silent kills, and no one could find any clues or patterns. The murderer didn't discriminate. They killed men, women, children, they were ruthless. You'd never see it coming. It could easily have been me as easily as it could have been you.

A few months after the murder of mama and daddy, it was Valentine's night, and the killer made one fatal mistake. They saw a woman standing outside a restaurant along and made their move. They slapped their hand over the woman's mouth and thrust the knife into the base of her skull. They twisted the knife, dug in some more, twisted again, then let the body drop. They almost made it to the alleyway, almost got away with another clean kill, until the door of the restaurant opened.

See, it turns out that that woman was a cop man's wife, and now the big man had the killer in his sights. The killer turns around and the cop instantly recognizes the face he's seen all around town for the past few months.

It was him. It was the kid.

"That was stupid of him."

"How was he supposed to know it was a cop man's wife? They don't wear signs!"

"Maybe he shouldn't've been a murderer—"

"Hush! I'm tellin' a story!"

The kid ran into the street to stop a car, then stabbed the driver in the head and started to drive away. The cops were on him as he drove rampant around the town, following him as he headed towards the backroads between the mountain trail and the dump where he could

lose them. But it was February and the roads were slick, it was dark, his car was being lit up in any attempt to stop him. He made it to the bridge and hit a patch of ice and flew off into the freezing pond that sucked up the whole car. The cops knew it was too dangerous to try and dig him out that night, so they waited until morning. When they came back, the One-Hit Kid was nowhere to be found, along with the stolen car.

They say he still wonders around the pond just waiting for his next victim to walk by.

I looked at her, her eyes looking past me to the wall, the flashlight illuminating the sweat on her lip. “That’s shit.”

She smacked my head with the flashlight and shut it off, leaving us in the light of the moon as we lay against our shared pillow. “What if it’s true?”

“Well why did he kill his parents in the first place?”

“Maybe they hit ‘em.”

I scoffed. “I’ve been hit before, ain’t nothing to go stabbing your daddy about.”

Bomb swung down to put the flashlight back under the bed. “Maybe it was more than that. Maybe there was a voice in his head that told him to, huh?”

“So, you think there is an old murderer kid running around your pond?”

Bomb nodded.

“If he were alive, why wouldn’t he go back to town ‘n kill again? Or run away so he wouldn’t get caught? Makes no sense.”

“You think too logically, Ronny.” She turned to her side, eyes catching between the light sneaking through the half-open blinds. “Some people’re just crazy for no reason at all.”

She was asleep before I had even thought of closing my eyes, her mouth wide open like she was asking spiders to crawl inside. My eyes trailed across the ceiling, finding different shapes in the ceiling that I could point out to her in the morning. Nothing really stuck out. A cloud passed over the moon and made the whole room dark with only the sound of Bomb snoring to remind me that I was still awake.

Then, light came back, and the first shape I saw on the ceiling was a knife covered in blood. Ice filled my veins. I watched as a drop of blood fell off of the tip and followed it until it landed, cold and sharp, on my forehead. I sat up, hoping that my sudden movements would wake up Bomb, but she remained still. My legs shook as I willed them to jump out of bed but looked up at the door.

He was there.

He was hidden in the shadows with a knife in his hand, but I could see the water dripping off of him. The eyes staring back at me were empty, and his blue lips were pulled into a tight smile. I heard the sound of metal being ground against gravel sharp in my ears, smelt heavy and sticky blood being gurgled, and felt the weight of death in the room.

He was laughing at me.

“Ronny?”

I shot up, sweat across my forehead and hands shaking at my side. Light from the sunrise peaked through the blinds, casting a light onto Bomb’s worried face. I looked over at the door where I had seen the shadow, but nothing was there. Then, I looked up at the ceiling, and the knife was gone, too.

“Are you alright? You were shakin’ like crazy.”

“I...I...” I steadied my breath. “I had a nightmare. That’s all.”

Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Ooooh, what was it about?”

“One-Hit Kid.” I looked to the corner again, remembering the sound of his laugh, and felt a shiver run down my spine. “He...” *Laughed at me.* “...was standing in the corner.”

Her face fell. “Oh, is that all? Well, it was just a dream. C’mon, go eat some breakfast.”

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Once the heat of June had thawed out the pond fish and the toads were croaking again, Bomb and I dug our nets out of the lawn shed and prepared for our first frog hunt of the season. We took off our socks, stuffed them in our pockets, and started

through the mud.

We trailed along the well-worn path of dry grass and dirt, brushing past bushes and swatting away stray bugs. Both of our ears were open to the sound of croaks, Bomb had her head to the side, making her hair sway like a match in the wind, like it could catch any of these dried shrubs on fire.

I, too, had my ear up. My feet could follow this path while I was asleep, so I closed my eyes and focused. There were no croaks. Buzzing of bees, humming of crickets, rustles of grass, twigs breaking under our toes, fish jumping and landing, but no croaks.

As we reached the bridge, Bomb looked back at me, smiling that god-awful crooked smile. Then, we rolled up our jeans to above our wobbly knees and walked across to the other side, hands clasped together. “Watch your toes,” Bomb jeered. “The Kid might snatch you up.”

I scoffed at her but glanced out towards the deep end of the pond, telling myself he wasn't there. This was our kingdom. We kept the monsters out.

Our bodies broke out into the sunshine again. Pieces of dirt and dead bugs stuck to our damp feet as we followed the trail to our landmark, the tree. Our hands rested on the trunk as we felt the water flowing from the ground to its leaves that rustled above us, and finally we heard it – a croak. Bomb swung up the tree and pushed her hair back, listening for another to tell me what direction to go. “The bay,” she said.

The bay was a part of the shore that dropped off slightly up ahead, so I snuck off in that direction, picking and choosing the spots on the ground that wouldn't hiss or crunch under my weight, listening to the croaking. The wind was on my side, whispering the noises my way. I reached the edge of the bay and crouched down, inching closer and closer, looking back between my feet and the side of the castle across the water, until directly between two branches was Bomb's window to the throne room. My eyes flickered down to the water and, just as Bomb had said, he was there.

This one was a honker, must've been a king of some sort. His vocal sac expanded and compressed in even beats, eyes looking right at me, head tilted slightly towards the sky. Come and get me, he taunted. I looked right back.

I will.

I gripped my net in my hand, feeling the wood chips rub uneasy and familiar against my palm, and crept forward. The king croaked again. Maybe it was a warning, his last signal to those around him that I was there. A martyr. He knew there was no escape, just like I knew I wouldn't miss. A twig broke under my big toe. King moved his head. Blinked. Croaked. Wiggled his feet free of the mud, ready to jump, but not fast enough.

My net swung down and landed on top of him, the metal rim perfectly circled around the body as he struggled to hop against the net. He pulled and pushed against the net trying with every fiber of strength to escape, but there was no use. I had been too quick, too quiet. With a triumphant smile, I stepped forward, my right foot landing in the bay and bringing the muddy water up to my shin and gripped the netting around the frog. He was mine.

“Gotcha, king.”

The water in front of me rippled, dragging my gaze from my latest prize to the murky surface. Beyond the bay, there was a drop off, the only part of the shore to ever get deeper than our heads within a few feet. Under strict rules, we never went past the bay. We stuck to the shore, we only stepped into the bay for a good catch. I had just caught, and now I was in the bay. From down in the depths of the drop off, with my right foot still sinking in mud, I saw him.

One-Hit Kid.

Under the cover of the water it looked as though he was covered in algae, hunched forward like he might've been praying. Some of his teeth were gone, maybe taken by fish as prizes or rotted enough to fall out, but his jaw was set in a smile, in a laugh. Minnows swam in and out of his eye sockets like they were only obstacles. There was a hole in the middle

of his head, like his own knife had somehow ended up killing him, or maybe he had been so cold all alone in this freezing pond he knew what he was doing. He looked at me like he had that night. I looked right back, feeling anger bubble in my stomach as he laughed and laughed and laughed—

“Ronny?”

I turned to see Bomb. She motioned to the net in my hand.

“Caught ‘em?”

I looked down. “Yeah.”

I stepped out of the bay, mud now up to my knee pit, and held up the net under my fist. The king didn’t move.

“Geez, Ronny,” she said, poking the frog with an outstretched finger, then put her hands on her hips. “You killed him! Didya hit ‘em on the head with your net, or somethin’?”

I released my hand from the net and looked down at the king, laying on his back, vocal sac still, and shrugged. “I didn’t think so. He hopped after I caught ‘em ‘n everything.”

“Why don’t you kiss ‘em? Maybe that’ll bring him back to life.”

“That only happens in fairy tales,” I grumbled. I wiggled the fingers on my empty hand, feeling the sting from the nail marks on my palm.

“Well don’t go killin’ anymore things, or you’ll be my next ghost story from this pond, huh?”

As she walked back in the direction of the tree, I lifted the frog from his hind leg, waiting to see if he was faking it or not. His eyes were still open, looking right back at me and making my stomach flip over itself. “Not as mighty of a king as I thought.”

No response. I tossed him into the pond water behind me, watching the surface ripple and waiting to see his face again, waiting to see if he was still laughing.

The only thing I saw was my reflection staring back, lips drawn into a tight line as the dead king floated to the bottom. My ears itched at the sound of the wind whistling through the reeds, my nose twitched at the smell of mud. I could feel the heavy weight of death in

my hands and clenched them at my side.

This was our kingdom, and I'd be damned if I let a monster take it away.



The Blade of Silver and Scale

Isadora H. Petrovsky

I toss aside my torch, the flame extinguishing in the murky lake. I bring a tan hand to my face, shielding amber eyes from the sudden intake of light. A hole had broken open in the ceiling of the dark cave. It was almost ironic, how the sun shined down onto the abandoned temple, crumbling on the island before me. It was like the gods had finally—quite last minute—decided to pay attention. I jump from rock to rock towards the island, the dark water beneath me still and unmoving. The last rock is too far to jump, so I wade through shallow the murky liquid towards the shore. I reach the island and only a few feet separate me from my prize: a silver sword, embedded in a broken column at the center of the temple. Even the magnificent blade, glimmering in the light of the gods, is overtaken by moss and reeds. Perhaps this was why the Minthrasians thought the blade was lost to time—because it was. But not anymore.

“Anthras” I whisper, excitement and awe breathy on my lips. My voice echoes through the chamber, despite my attempts to be quiet. I wait for the sound to dissipate, cringing at the unexpectedly loud noise. With my luck, some god-like being would hear me and come out of the stone-work. I couldn’t mess this up, not this late in the game.

The High Council of Minthras had promised ten thousand gold pieces and knight-hood to the first adventurer who found the realm’s most sacred artifact. The ridiculous quest was clearly a ploy to distract the people from other more pressing issues. This included increased taxation in the Southern Valley, meant to make up for government spending on repairs to damage done by a flock of fledgling dragons. The prize money, likely from the increase in taxation on the valley, could have been used to hire adventurers to kill the dragons. They had been destroying fields and livestock for weeks, and not once was someone sent out to fix anything. Instead, the Council hired adventurers to go on what seemed to be an endless quest for a sword that had been merely Minthrasian legend. The Council had said something about, “giving the people someone to root

for,” but I knew the truth. If the citizens were distracted, the problem would blow over without an extra penny spent. Sure, a few peasants would starve for a while, but of what consequence was that to the Council?

The people of Minthras were certainly not rooting for me. I am a woman for starters, which strips the portion of the prize that says I’d be knighted for my efforts. Women didn’t get to be adventurers in Minthras, much less knights who wield ancient swords. In some ways I don’t care. That money is my path to freedom, to getting out of this small-minded realm and finding someplace better. Where that will be exactly, I don’t know. But that’s the fun part isn’t it?

I wring out my black braid with my hands, wriggling my body to be rid of the drop-lets seeping into my chilled skin. I could go anywhere I wanted once this was over. It is over, isn’t it? There before me is the blade the Council never expected anyone to find. I found Anthras, relic sword of Minthras, not some empty-headed hero beloved for his brainless brawn.

I had seen one of those heroes, lost in the woods a few hundred leagues back. He and his squire had been prancing around beneath the trees, heavy metal armor making an egregious amount of noise in the quiet wood. I had left the vicinity of his noise as quickly as I could. Only one of us could afford to get lost, or worse found by one of the many beasts that lurked there, and it wasn’t me. I would be the one to find the sword. And I did find it. A coprophagous grin stretched across my angled features as I thought of the Council’s stupid faces when I handed the blade over. Priceless.

I push away the tangled web of moss and reeds engulfing the glimmering blade. I clasp my hands around Anthras’s polished leather hilt, yanking upward. The sword slides out of the column, my powerful arms balancing the heavy blade easily. I grasp it with both hands, shifting my weight into a fighting stance. My trousers, wool tunic, and leather armor are soaked and weigh down my limbs, but I hardly notice. I have the sword. I did it. A laugh loosens itself from my lips. I can’t remember the last time I was this giddy. I feel like a child, amber eyes shining in the reflective blade. It’s honestly astonishing how something so old stayed so clean.

Then the cavern begins to shake.

It never can just be *easy*, can it?

It comes up from the water, writhing and slithering as rocks plummeted from the ceiling into the black liquid. A large white head, smooth scaled with milk slotted eyes meet my own. Water rushes from its body, splashing onto the island. The waves created by the gigantic serpent nearly reach me at the land mass's center. I grip Anthras tightly, trying not to shake myself as I point it at the alabaster drake.

“Foolish, foolish girl. You are either incredibly brave to enter these caves alone or unbelievably stupid.”

Yet, despite the fear that coursed through my veins, I knew I couldn't give up. Nor would I be heckled by a talking snake.

“Get the sword, slay the dragon. Doesn't sound too hard to me.” Verbally prodding the monster, that filled up the cavern with its slithering form, was likely not a smart idea. But this was the last thing between freedom and I. I already had the sword. What was the worst that could happen? I already know the answer.

Its slotted eyes narrow while it hisses. Fangs longer than my own body protrude from its bottom lip. “My name is Gaslieth, Protector of Anthras. Do I look like a dragon to you? I am the oldest guardian of Minthras. Those idiots raid villages for the Dethenia's sake. Do I look like I raid villages?”

I found it interesting that the drake invoked the goddess of wisdom, a lesser god by current Minthrasian standards, but once extolled in the centuries before the High Council. I was quite sure she would not fall prey to my taunts, assuming I had gall enough to taunt a god. I'll leave that for you to decide.

“You look like you haven't left this cave in a long time. Seems bad for the complexion. If you ask me, you're looking a bit dragonish these days. Nothing like the paintings I

saw of you back home.” That was a lie. I had no idea what to expect when looking for this weapon. I certainly would have liked to know there was going to be a giant snake. Perhaps I would have made a plan.

“How DARE you! You are no worthy hero. You will not pass my waters, certainly not with that attitude.” The drake huffed, bearing its vast teeth as it shoots its long neck towards me. I quickly dodged out of the way.

“Measly shot for a being so great. The gods could have at least chosen someone with some *finesse* to guard their most prized possession. This is just disappointing.”

The drake was getting flustered, quite clearly offended by my words. It was thrashing now, losing any sort of precision when striking. To be quite honest, Gaslieth was a little lame for an ancient guardian. I suppose he was out of practice, being alone in that cavern for so long. The fear that had twisted my stomach faded, replaced with haughty determination.

“Hey Gassy! You missed me!”

But this time he didn't miss, and neither did I. Anthras cuts clear through his long neck, the metallic blade glistening with greenish purple blood. The drake's head drops onto the mossy earth. I shoulder the blade, a wide grin stretching across my chiseled features. I did it.

The snap of bones, a sickening squish, and another white head rises from the writhing neck that lies before me. Not one head, but two. A hydra. A god-forsaken hydra.

As the farmers in the villages would say, I am knee deep in manure.

I really wasn't prepared for this.

Gaslieth did not look happy, but what did I expect? Who would be pleased about getting their head lobbed off? By the cracking and crunching of bone and sinew, it did not sound particularly pleasant to regrow a head either. Not that the comfort level of the Hydra was my principal concern. If I did not make it out of this cavern, I would no longer exist.

The Council of Minthras would say, amusement glinting in their smarmy eyes, “Bryn the Belligerant, never heard of *her*. Though by the sound of it, she sounds highly

disagreeable.” The last word hissing off of forked tongues. Just thinking about it made me want to gag.

No, I wasn’t going to let them soil my name because in this society of fools, reputation is everything. Without a reputation, without proof I was alive and here in this god-forsaken cavern, history and the sack of gold waiting for me, would forget me. I could live with history’s fading memory, but that money, I *needed* that. Council pricks and god-like beasts be damned, that gold was *mine*.

This is probably why I should be paying more attention.

“That was my favorite head, you preposterous plebe! Over a thousand years I relished in my solitude, and now you’ve ruined—”

“Oh, pipe down Gasilieth, what is done is done.”

The new head that sprouted along a secondary slithering neck opened its jaws, its face the same creamy scaled white as its twin. The voice however, was far more controlled, less temperamental. “Allow me to briefly introduce myself, I am Basilmere the better half of my half-witted brother.”

“Pardon me, but that is hardly fair. Where were you when she stole the sword?”

“Where I always am, Brother, right here beside you. Waiting for a hero who is capable enough to do the simple task of bringing me out.”

“Simple! I hardly think it is simple to...”

And so on. The two heads snapped at each other, fangs barred and mouths dripping with thick saliva that splattered onto the edge of the island. They seemed to forget about me, standing alone gripping the very artifact they were meant to be guarding.

A slow simper stretched at the corners of my mouth. As annoying as their bickering was, it was a distraction none the less. If I could keep out of their notice as they bit and snapped at each other, perhaps I could slip out the way I came. Or I could eradicate the problem entirely. I wasn’t here for glory, but Hydra scales would fetch a pretty penny at the Obsidian Market, and as you’ve probably guessed by now, I could use the coin. Yet, I wasn’t

willing to risk my life trying to kill this beast, not unless I had to. The Council's coin would be more bountiful anyway, and the feeling of it rattling in my hands far sweeter.

The two joining necks, writhing and convulsing in their attempts to prove which brother was the better, were connected to a long singular cylinder of a body, tapered into a point far off in the distance, back towards the entryway. If I was going to get past this thing, I would either have to stick to the edge of the cavern, exit through the hole in the ceiling, or kill it. As I had already decided not to do the latter, my options were severely limited.

With a quick glance backward towards the open hole in the ceiling surrounded by smoothed sides with no footholds, sneaking around the edge of the cavern became my best and only option. That is if I could swim with Anthras in tow. However, based on the relative ease with which I am holding the massive silver blade, I am hardly worried.

I slide the blade into the back of my breastplate, sandwiching its polished silver between leather and the wool of my tunic. I tiptoe through the moss and the wet mud, trying not keep my laced boots from any particularly squishy spots. I made it to the edge of the cavern, my legs knee deep in the black waters, foul smelling, rank with hundreds of years of mold, sloughing scales, and decaying bodies. I try not to think too much about it as I silently waded in.

So close. Just straight across.

I repeated the words over and over as I slid my body further into the water, nothing but my head of black hair and the hilt of the sword visible in the dim light. I made it about half way across the cavern, the booming voices of the chattering heads reverberating off of dank walls.

I swiveled my eyes back towards the Hydra, heads still bickering and jabbing at each other. I should have looked away then, continued to stroke powerfully through the dark waters. I did not. Part of me, a fruitless seed of doubt planted deep within my tightened stomach, wanted to make sure the Hydra was distracted, that I had *truly* succeeded. I needed to be sure I could be irrevocably *free*.

My eyes caught his form lowering from the opening of the cavern, above where Anthras had been minutes before. He is not looking down. Rather, I am not sure he was looking at anything under that ridiculous bulky helmet on his head. He is clinging to a rope, head tilted upward toward the sky as he yelled, "Squire! Lower me faster, the sword is almost within our grasp! Huzzah!"

He was clearly a hero type. By the looks of his polished armor and the glistening sword at his back, that clearly had never seen blood, he was surely a knight. That meant that he is far more unprepared to face a Hyrda, with two heads, that he has not yet laid eyes on. I am certain it is that idiot I had seen traversing about the woods. I almost want him to take off the helmet so I can see the horror on his face when the two beasts center their slitted milky eyes on him. Part of me feels guilty about the thought, but it was fops like him that always took credit for jobs I did, who always got the bigger share, and who took the gold that was rightfully *mine*. This time I would be the lucky one.

Not even a knight in distress, crying for his squire could sway me. I was getting out of Minthras, no matter the cost. So, I turn away from the wriggling knight. As the bickering between the brothers stops, and a roar like thunder shakes the cavern, I keep swimming. I pretend not to hear the sickening shrieks or the snap of bone like the breaking of twigs. I can imagine it, thick jaws snapping metal armor and bulging muscles that snap just as easily as any other man's. It is lucky I'm no man.

I reach the archway leading into the cavern, grabbing the pack I had thrown on the ground at the entrance to the tunnel leading to the surface. I can live with dreams of screams. Sure, I could have gone back, and then I'd be dead too. Then where would Minthras be? Short another dead adventurer and another fruitless distraction of which nothing came. I was going to show them. I was going to *leave*.

I drew Anthras, the blade shimmering even in the dark tunnels that led back to the surface. Shouldering my pack, and wielding my sword, for that is what it was (at least until the gold was mine) I traveled through the blackness and into the light. The sun hit my amber

eyes, and with a sharp toothy smile I headed into the woods. Eventually, I would reach Yaria, Minthra's capitol and then the High Council was in for a surprise.



Ebb and Flow.

Megan Lolley

It happens when I crack open the surface of the sea with hands like gnarled tree roots, stretching up to take root around the sun. Sun that flirts with the skin on my arms as young people might have, and a breeze that tucks copper hair behind my ear and rushes into my nose, embracing my lungs in a new day. The sound of my heels against sidewalk and wooden floors, and how my hair taps my shoulder as I walk. It's falling asleep at eight at night and waking up at two in the morning to go to bed. Cold sand that snuggles its way between bare toes to watch the sunrise over the lake. Eating chicken pad Thai with my mom on her birthday. It's when fleeting moments last for lifetimes: waves that crash onto the shoreline with every exhale and retreat on inhales.

It's breaking free from the arms of my pillow in the morning—hands that tie my brain to the mattress using my own fingertips, untethering the mind. It's the little lemon earrings from the farmer's market, and the extra-large men's flannel that smells like dad. It's microwaving a s'more. It's the look the puppy gives the phone over FaceTime when you call his name. It's the first sip of water that touches the back of your tongue after you've been crying for hours.

It's every moment that becomes a key to a different day, hotel rooms of memories maintained in my mind. Behind each one is an ocean. As I walk down the roaring halls, I hear each day behind each closed door. Some are roaring with anger, some pool and lash at the door halfheartedly, and still some ripple, laughs crusted with dried salt. Those are the doors I wish I could keep open every day. Those are the oceans I wish would flood the hotel and every other door. Those oceans never overpower the seas contained behind locked doors. No matter how strongly you barricade, the water always rushes out, either by breaking locks and kicking down doors or by slowly seeping under the door and tainting the pure waters that smile.

It's knowing that I can't control oceans, even though sometimes I believe I am the

moon. It's fighting the riptide or feeling it drag me through the silt: air that becomes so infuriatingly uncomfortable that sand seems like a better alternative. Sand that drowns, leaving just one blackening bubble of air that can't seem to give up. A new checklist for a new day, blacking out minutes in a dotted journal stained with peppermint tea and sea salt. Bobbing knees and sweat underneath oversized ratted sweaters. Tired of trapping angry oceans inside their doors over and over and over and fighting too hard yet not hard enough. Chasing water down hallways until it grabs my ankles and whispers siren tears into my eyes, lying on the floor of the hotel. The tracks of salt rubbing my face into a muddled mess of pink swirled with porcelain-beige makeup. Peeling myself off the floor, vertebrae by vertebrae, and eating popcorn. It's getting into bed knowing I will have to fight to get out of it in the morning.

It's the neon lights, swallowing every corner of the room in a red haze. It's the half-deflated air mattress draped lazily with a blanket, splintered wooden stairs, and dead grass in the lawn. My necklace on the floor—a golden sun—sneering at me when the red light hits it. My phone buzzing, ignored on the floor, and the kitchen knife that sits poised in my purse. It's the riptide of alcohol and anxiety: ebbing and flowing, pushing and pulling, toppling over and falling under. Bare shoulders and bared teeth and a wobbly black bubble in my gut that never pops. A lazy smile and a promise, both of which mean nothing anymore, and might not mean anything again.

It's all about spilled grape juice and ocean water that runs down the shower drain when the tide comes in. Blankets swirled around a wobbly bubble to hide it from the sharp things—too many teeth in the world. Bared teeth that tear into bared shoulders for the sole purpose of biting. Cancelled plans, gasps of fresh air that run away too soon. Mowing the lawn in the rain. Seeing your dad cry for the first time in eighteen years as he walks away from the vet without the dog. It's the drive around the lake, going twelve over and listening to The 1975, and what it feels like to scream when you never have before: screaming until your voice is a gravel road and drowning

out the thunder. Screaming until all that's left is a crumbling castle of sand. Sitting on a ratted purple rug, deciding to crumble, smoothed over by tear-stained cheeks. It's the seven thousand and nineteen days of dress rehearsal and how many thousands more before the curtains finally open.

It's where I laugh too hard on a Sunday night, traipsing through a WinCo parking lot like it's a beach. The tide's out tonight: toppling over. Never can pop the bubble. Toppling over, hitting pavement curb, laughing over. Leaving someone on the cement and walking away with someone new. Falling off the sidewalk when Chris walks me home, apologizing for leaving who he thought he knew on the road. It's wondering what he thinks of me: staring at the too-stiff definition of anxiety and perfection struggling to even hold herself upright. Snapped. Snapped, but less stiff. The girl that used to share sour patch kids and play card games in the back of the bus, exploded into a colorful tear-sodden mess on the floor of the living room. Walking the curb like a tightrope, spilling over onto the staircase, saying sorry but never really feeling it. Tripping over stairs to get back to a deflating air mattress and a warm cup of vodka. It's eyes that are way too common, yet not commonly seen, shrinking into the skull after each sip. Using the bottle as a rag, soaking up all of the water running up and down, wringing it out again in the morning.

It's the empty wine glass and the money in my pocket. It's the fear of empty rooms and crowded places. It's the foam that covers my face and lungs, hanging halfway out of a bathtub. Wanting to sink in all the way and wanting someone to care enough to pull me out. It's the walk back, spilling over like beer. Eating mac 'n' cheese on the floor between the chair and the couch, and not being able to fall asleep before three AM. It's pictures of him that make me happy to be miserable, bitter that I couldn't keep it. Guilt for the waves that flow out of my mouth and isolate me. The sound of closing doors and muffled voices. It's the hatred I have for closed doors, and the boy on my shopping list that I can write poems about. It's the phone call at 2:49 in the morning that wakes my mom up to hit "play" on the same track that has been played since my sophomore year of high school: Am I working to

solve the problem? My hands shaking as I fold a piece of paper into a paper boat, drowning it with a sunrise-soaked brush, my throat falling into my hands—I have lost the problem: it slipped through my fingers and sunk into the ground. It's the promise to sail away someday.

It's what I feel when another arm covers mine, rolling to trap me against the pillow, feeling its writhing fingers tickling my ears. It's breathing first, my lungs jumping to keep up with my heart. Then, it's how my nails find the same spot of skin on the inside of my palm. It's sobbing and not being able to explain it, protecting the anxiety, the only reliable constant. It's cries that come out in rushed breaths, soaking up the air before it's all gone. Eyebrows that furrow and raise, trying to fix the wires. The room with a hospital bed, covered with stiff paper and a flaky blanket, my home until fifth period—when they think God will be done healing me. Soup that takes up more space in the kitchen drain than the water does. Three hours of sleep that press my head into my desk at 5:30 every evening. Headaches that remind me to eat. Unfinished lists that remind me I'll never be able to try hard enough. Outgrowing the stability. Laughing louder than anyone else in the room.

It's about every apology I made for every mistake I made or didn't make—apologies being my mother tongue. Tears and promises, promises and apologies, and more tears: there's always more tears. Sorry for the tears. Sorry for leaving the too-stiff valedictorian on the curb of the WinCo parking lot, giving into the ebb and flow of this vast ocean. It's about Chris, picking up the shelled girl off of the road. Putting a homemade muffin in her hands and keeping her from falling into the street, leaving her at the door. It's about a hug that brings back a hazy screenshot of senior retreat, and the only thing I would remember. Trying to find a new shell to fit in. It's about what the tide brings in and wishing it would bring in something like Chris. It's weeks later, showing Chris the bleeding lines on my thighs before he shuts me up and tells me to spread them. Another part of the routine—another wave of the tide.

It's how I'm folded into the toilet, watching as my body retches out every second of the night in order to stockpile more nervous thoughts—the tide flows in, and in, and

in. Crawling across the bathroom floor to drink water I put in a bowl. It flows out of me instead of in, and I gag. My head falls into the toilet again, an unforgiving ocean rushing out my throat and nose, running black against the porcelain. Waking up the next morning crunched into a paper ball, crumpled to match every mistake. Falling into the doorframe at 9 AM. It's how I shower twice a day to smooth out the wrinkles, calm the sea. Stepping out into the cold of morning to feel my wet hair freeze in spears against my head, numbing my headache. Somewhere far away, I am screaming, and all I can do is listen.

It's because of dandelion eyes that have been blown bare by too many winds. Sunshine that reaches in to warm but doesn't care to open the curtains. Hotel guests that open doors they shouldn't. It's because of dogs that die too early and leaves that fall too soon. Sleeping on the floor until your father wakes you up to eat—seven pieces of orange chicken. It's because of the mirror, and the soft spots on my body that my hands find as I smooth out every day's outfit. It's because I am running out of words to put in the narrative. It's because of the puzzle I have never been able to put together, the bruises that make me into a constellation over the sea. It's because of the men that never just pick up shells and leave them at the front door; the tide rushes them in. Bared teeth that tear into bared shoulders. Hope that is a heartache that is hope. Hope of being less alone, hope of being more alone.

Whatever it's about, it's never about the shivering bubble that was forced to contain an ocean, or the guests that run around the hotel as soon as they're let in, shoving the cruel waves down my throat and into my eyes, and asking me why I am tired of trying not to drown.



Burning and Burying

Emily Heilman

Julie rubbed the waxy leaf of the white peace lily softly between her fingers. They were her favorite of the bouquets that had been sent to the house. The bright spring bouquet of carnations looked sad in comparison, and the hydrangeas had drooped since their arrival. The peace lilies were her favorite, classic for a funeral, and frankly, they looked dazzling in the bay window. Perhaps it was the lace curtains that framed them nicely, or the vintage art-deco throw pillows nestled in the corner, or how the sky outside the window beheld a splendidly warm sun and a sky full of textured white clouds quickly moving in the west wind. All seemed cheerful and light to Julie. There was no way for her to possibly act sad now. She sat down at the piano to practice Chopin's *Waltz in C Sharp Minor*.

The front room where she sat at the piano was filled with leafy plants. Many of them were in orange ceramic pots, having long been a part of the decor, but there were a number in various neutral-colored containers that housed floral arrangements—living and dead—from the recent funeral for Julie's now late husband Roger. Roger had been a decent man, sure, but he never truly had the opportunity to make his mark on the house. He had never had a defined style, so the house defaulted to Julie's more particular tastes. She sat at a light wood upright piano on the interior wall across from the burnt orange mid century modern sofa. At each of the sofa's arms was a wicker side table containing only a voluptuous spider plant on the left, and one slightly less so on the right, which also tabled a tall gold lamp with a canvas shade. A cream rug filled the center of the room and upon it sat a pine coffee table on wrought iron legs. There was another plant and a few magazines strewn upon it, none that she ever read, but kept for guests to peruse as they sat and listened to her play. Really though, she mostly kept them to make herself seem a more fashionable woman. She knew her vanity and despised it. Upon closer inspection, guests could discover that most of the magazines were from at least a half-decade prior. Besides that, there was a bookshelf in the wall next to the bay window, housing a half-dozen more leafy plants and a number of books

on American history and gardening—two topics Roger most fervently abhorred.

Roger and his sports memorabilia had been banished to the basement, where there was a kitchenette with a bar that they had renovated when they moved in. The basement had been his domain completely, though Julie had never been unaware of its contents. She knew the exact number of baseball bobbleheads that lined the shelves he had built upon the far wall and the various posters and yearly calendars of naked or otherwise scantily clad women that he had kept by his workbench in the part of the basement they had left unfinished. Roger was dead now, and that domain was Julie's if she wished to claim it. Frankly, she had no desire to do any such thing. She was perfectly content to hire some people to come and box everything up and take it all to Goodwill. But that will have to be done later. Norene seemed to finally be done puking her guts out in the bathroom.

She had a head full of curly dyed auburn hair and wore a lacy black shawl with small tassels hanging off of it about every inch. She wore a tight black v-neck dress that did not do any good for the kinds of curves she had acquired in her older years, and that she paired with fishnet leggings and open-toed black stilettos. This was what the woman had referred to as her “funeral garb” when she had picked Julie up for the burial, absolutely hung over. Norene stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame in what was probably an attempt at some sort of aloof melancholy. She stared off into space away from Julie and lit a cigarette.

“My brother was quite the fellow in life, don't you think, Jul?” she said, letting her cigarette smoke curl whimsically toward the ceiling.

“Don't smoke in my home, please.” Julie did not answer her question until she had finished playing. “He certainly was. And now he's dead. By God, Norene, put out that cigarette.” *She began Waltz No. 9 in A flat.*

Norene rolled her eyes and stabbed the cigarette into the peace lily's pot. She flopped onto the sofa, sinking down far enough so that her ankles could reach the table. Her foot wiggled along to her sister-in-law's music, though the scowl set into her face stared unwaveringly out the bay window as she waited for Leah.

“God Julie, that piano sounds like shit. Sounds like it hasn’t been tuned in a decade.”

“Have you made that hearing aid appointment yet?” Julie’s fingers continued their flight along the keys. Norene made a series of disrespectful facial expressions like a teen imitating her parent, and Julie kept playing.

A car door slammed outside. Leah waddled across the street, still in funeral black. She was the spitting image of her father. She had a kind, round face and eyes deep set in a way so that her brow shaded them, but when they caught the light just so it made them seem illuminated from somewhere behind the irises. She was old enough to have a career and be married, but she was young enough to still be happy with both and envied by the older women in her family and in her parents’ circles. So, obviously, she was a target for them at most social functions. This morning, no fewer than four old hags that came to her father’s funeral had remarked on her heavy abdomen, to which she smiled serenely and replied “my dad will be remaining grandchild-less in his grave, at least for now,” and genuinely forgave them their cruelty.

Julie found the results of her parenting most satisfactory. She admired her daughter’s poise and her wit. Her daughter deserved the world and she had tried to ensure that she could get it for herself. A job well done.

Leah carried a crockpot up the driveway, and Julie saw her through the window and abruptly ended her playing to open the door.

“That was quick,” she noted as her daughter tried not to spill the contents.

“Leah, do I smell roast beef? Good Lord, I’m lucky I’m still alive!” Norene got up from the sofa to peek at her as she walked through the foyer.

“Roast beef, and I left the potato salad in the car if you wouldn’t mind going back for it.”

They set up lunch at the kitchen table. Julie moved the peace lily out there to be admired during their meal, and Norene shoved it aside to see Leah from across the table. They ate without much ceremony, the lily taking up the empty place at the table.

No one was missed.

“What are your plans for the house, mom? Do you think you’ll stay?”

“Of course I’ll stay. I like it here.”

“You’ve got the chance to find something new. I think you should get an apartment and travel a little.”

“You’re the young one. You should be travelling.”

Norene piped in. “What Leah should be doing is settling that man down and trying to pop out some babies, so when she’s an old crapper like us she won’t be dealing with kids’ college loans and shit, and God forbid you won’t still be raising them.”

Julie, as was custom, tried not to pop a blood vessel. “What she means is she’d love to spoil some babies before she lies down next to your dad in the cemetery.”

Leah laughed—amused, but brushing off certain harsh realities.

“Well, that may be true Julie, but think about it! You got lucky to have such a *heavenly angel* like Leah, but they say crazy skips a generation. Your kids are probably cursed to end up like me. Or worse.” She glared at Julie. “Your mother.”

Julie feigned offense and flicked a stray potato from the salad toward her. It missed and sailed to the ground.

“Wow, Julie. Show some kindness. My brother just died.” She winked at Leah who cringed, and, grabbing her cigarette out of the peace lily, went outside. They watched her through the screen door as she threw her heels off, walked through the grass and re-lit her cigarette.

Leah chuckled, and Julie shook her head and tried to hide her amusement. Though the woman lived to make her angry, some of Julie’s most liberating moments were interacting with her.

Leah turned back to her mother. “But really, what are you going to do? Are you just going to leave everything in the house as is? Have you thought about moving?”

“I’ve thought all of this through before your father even thought to die. We were

always prepared for this. I'm going to hire some people to clean out the basement, maybe buy a new couch, hopefully go visit my sister in Atlanta for a while. But I will be back, and I will be living here."

"It'd be a waste of money to hire someone; let me take care of it."

"Leah, you have your own life. Don't worry about it."

"As your daughter, you will let me worry about you. I will be back tomorrow with some boxes." She stuck her chin out and lifted her eyebrows just enough to say that her mind was made up. Julie wondered if she had taught her that sort of expression. Briefly, she remembered looking into her own mother's face. Leah took care of the dishes, kissed her mother on the cheek, and said goodbye.

Norene reentered through the screen door, plopping her cigarette back in the plant. "And I will be back for that tomorrow. And to help out." She gave Julie a pointed look and followed her niece out of the house, carrying her heels in her hands.

The next day arrived early. Julie got up at seven as she always had and made the bed. She smoothed her hands over the floral quilt, imagining a hollow in the mattress where her husband used to lay. Instead of her usual routine of showering and dressing before going downstairs and preparing breakfast for two, she chose to forego it all and instead made tea and sat back at the piano. The clouds were dark today, and soon enough the rain added its percussion to her piano's Chopin. She was still in her nightgown when Leah and Norene arrived at nine. They ran up the driveway through the downpour using cardboard boxes as shields unnoticed by Julie.

Leah let herself and her aunt in.

"Damn Leah," Norene started, "I bet the angels are cryin' so hard because they're pissed they had to let your dad in."

In the living room Julie stopped playing, sighed, and tipped the last of the cold tea into her mouth. Leah peeked into the living room to say hello, then went right to the basement and got to work. Norene stepped into the living room as she exited.

“You eat yet? Or ’ve you just been sitting at that damn piano all morning?”

“You make the best omelets, if you’re offering.”

“You got it.” She walked away into the kitchen.

Julie sat for some time, empty mug in her hands listening to the rain. Norene popped open a window in the kitchen and the sounds were much more alive now. She could hear the droplets hitting the foliage of the maple and the concrete on the back patio. It rained like this for a week after her first fight with Roger, early in their marriage. She thought at some point during that time he’d come home from work, soaked from the rain and standing in the doorway. He’d see her, and he’d say sorry. Or he’d have flowers. And the rain would clear. But they made up in a bar, a Friday night out with friends. He was drunk and wanted to make out. So she let him, and they went home after and made love. She woke up the next morning and the rain was clear, but the air was heavy with a humidity that didn’t go away that summer.

The smell of cigarette smoke woke her from her reverie. “Norene!”

“Just burning my incense dear, no worries, I’ve got a window open,” she quipped.

Julie could hear the cigarette between her teeth.

Julie made her way to the kitchen as Leah trudged quickly up the back staircase carrying a full box. She shoved open the sliding door with aggression and took it to the trash. She did not stop. Norene and Julie shared a look. They stared at Leah as she reentered.

“Just a lot of trash so far!” She smiled sweetly, turning her head so the light would catch her eyes, and went back down the stairs. Poor girl never learned how to lie. At least, not to her mother.

“Omelet’s done,” Norene said, scooping it out of the pan and onto a plate.

“I bet I know what she found,” Julie stated, taking the plate and plucking the cigarette out of Norene’s mouth. She placed it next to the other from the day before, in the pot of the peace lily.

“Her expectations are too high,” Norene replied, cracking a couple eggs for herself

into the pan. “It’s porn, isn’t it? Even in high school that man couldn’t hide it well enough. Ma used to beat him with those magazines every time she found one.”

Julie nodded from the table. Even early in their marriage Roger hadn’t been particularly secretive about his collection, though, like Leah, Julie had been surprised and angry when she first found it. Somewhere along the line Julie knew that he knew that she knew, but the topic was never mentioned. He kept it all in the basement, and the basement was his.

“Well, what’d you let her clean it out for? Shock value? No one wants to see that side of their ‘happily married’ parents.” She made finger quotes in the air. The smell of eggs and peppers filled the room.

“She’s a grown woman with dying parents; there’s no more room for illusions.”

“What’s wrong with you? You dying, too?”

“No, but I will. And she’ll have to teach her daughters how to have realistic expectations.”

“You couldn’t teach her this, I don’t know, before she was a so-called ‘grown woman’? Before she got married, too? You couldn’t teach her to build realistic expectations rather than let her build whatever the hell kind of idea she liked just to leave her jaded? Jaded parents leave angry kids, Julie, you should know that.” She shook her head and flipped her omelete.

Julie bit the retort on her tongue. She knew Norene had a point, and she didn’t think she needed to remind Norene who had actually raised a kid. What Norene didn’t understand was that you never stop parenting

Leah came back up the stairs with another box and again took it outside. The older women ate their omeletes in silence. Norene eventually went down to help Leah clean out the basement den while Julie set about deep cleaning the rest of the house.

When Leah said goodbye that day, with the promise of returning tomorrow to finish the job, her words were just as easily faked as they were after the disposal of the first box. Julie let it slide, seeing the confusion and anger in her daughter’s face and the way her

brow casted shadow down her nose. But what was she expecting, really? Julie furrowed her brow in irritation as she watched her daughter walk down the drive toward her car. Like hell she'd never seen porn before. Did her daughter really think herself so high-and-mighty that her husband didn't have his own collection? A box in the basement, a file on his computer, a hidden photo album on his phone—he had *something, somewhere*. Julie was as sure of that as she was that Leah would have another box of Roger's in the recycling bin tomorrow morning. She wouldn't be surprised if Leah had her own resources to get off.

Julie went to bed that night reading her own form of pornography. The romance novel was barely explicit enough to go beyond implying sexual encounters, but the exaggerated romance scenes brought more satisfaction than orgasm would have. This sort of fantasy was, in essence, the same as Roger's had been. It fulfilled a desire not often met by the other party in her marriage, and now that that other party was effectively out of commission, she no longer felt that twinge of shame she once had reading the novels in front of her husband. There was no need to defend her desire, no need to ward off his derision. Just Julie, the stained glass lampshade illuminating the pages, and a fictional romance more real to her than hers had been in life. At least for a short while.

She slept in the next morning. The sound of *Chopsticks* being played on her piano gently roused her from sweet dreams, upon dressing she found who she thought she would seated at her bench.

“Aren't you supposed to be helping my daughter clean out porn?”

“Darling, you're up! Leah just went back to the car for something.”

As if on cue they both looked toward the window. Leah carried a hefty cardboard box up the driveway and instead of heading toward the front door she walked around the side of the house and disappeared. Norene's *Chopsticks* slowed to a halt. They looked at each other. In the same motion, they moved through the kitchen to the sliding back door.

Her back to her audience, Leah stood bent over the fire pit, lighter in hand. In the pit stood a few pieces of wood and some kindling, set with perfect girl-scout training. A fire

caught easily in the breezeless sun of the midmorning.

Julie led the way through the screen door. She stopped at the edge of the concrete slab making up the back patio, hand in her pockets, some ten feet from Leah in the yard. She watched quietly as Leah opened the box she'd been carrying and started feeding magazines into the flames. Julie noticed the two other boxes around her, fresh out of the trash. Norene sauntered up behind Leah, plucking a magazine out of one of Roger's boxes before plopping herself down into one of the reclining lawn chairs set around the fire pit. Leah, startled, watched as her aunt dramatically opened a vintage magazine with a Marilyn Monroe-esque woman on the front. A half-dozen photos dropped out of the magazine into her lap. For a brief second Norene's face matched Leah's in surprise, then she whistled.

"Good Lord, Julie!" A wide grin grew on her cheeks, causing the wrinkles in her face to disappear into the stretch of her mouth as she brought the pictures closer to her eyes.

"Oh, God." Julie sunk her forehead into her hand.

"When was this, the 80s? Late 70s, maybe? No, no, how old are you again? I've never seen so much skin, baby! Well, I definitely have, but these pictures, I will admit, rival my Vegas days for sure."

"Vegas? Closest you ever got to Vegas was Amarillo."

Norene clicked her tongue. "You might be right, but you should have seen my photos at the Cadillac Ranch."

Leah did not move. She could see explicit outlines of her mother's pre-Leah form through the backs of the photos as the sun shone through them. She turned her gaze to watch a magazine turn black in the fire.

Julie held her hand out as she approached and waited patiently for Norene to put the photos in her hand. Early 80s, she was right. She put them in her pocket. "You've got a lot of porn here, Leah," she stated simply.

Leah stared down into the grass. Julie threw another magazine into the fire. Leah took this as permission, and began feeding the fire two at a time. "I found *his* stache in his

toolbox in the garage.”

For more than an hour, the women burned magazines. Leah was as hungry to burn them as the fire was to consume them, her eyes alight like the flames she'd started. Julie resigned herself to placing a magazine in when there was room on her side of the fire and watching Leah out of the corner of her eye. Norene reclined in her lawn chair and flipped absently through the pages, throwing them in when she was bored of them. She lit a cigarette. They found no more of Julie's nudes, and by noon they were all sweating from the fire and the scorching sun.

Leah spoke. “I thought when we were married this stuff would just go away.” She shredded another magazine, crumpling the pages before throwing it into the flames. Julie watched her daughter stare into the fire. “What didn't I give him? I thought we were supposed to be enough for each other.” She looked to her mother.

“Did you think I was enough for your father?” Julie asked.

Leah buried her face in her hands, wiping sweat and quiet tears from her face.

“Well?” Julie crinkled the magazine in her hand and leaned forward to look into her daughter's face. Norene found this moment ripe to be intruded upon. She tossed a full- and free-chested woman onto the fire. “Well, let's not act like everything's gone tits-up here ladies. So what if your husband thinks about other girls in frankly uncreative costumes? So what, your husband did the same thing 'til the day he died?” She tossed in her cigarette. “You either end up burying the things you should've burned or burning the things you should've buried. Bad habits don't die. People do. We can sit here and burn magazines all day, 'till we're full of sweat and you think you're satisfied, but nothing changes 'till you decide if you're gonna burn or bury the husband, Leah.”

Leah couldn't take it; she laughed. Shaking her head, she got up and disappeared around the side of the house. Julie set her jaw, shook her head toward Norene, and walked back inside. Norene sat at peace, flipping through magazines and tossing them in as the fire grew low. She could hear Chopin's *Waltz in C Sharp Minor* through the screen door. She lit another cigarette.



On Chocolate

Molly Thompson

My friend and I were talking about chocolate chips today, the dark, bittersweet chocolate you revel in when you eat bagels or cookies or your mom's special pancakes after Sunday mass. They are a thing to be wondered at—in the way chocolate chips suspend themselves in dough, the way they are kneaded and melted somewhat, the way they tempt you to eat a second, third, even fourth scone. Chocolate chips are really the only thing worth eating in trail mix, leaving you picking through the mix in the palm of your hand. You eat the peanuts and the pretzels first so you can savor the heavenly depth of a semi-sweet chocolate chip last, swirling it around on your tongue.

I moved out of my family's home a year ago. I moved out to go to college, like all my siblings had done, and I was prepared to make the thirty minutes I put between us count. I had no intention of seeing either of them anytime soon. It had been a truly exhausting summer, the summer before I left, and it left me wanting nothing more than to not see them. I worked forty hours a week and spent all of my free time “out.” I was not home often. Things had grown tense between us, as if the empty space left by my four older siblings made the air thick and muggy. I know our absences are tangible for them, empty beds as characters in their daily rituals.

We do not get along well. We have not since I was very little. It stems from our categorical differences in values and our very likeness in temperament—our need to be right, the vigor with which we argue, and the way we cut with words.

It was my birthday last year that my mother sent me a note and my gift. It was a short note that I read quickly, and the gift was a bagel. I thought it was funny. My good friend was there too, and she found it uproariously funny.

My mother used to go to Panera every so often when I was younger to get bagels. At Panera, if you go on a Tuesday, you can get thirteen bagels for the price of twelve, not a

particularly compelling discount, but one my mother found thrilling. These bagel days were always moments of excitement for my family, the novelty of purchase and selection. She would always try to remember what we wanted, but there were five of us kids and she would never get enough of the chocolate chip ones. She would always try some “fun” new flavors like cranberry walnut or sesame pecan, leaving us children to scrounge for the prized sweetness of chocolate chips. Susie, my older sister, would wait in superiority to take her blueberry bagel (of which my mom would get two or three) (what a waste!) and my brother would grab a cinnamon crunch. But Oh! The wonder of a chocolate chip bagel toasted with butter in the summer when no school is to distract from the simple peace of a Panera bagel to be enjoyed at home. Those breakfasts, when she would come home laden with bagels were always happy respites from the often volatile nature of our family meals (fighting!) (politics!) (admonishments for having boyfriends!).

I remember being, when I saw the bagel, for some reason, particularly enraged. She had given me a blueberry bagel and it made me genuinely furious. There was a snap, the snap of a memory so pure corrupted, the anger of something important about you being forgotten. The idea that my mother sent me a bagel for my nineteenth birthday was nothing to the fact that she sent me the wrong kind. I remember telling my friend the bagel was the last damn straw, that this was it. She laughed at me, which is only fair. It is rather embarrassing being caught to be furious about a bagel, to be hurt by something so trite and childish. To cry that someone forgot your favorite kind. Even then, I knew how pathetic I was being. I knew it was ridiculous and absurd to cry over a damn bagel, and, in case, I might have forgotten, my friend was not shy to tell me it was a little funny. She smiled at me slyly and asked if I wanted to throw it at the wall, give the bagel a what-for.

I did.

I threw the damn bagel at the wall and I pummeled it with my hands. I smeared it in my palm and it rubbed off on me. The blueberries melted against my skin, and I realized I was an idiot.

It was a chocolate chip bagel.

It was a moment of hazed hilarity. We laughed until we cried and it was all feverishly absurd. The bagel did not erase the past and mend a fractured relationship, but it was a good reminder that sometimes our vision is self-fulfilling and blurry. Sometimes your life looks like shit and everyone is against you and everything is real and heavy and pressing, but sometimes you realize it's just a chocolate chip bagel.

The note was actually quite nice. I still have it pinned to my wall.

Today my friend and I talked about her partner and how even while they are dating, she thinks about moments she will miss if they break up. She calls them chocolate chips, the moment in which there is a bittersweet realization that this is the best part, that to appreciate it is to know that even now it is melting away.



The Princess Gets up to Answer the Door

Roxy Rico

The princess lived hidden inside a cavity deep within the castle, where no one could touch her with their eyes. The exterior of the monumental structure dripped so with rotting vines as to resemble a weeping giant. Endless layers of trees warped their way around the castle in a threatening embrace of swirled branches and shadowed leaves. When the sun broke through this clutter of nature, it reached the arched windows of the castle as a faint memory of light. In the belly of the castle, the princess let all of time drift away from her. The space she occupied in the castle was cavernous, with bejeweled walls that turned into black sky at an indistinct height. The ornaments in the walls no longer remembered how to shine, so distant in their memory was the caress of light of any kind. The floor was a shattered expanse of mirrored glass, an unending sheet that reflected the room and cast it upside down in ugly fragments. The only doorway had been locked from both the outside and the inside. The princess could not for the life of her remember why she was hiding, only that she must remain hidden. At times, she thought she remembered there being windows, some dreamy memory of silver sunlight coursing through the room, but years of running her hands along the walls in search of them only ended in her clutching her bruised and bloodied hands to her chest. And then there was the dust; blankets of it, without end or beginning, draping themselves over everything in the room. It seemed to come from everywhere, falling from the lofty void above and seeping up through the cracks in the floor, engulfing the princess in the process. There was not much she could do but let herself drown in it, gulping it down her throat until she felt a throbbing pain.

This darkness and dust, these bedazzled walls, the stretches of time and space that grasped at her were all she knew, all she had ever known, until one morning—or night, the princess could never be sure of the time—there came a knock at the door. The sound of it crossed the room like a great flash of starlight and caught the princess in its bright

beam. A thousand windows were flung open in the princess' mind and she was overcome with sights of unending hope. Her body practically levitated off the floor to answer the door. And in the moments it took her to reach it, the princess wondered what she might find on the other side. Perhaps the hands of angels were calling her forth, come to greet her with soft gestures and a pale touch. Visions of a world where all is clean and unrotten danced before the princess' eyes. A pulsing vortex that would suck her out of the empty room and up into a flurry of twirling snowflakes and candied skies. The person who is supposed to come for you does. And they are right on time, just as they promised they would be. A meadow golden and warm and always open. Her hand reached for the door's lock and undid it. Echoes of song and twinkling laughter. Places where nothing hurt and no one could touch her with their eyes. She grasped the handle. Cool wind streaming through her hair and her limbs and her veins. There is no need to turn your back to the rapture. Then, she opened the door on what felt like forever.



Sweetheart of the Supermarket

Firyal Bawab

The deli aisle is a fluorescent-lit hallway to hell, if it were so that the inferno's gateway stood behind the wall of stacked cardboard boxes at the end. The boxes' insides carry rows of room-temperature chocolate milk cartons. I barely make them out in a fog that fills the place. *The Fog*, the one that has always been here. It reflects the light the way a rubber knife might glint under the sun.

I lost my mom again. Or she lost me; or for the sake of renouncing the blame game, we lost each other. She is not like the idea in my head—wherever it came from—of how moms are supposed to be. She strolls forward with a lack of hesitation akin to absent-mindedness, only slowing down to turn some grape jellies in her hand before hurrying on. There is an ambiguous feeling I have yet to articulate as my annoyance, she does not look back to see that I crouched on my knees to compare which peanut butter paste, from a selection a couple rows below the jams, would best compliment her pick. I only notice her absence when the arm I stick out to hand her the peanut butter with starts to ache.

What I think to myself next—in not so many bold words—is to hell with it. Mamma must have lost me on purpose. If she does not want me, then I do not want her either. I will not try relocating her if she will not even worry herself sick about me.

I waddle, dressed by Mama in bulky boots and a bulging puffer coat, in wide zigzags from one aisle's end to another's beginning. I pass the chocolate racks to the potato chips area, then past blue, yellow, and green cotton candy popcorns. The Fog hangs thick and low inside the store, as though the artificial fluffs were flung out of their containers into space. Repetitive pop tunes from unseen speakers diligently choke the air. Silence does not breathe. The music loops back to a synthesized chorus when an oak trunk bumps me out of my path.

I do not see well—neither more or less than I did before losing company—but I am suddenly made acutely aware of it since going off on my own. The trunk, rising from the

Fog as though it were only an extension of a greater organism, vanishes right back into the cloudy whiteness after the collision. I get a last glimpse of its foot, a hard-boiled stump with tentacle roots, as it heaves itself off the ground into oblivion.

I am almost knocked to the ground. I recover from a near-tipping guised with an awkward ballet maneuver: arms out to the sides with fingers spread, tottering on one leg, the other leg raised in a right angle. A moment—then returned equilibrium. I almost forgot about the walking trees. They are stiff but never still, always striding left and right and up and down the polished wood floors. They are quiet except for the rustles and scratching sounds their leaves and branches orchestrate. I cannot see their leaves and upper branches, though, because their tops tower above the Fog—the noise is my only evidence. I have to be careful since the moving trees do not see runts on the floor like me. An icy mist, intermingling with the Fog, crawls the floorboards as I walk on, past a section. Without glancing its way, I quickly turn unto another corner to avoid the cold.

Seeing the tree's sturdy leg reminded me mine are not. My legs are aching. I wish the fans were turned on. Surely there are fans here, somewhere. Then the propellers would disperse the Fog, and I could see. There are adults who work here that should be able to switch them on. Why aren't they switched on? Why don't the adults switch them on—

“Hi. Hey, you.”

The music in the air is tinny, like pots clanking.

“...”

“Hey, I'm talking to you. Can't you talk? Hey. Hi. Hey.” He's behind me. He is poking into my shoulder incessantly.

“What?” I say. I didn't notice there was another kid nearby. In my blind wandering, the candy aisles slipped past me, and I was now standing at the head of the dairy sect. A shaft of bright, white light shines down from the stretched-out fridge, crammed with juice and yogurt, on my right. Opposite it, tinted glass bottles on metal racks hold dark liquids, just out of the light's reach. When I turn to face him my sides swap, right becoming left and

left becoming right.

He is a buck-toothed boy runtier than me. He has a ratty face and unkempt fur for hair. I am lanky for my age. We both wear glasses. “Did you come here with your mom?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” Then, because I want him to taste how abrasive and interrogatory he is, “Where’s your mom?”

The question does not appear to affect him like I want. But his shrug is extra aloof; his eyes roll around. “I’m getting stuff for her. Do you want to race?”

“What? No, thanks.”

“Why? Is it because you’re slow?”

“No, it’s—I’m not slow.”

“Then c’mon, I’m bored. Let’s race. The finish line is at the end, at the mirror.”

He points behind my left shoulder, where he means at the end of the fridge. A mirror propped up vertically besides the fridge where the aisle should end makes it look like the plastic shelves bursting with cheese and lactose go on forever. I look back at the boy, focusing on his face for the first time. He interprets my stare as the signal to count down: one, two... *three*.

We simultaneously take off a split second before he finishes mouthing ‘three’. Our background runs past us, then around us. Glowing wine and white ribbons curve around my head before they dissolve into my boots. The world is a neon blur whizzing past the edges of my sclera. My bulky coat melts away from my body. I zone in on the infinite-looking finish point, bowing my head down until I see nothing but my breath.

We cross at the same time, stomping some steps past the mirror. None of us speak as we regain our composure. The adrenaline thaws something between us, I think, and I feel comfortable enough to laugh with him when he starts to. Then one of us says something

and the other retorts, and the boy's cheeks abruptly pinch pink with indignation. He gets upset, so I follow suit, and one push to absorb a preceding one leads to a brawl. We are a post-celebratory ball of hair-tugging and arm-biting. It is another race, one towards the floor in which the winner loses.

I hope my mom did not see me like that, I think to myself. I walk away from the dairy aisle, readjusting my puffer and pulling at my shirt's sleeves from inside the jacket's wrists. I comb disheveled hair with my fingertips. The boy is out of sight. I am almost sure I won the fight. He will not admit it, but I did. My mom will believe me, and his mom might believe whatever lies he tells her.

I pause beside a pillar punctured with hollow cubes for no particular reason. Then again, I was also initially walking with no particular reason, so it suddenly seems biased to me to point out the lack of reason only in the lapsed intervals. But why are the intervals lapsed? Why not the motion? I think it's because that is the structural design of the supermarket. Its spacious maze blueprint makes anyone feel embarrassed to stand than to stroll. And when we stroll, we look at all the products, constantly sifting through them. They built it like that on purpose, because they—the producers—want us to buy. Even the things we do not need they want us to buy, because they want us to think we want them. We over-consume. It is all a scheme, a big fat scheme, to rob me of my dough once I start making it. Well, we'll see about that, now that I've figured them all out. Ha-ha! Those filthy capitalist pigs. Capitalists! Capitalists! Screw'em! Socialism is the future. Socialism should work now, now that people are smarter. Right? More for the people...but not communism. Nooo, not that, of course not. It doesn't work. It'd be heresy, unnatural to go against our ambitious nature. Our natural need for competition. Competition is of the utmost importance. Competition. Competition. Without it, why would anyone do anything?

I beam a bit, floating on my intellectuality. I feel like I could switch on a fan myself if I were taller. But then if I were taller, I would not need to turn them on. I would tower like a tree above the Fog. It only makes sense we all outgrow the Fog eventually— that's the nice

thing. I go over my contemplations again. Now that I have them all figured out...I pout. I grumble, and pout some more. It does not sound as clever as before.

A familiar mist twirls at the tip of my shoes, pulling me out of my reverie.

The aisle I just raced through opens up to the frozen foods section. It is a large corner of apartments composed of transparent glass cubicles that are all fogged up. The music doesn't reach this part of the supermarket; it's nothing more than a faraway din. Pizza boxes' shadows behind the windows are smudged. I do not have a strong sense of direction, but I thought I avoided this chilly part of the supermarket somewhere towards the back.

The paths of the section are peppered with frost-bitten, scraggly trees. In their endless walking they are bound to wind up in the frozen foods section. Sometimes they'll make several rounds here, coming out then going back, until eventually their roots harden to the likes of stone and no longer carry them out. All the trees must end up here. Icicles grow out of the bark to sleep on naked branches. No bright, white light emanates from here. The matte mist, hugging the trees, glints under fluorescent bulbs like a rubber knife does under the— oh, is that my mom?

She strolls out with a cart from behind one of the apartments. "Mamma! Mamma! I'm here!" I say, bouncing towards her. She filled up the cart with quite some stuff. I clasp onto the railing of the vehicle as she walks on, out of the frozen foods. "Did you get ice-cream?" I ask her.

She rummages through the pile of items without stopping. "Here," she says, pulling out a paper-wrapped popsicle. She got my favorite flavor, red and sweet. The treat passes from her hand to mine, but stumbles, and falls to the floor.

"It's fine, I got it. I'm sure it's fine," I say. I crouch and pick up the popsicle from beside my mom's roots, where it fell. "Doesn't feel broken," I say. We walk to the register together. I help her place all the things we are going to buy on the conveyor belt. Then she turns around with the empty cart and walks back to continue shopping, towards an aisle. The jams and spreads aisle.

“Mamma, we forgot to get peanut butter to go with the jam,” I say, clinging onto the cart. She nods. I suck on my popsicle, careful not to let it snap under the force of my tongue. I think she even forgot to buy the jam. She forgets sometimes, though these days more often. I will not mention it, though. It is not necessary; I will spare her the hassle and slip a jar of mashed grape into the cart when she is not looking.



A Diving Dove

Stella Stocker

She drowned on a Thursday afternoon. I was distracted stroking the craggy pebbles and tracing graffitied curses on the chunks of concrete that made up the shitty shores of Little John's lake when it happened. I saw her pale hand flutter above the water's surface for a second before she disappeared. Like a goodbye, like a dove, like a funeral for the girl I once knew. On the drive there we saw a pair of tighty whities suspended on the signage for the lake. I slammed on the brakes when she cackled in the passenger seat, clutching her sides in laughter that looked like it hurt. I clenched my jaw and stared at the underwear.

The car huffed impatiently as I pressed on the gas and she stammered next to me with that painfully wide grin, saying that the underwear had reminded her of one of the many class trips to the tepid waters of Little John's in our youth. "To observe the wildlife" my ass. It was an excuse for the teachers to get high and stumble around like toddlers with that earthy scent clinging to their clothes. We used to pants the other kids until we got in trouble, made a game of it, all that and other childish mischief that settles in the corners of memory, clumped together with the smell of home baked apple pie and spelling test anxiety.

I parked by the shore and watched the gentle waves of the small lake crest then fall flat again as she crawled over the cupholders to settle in the backseat of my car. I could see her throwing pleading glances to the rear view mirror occasionally between shimmying into a bikini. I sighed, low and slow. She had already spent the half hour drive trying to convince me to bring a suit, swim with her just this once before we parted ways for college. She knows that I don't swim, but we compromised and I brought a suit with me, just in case I changed my mind. I knew I wouldn't; whenever I let my feet brush through the green tinted water of Little John's I felt my soul freeze in my throat and all my thoughts carried away on the waves.

As she stepped into the lake, I can remember so clearly how the frogs sang, deep enough

to shake the pebbles beneath my fingers. She didn't seem to notice the trembling earth and was submerged up to her shoulders in the water, calling out playfully for me to "come in, the water is just fine!". "And so is the shore!" I shouted before diverting my attention to the rocks. She scoffed. I knew then that something was wrong-the lake was silent except for her huff. I glanced up and there she was, submerged up to her neck. There was something missing from her eyes. I stood to race into the water, but I just couldn't do it. She smiled at me, and she was there in that smile, knowing and radiant like she always was. She started to sink into the water as if the mud was sucking her down and the last I saw of her was that pale hand waving at me. I stood there on the shore until the frogs started to sing and the waves lapped at the craggy rocks again. I haven't been back to Little John's Lake since. I could never go back without feeling that chilling silence in my bones and seeing that pale, pale hand fluttering above the waves.



On Visiting Old Homes

Molly Thompson

It was winter when I moved out. I remember because the trips from the car to the apartment were short bursts of frigid air, the kind that frost your fingers into curled shrimp. That's how I remember my first winter: by the cold in my bones and my runny nose—slightly drippy, always. I learned to wear flannels with long sleeves, using the cuffs as tissues that rub your nose slightly raw in a way I like to think endearing. My mother used to keep a crumpled up tissue in the waistband of her stretchy pants. It would get soggy and balled up and she would forget it was there. In the winter you might look over and see her waistband lumpy with the outlines of five or six balled up tissues dotting her waistline. She was always moving then, lively in action and decided in thought; she was a force to be reckoned with. She used to be a doctor, bustling and ordering others around; a woman who got what she wanted. She retired shortly after I was born and ran the house like her hospital: sterile, spotless, and efficient. Dinner was always ready at 5.

I eat dinner late now. I eat whenever I remember I am hungry and have time to cut up some veggies and throw on some rice. I live like the women in rom coms when they think they have scared away their lover and spend a week or two wallowing in self-pity. But it's not bad, I like it. The way pb and js become snacks and yogurt can be dinner. There is something decidedly rebellious about rebelling from no one but your own notions on lifestyle. I live alone now, which is something I never thought possible, but I enjoy it. I like the way I can vacuum at night and leave the dishes until the morning. I like watching t.v. naked and I like that I have to leave to see people. I love the ritual of it all, of getting ready to leave. I play music as I pull on my jeans and a turtleneck and a sweater on top.

I love turtlenecks, now, the way they pull over your thumbs and up to your neck, a shield of comfort that irons you out. They are the kind my mom would try to stuff me in when I was young. Back then, I would fight nothing the way I fought layering. Jeans under dresses, turtlenecks under v-necks—the shame they bring to middle-school girls is unthink-

able! In sixth grade I blamed the green long sleeve under a rhinestone sweater for the fact Jesse Rogers didn't kiss me at the end of Ellyn's party. Looking back, I can only assume it was the rhinestone sweater that must have pushed him over the edge.

It is winter now, again, and my father is coming to drive me back. My coffee has grown cold and there is a thin film on the top. I don't smoke, but at this moment I wish I did. I would stand on my balcony, cigarette in hand (warming my fingers) and wait for his car to turn the corner. The smoke would curl around my figure as I leaned forward, and the scene would be terribly melodramatic. I am cleaning now: tossing laundry into the hamper and straightening my bed sheet, anxiously watering my plant. I pour too much water in, and, cussing, I hurry to the sink as water drips from the drainage hole. Plants are weird like that. You give them too much water and it just might kill them. I want them to survive so badly that the second the soil feels dry I shower them with affection and water. Being loved is like that— being choked by excess. I read now, when I get the urge to overwater my plants. If only I smoked cigarettes, that would be the perfect distraction. Plants are so cavalier with their desire to live. But I don't smoke.

I have friends that do. One time I bought my friend a pack of Marlboro reds because she is six months younger than me. It's weird, giving your friends something that might make them sick. It feels kind of twisted, but their smile and thanks makes it feel fine, as if killing them with their consent smoothes over the situation. I sat on the balcony with her while she puffed. Her fingers got sooty and the wind blew the scent into our faces. The cigarette split between the filter and the body, and tobacco spilled out of the seam like guts on the side of the road from a deer hit by a truck. She took one last inhale and ground the butt into the railing. She looked devastatingly beautiful, the grayed tinge that illuminates smokers made her look radiant. Sometimes people say the beautiful die young, but I think those that die young are beautiful. It is as if everyone has a set amount of beauty they are allowed in their lives, and those that live longer simply have beauty stretched for them, like silly putty pulled thin by a child. Thinly dispersed beauty to last a long time.

My dad is here.

“Hey Dad— how is the office?” I swing my legs into the footwell and throw a bag of dirty laundry into the backseat. I have to pay for laundry, four quarters each load. It seems nothing short of an injustice.

He sits behind the wheel, hunched in a way that makes a six foot five man look like an elderly woman on her way to six AM mass.

“The office is good, my cases are going well,” he says, turning off my street. “We are getting really busy this time of year. You know, we are always looking for new interns, it might be a really great experience for you. Definitely opens a lot of doors, career wise.” He sneaks a look at me as he merges onto I-35W. “Patty’s son just started last month. I could pull a few strings.” His eyes looked ahead, shoulders still hunched. This was an old speech of his, one he sprinkles into all of our meetings lately, usually followed by a chorus of changing majors, coming home, starting over.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.” Several moments pass as I remind myself dinner will be short. I won’t even stay the night. Breathe.

“I finished a painting the other day,” I blurt out.

“That’s great honey, a great hobby.”

He takes the exit and turns onto a freshly repaved road. Businesses turn to residential neighborhoods, Suburbia sprawling before us, as we drive straight to her heart.

“You know, artistic thinkers do very well in the legal field. Great hours, comfortable pay, a great career for any young person.”

Houses glide past as cruise control pushes us closer. My fingers tap the pleather console that separates my dad and I. He looks older now, older than I remember him looking. Lines push deep into his face and down the sides of his neck. They look like deep cracks in sagging asphalt. But it’s not just age, there is a definite sag, something deeper than the passing of years.

The car purrs softly as we take the driveway at a slant, one wheel mounting the dip at

a time. The engine sputters off and just as I open the door—

“Honey, just think about it, okay?”

I smile wryly and close the door, scampering from the cold to the stoop, up the stairs into the warmth of the house.

“Hi mom, how are you?” I slip off my shoes and put them on the rack, dirty side down.

“Maura?” Her fingers fly across the top of her knitting project. Scarves and hats and mittens nobody will wear. Boney legs tucked under her like a hen on her brood. For as long as I have been alive, her fingers never rest. When I was younger, knives would flash like pistols in a western movie. She was always making a thousand things— blueberry pie and a pot roast for dinner. Packed lunch of leftover sandwiches and apple slices for me and my dad. Her legs would spin around the kitchen at a hundred miles an hour. On Sundays they would briskly walk through church. Every person seemed to have something to tell her, or ask her, or ask from her and after mass she would run in the woods near the lake. The only times she would sit still was during bible study on Tuesdays.

When I was very little, she would let me come. I would sit next to her in the large booth at Panera with crayons and a packed bagel with cream cheese (“we have bagels at home, we won’t buy any here”). She would sometimes let me braid her hair and Linda would sneak me corners of her cream cheese danish. The group of women would chat over coffee with a loose interest in faith, but more in a “God has a plan” way than a strict reading of scripture. But one year, when my mom was pregnant and I was six, the club prayed much more than normal. My mom was beautiful in her pregnancy. I would braid her hair and she would cut my bagels the way I liked— sliced down, not across, so I had a bunch of bagel circles. But one day, she stopped. They prayed through the whole session and stayed late. I was given extra coloring sheets and asked to stay quiet. Mom didn’t want her hair braided. Linda kept shoving more and more danish on my plate, by the end of the hour I had eaten half her pastry and a couple sips of her coffee (something my mother never let me

do). Cindy squeezed my hand.

“Honey, what classes are you taking?” my dad asks, putting a pot of water on the stove and looking back at me expectantly. My mother sits in her chair, fingers moving, body still.

“Just some classes for my major— contemporary art theory, composition and light, hyperrealism, and a writing course.” I tack on the last one quickly, almost dying with my breath.

“That’s great— a technical writing course? Is it persuasive or critical writing?”

“It’s actually creative writing,” I lie. I don’t know why. It is actually called “the art of explaining things: an introduction to technical writing and communication.”

My dad puts pasta in the water and starts to warm up some prego. My mother used to hate canned sauces. Canned anything, really. She used to hold nothing in higher disdain than premade, canned, or boxed food. When I was younger she used to make the most amazing spaghetti sauce. It would simmer all day in the kitchen as she chopped and minced and spiced. The whole house would dance in its scent. I would sneak spoonfuls of it and she would bat me away telling me that I would spoil my appetite, that I wouldn’t be hungry for dinner, that I wasn’t savoring it: the way I slurped it up like soup.

Now she sits in the corner, slightly sweaty beneath layers of sweaters, a blanket atop her legs. She doesn’t say much, just sits there sewing.

My dad is serving up the pasta as I sit at the table, he slops it onto the plate like a lunch lady in elementary school. I remember my first school lunch. My mother was no longer pregnant. She stopped making me lunches after her bump disappeared. I remember standing in the line and deciding if I wanted cauliflower or not. The lunch lady waited impatiently. I had never had it before. It looked gross, like grayed broccoli that’s little leaves turned soft and round. She asked again if I wanted any and I said yes. I immediately regretted my choice. I didn’t even try it when I sat down. I pushed it with my fork to the corner of my plate where it sat undisturbed until the end of lunch period. The state of the canned fruit would have horrified my mother. The next day I remembered to say “no cauliflower

please” as my tray was passed to the next lady.

“Honey, you haven’t touched your pasta. Your appetite isn’t what it used to be. Maybe you should come home for a while.” My dad refills my milk. “The room downstairs has a nice bed, and it might be good for you to stay here a while, just to get back on your feet again.” My dad butters bread for my mom, who is obediently eating the prego pasta. Her eyes are bright. After dinner she will sit in her room and read for hours.

“I actually have to get back to the city tonight. I have a lot of work to do. I have to photograph my painting. I am submitting it for a competition. You should see it, dad, I think you might really like it.” He wouldn’t. It is bold: splashed red colors and greened shadows. A crying nude with rounded brushstrokes. It is softened peaches and bruised plums and wilted greens. It is jagged lines jutting to the middle of the canvas. It is emptiness in busied lines.

My mom doesn’t talk much during dinner. It is a bad day. She has them, good days and bad days. When I was younger she would lock herself in her room for hours: reading and reading and reading. My dad and I would eat sandwiches. He would cut the crust off for me, something my mom never did. She said it was shameful, wasteful to get rid of the best part, frivolous. She became herself again, a couple months later. She was back on her feet and chopping, cooking, baking, not a scrap of food wasted. She had a collection of spatulas of varying sizes to ensure she wouldn’t waste a drop of anything. When she started using them again, I knew everything would be okay, I could breathe again. I moved out at sixteen and I took a spatula with me, a bright yellow one. And when I left with that yellow spatula she took to reading again. And knitting. And silence.

My dad drove me home after dinner. I kissed him goodbye and lugged my laundry up the stairs. Beds are a good place for shaking sobs, the kind that take hold of your body. The kind that grip your lungs from the bottom and squeeze up, the action of one getting the last squeeze from a tube of toothpaste. There is an emptiness, when one is done crying. When there is nothing left to cry. The only thing left to do is water one’s plants.



Weeding

Giuliana Piccione.

Doubt thou the stars are fire;

Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love.

-Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

There's a million items to check off a to-do list when you buy a house, Timothy thought. Maybe this fixer-upper hadn't been a good choice for first time homeowners, but he and Kate—just a few months after their small but intricate wedding—had wanted a place to call home and found it in this cozy old bungalow. The run-down and proud Craftsman had needed a lot of restoration and work.

Kate was a planner. That was why she was good at her job, priding herself on her accurate and timely accounting. She always seemed to have everything under control, every detail thought of and organized. That's why each weekend the couple drove from their tiny apartment out to the suburbs and focused on a specific area of the house; cleaning, painting, repairing, and renovating. The kitchen had taken several months, since neither of them were able to take much time off from work, but now they were getting close to moving in. According to her schedule, today they would work in the garage and garden.

“Could you open the garage door?” asked Kate, broom in hand, standing over a pile of dirt, leaves, and God-knows-what. Her slippery hazel hair was already escaping from its bun after less than a half hour's work. Timothy would have rather hired someone to clean out the rubbish, but Kate, a long-time home renovation enthusiast, enjoyed working, and what with the mortgage payments and their income, it didn't make sense to spend the money.

“Why pay someone else when we can just do it ourselves?” she often said. Tim knew that asking or even paying somebody to do something for her did not come easily.

He noisily tugged the hinged wooden door along the rusty tracks until it stuck—since of course, the motor didn't work (it was lucky they were both even tall enough to reach it)—and brought over a broken lawn waste barrel that had come with the house.

“Thanks, honey.”

With the light coming in, they could see the bare wooden framework of the dusty walls clearly, and a piece of cardboard stapled near the eaves.

“Do you think there's a window up there?” asked Timothy, wiping dust off on his old jeans. They'd never seen the back of the garage clearly because it was so thickly overgrown with vines. He dragged the wooden ladder they'd found in the basement over, and Kate held it steady as he climbed up. They'd learned not to trust the rickety old thing after he'd fallen against a freshly painted wall while climbing up to reach the ceiling once, adding new meaning to the phrase “painting clothes.”

Kate glanced at her dusty old running shoes, looking down to rest her neck a moment with her hands around the ladder. The ancient concrete was actually in pretty good condition, she thought, and hadn't cracked or settled dramatically. She'd seen many home renovations shows where an unexpected expense like that put strain on the whole project. A bit of green in the corner distracted her from the relative merits of this concrete, and she narrowed her eyes to examine it. It was a tiny vine crawling in from the outside. She'd seen this vine before. She'd seen them in her father's rigid planned garden growing up.

What was it he called them? Oh, that's right: a pestilence and a plague. The invasive plants grew a foot a minute, he'd say, pulling them out by the fistful. They choked the tomato plants before you even noticed them, irritating her father to no end, but Kate always had liked them. They were just trying to survive, after all. Their leaves were so tiny and thin, she couldn't help but feel sorry for them. “It's only a weed if it's unwanted,” she'd say. And I want it. She looked back up at Timothy.

“Got it,” he said, pulling the old piece of cardboard through the staples. “Hand me the scissors, will you?”

Kate handed him the tool and he clipped through the weeds woven on the outside of the building.

“Guess we’ll have to replace the window,” he said, gesturing with the piece of cardboard. Light fell through the window, surrounding his pale face looking down at her, dust motes like a halo around his head. It reminded her of when they’d first met. She had sat in the audience at their university theater, watching him under the stage lights, a desperate and dashing Hamlet. They called it their play ever since, joking that it’d been good luck it hadn’t been a performance of Macbeth. He was a classic leading man, Kate always said—tall, dark, and handsome. I know that’s where he really belongs, she thought, acting on the stage or on screen.

“O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?” Timothy stretched a large hand down to Kate. He knew she was thinking of that evening at the theater and tried to make a joke of *Romeo and Juliet’s* famous balcony scene. “Deny thy father and refuse thy name”—he paused for dramatic effect while Kate flinched— “or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”

“Um... Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair?”

“Nope, wrong story, my love.” He kissed the top of her head and started to descend the ladder.

Kate cleared her throat. It was time to have another hard conversation. She’d been waiting for the right moment, and it couldn’t be more clear that it was now. She was determined to do the right thing.

“What are we doing here?”

“Cleaning the garage for our DeLorean, of course,” he joked (they shared a 2010 Honda Accord).

Kate didn’t laugh. “You shouldn’t be here—”

“What?”

“Working at the community theater and teaching drama at a grade school? You be-

long on Broadway or in LA or something.”

“This again? Kate, our lives are here.” He stood in front of her and placed what he hoped was a reassuring hand on her shoulder. His grey eyes were calm, and she looked away. She had to make him see—she had to take this seriously.

“I think we should sell the house.”

Timothy’s feet were suddenly very, very cold. He wasn’t sure if it was anxiety or joy or frustration—sometimes he wondered whether any of his emotions were real. He was always so conscious of what feeling he was portraying outwardly that he could lose sight of his own inward reality. Kate was the only thing, the only one in his whole life he was certain about. He tried to compose himself and figure out the answer.

“What are you talking about?”

She broke away from his hand and gaze, walked over and distractedly began rearranging the tools she’d hung on the wall scarcely half an hour ago. Her back turned, the writing from his college sweatshirt she always wore so endearingly now mocked him—You Can’t Take It with You.

“I’ve been looking at jobs online,” she began nonchalantly, “and there’s plenty of jobs for accountants pretty much anywhere, so I would be fine.”

“But this is our home.” He ran his hand through his shock of dark, bristly hair. Timothy couldn’t believe she was seriously considering anything like this, and, making any attempt to diffuse the tension, teasingly added, “and that wouldn’t be part of the plan.”

Didn’t he know that she knew that? Kate frustratedly switched the screwdrivers and the hammer, changing another of her plans. With Tim, her plans always fell apart. Lord knows he wasn’t a part of her plan two years ago. But that could be all right. Couldn’t they make a new plan together?

Timothy walked over and switched the hammer back to its original position. Kate had drawn up a plan of where each tool had gone for maximum efficiency during the week, and he didn’t want it to be messed up.

“Kate, we’ve talked about this, I’m happy here—we’re happy here.”

She stepped back and threw her arms up. “See? I didn’t bring this up because I knew that’s what you would say.”

“Because it’s the truth!” Tim pleaded.

“But how would I know if you’re lying to me?” she cried. He wasn’t sure whether to take that as a compliment to his acting or not. Probably not.

But that’s how love happens, he supposed.

“I’m not lying to you. This is just the way things go, I think. You want to give up things for me, and I for you, because that’s how love works.” But, he thought to himself, we can’t both do it at the same time.

“Oh, so you are giving something up. Admit it to yourself!” Kate then backtracked and added softly, approaching him. “Tim, we can make a new plan.”

A bird flew through the broken window. Kate almost screamed when it came from behind, right above her head, so close she felt the air move around her from the blue jay’s tiny wings. Her bun fell out completely and shadowed her face, the strands cutting it into pieces—looking at her was like trying to see through a barred window. They chased it out the door. Maybe this was a sign that it wasn’t the right time to talk after all, she thought.

“We need to get back to work,” she said, tossing Timothy a roll of duct tape. “Would you tape the cardboard back up?”

They worked in tense silence, apart from the ripping of the duct tape, while Kate again held the ladder. It’s a quiet neighborhood, she thought. Full of nice, nosy old people who’ve been watching and listening to us. Great. Isn’t that the perfect way to meet the neighbors?

Timothy quietly taped the piece of cardboard over the window, covering the edges, then crossing an X for added stability. Just as quickly as it can open, the hole in the wall was shuttered, and the light left the room.

I shouldn’t be surprised, he supposed. He’d always known Kate’s tendency to go to extremes. Even with her detailed plans, she’d upset them at the drop of a hat for anything,

for anyone, for love. It was sweet and ever so frustrating. Honestly, he realized coming down the ladder, she takes after her dad quite a bit. Gosh, she'd hate to hear that. When she'd introduced him to her dad, which took a lot of convincing from her then-fiancé, he felt like a soldier in no man's land.

The father and daughter bickered the whole time, over their car, her father's attitudes on their engagement, and about how he'd apparently put too much ice in the lemonade. Kate had warned Timothy that they had a tense relationship, had muttered something about their opposite personalities and his "utter disapproval of everything" she did. He got the feeling there was something she wasn't telling him about her childhood. She didn't talk much about her family, but Timothy's side more than made up for it. His parents, the perfect buttoned-up middle class couple, loved Timothy and Kate and said they were perfect together. They loved the stability of Kate's job—for that was one thing they agreed with her father about.

"You're throwing your life away," his mother had cried dramatically during one particularly heated spring break discussion in Timothy's college years before he'd met Kate. His parents had taught him to appreciate the arts but had never intended this path for him. He should've been a doctor or lawyer instead, he supposed they would have preferred that. "How do you think you'll ever make a living in theater?"

"Oh, you're an 'actor'?" Kate's father snorted, wrinkling his greying mustache. "A drain on society—and now on my daughter. Katherine Marie, what are you doing getting married to him?"

And now maybe Kate felt the same way.

When Timothy was safely down on the ground, and the ladder stowed in its corner, they fled to opposite sides of the small garage. Timothy started installing a bike holder on the far wall. He'd be able to commute easily once they moved in. The school where he taught part-time was only a short ride away, and he was able to drive the several miles to the theater in the evenings. It was a simple life, but it was their life. Timothy loved acting,

becoming someone else somehow made him know who he was himself. And he was pretty good—well, at least he hoped he was.

But the truth? The truth was—he was afraid of becoming famous. Maybe that was a little vain to even consider. But it was true. He didn't want the world to know his name or his face. He didn't want to be seen by so many people and become vulnerable to attacks on any little mistake he made. He was truly happy here; he enjoyed working with the community and loved teaching the kids. But maybe this all wasn't enough for Kate.

Kneeling by the opposite wall, Kate was cutting the tiny vines where they grew into the garage, where they defied the building's boundaries and ventured into a new world. She stopped and twisted her hair up tightly, out of her face. Stupid, stupid vines, she thought. Didn't they realize—hadn't they learned anything? They would die in here. I know better now—I'm doing the right thing, cutting them off before they can get hurt, she tried to convince herself. Kate wouldn't let herself be like them. She was determined not to stifle Tim's dreams. When there were no more shoots to be seen, she gathered up handfuls of the wilting vines—no, weeds, she corrected herself. Her hands looked like her father's.



The Screwtapes Letters Chapter

Mark Possis

***Context:** I've recently been reading C.S. Lewis' "The Screwtape Letters", and I have decided to pay homage to it by writing a chapter that was not in there: one dealing with the transition to college, in which I draw from personal experience. Thus, here is a senior demon named Screwtape explaining to a novice demon how to corrupt his human during his first few weeks at college.*

My dear Wormwood,

I am so incredibly overjoyed by the opportunities on the horizon that I am willing to dismiss all of your grievous errors in allowing the boy to develop a Christian faith, for whatever has been done can so very easily be undone within his first few weeks at college. Of all the seasons in human lifetimes, this four year period is where we have experienced the most success in permanently removing souls from the Enemy's camp. You see, Wormwood, they go to college to find themselves, but I am about to enlighten you on how skilled we have become in helping them find anything but. Listen carefully now, because although we have experienced great success, there is a very real flip side to this monumental opportunity which the Enemy could very well capitalize on. Thus, there is no room for any of your past incompetence.

Before I delve into the thick of it, I first must lay the groundwork and explain why his soul can be so easily corrupted, and how it is possible for him to drop everything he stands for upon arrival. Everything that will lead him directly into our clutches can be traced back to the all-consuming desire humans feel to be liked by their peers. This need is entirely from our court, and is naturally amplified during the first few weeks of college, where all the little vermin are worried more than ever if these new people will approve of them. Your boy is no exception. Based on prior reports of your boy's occasional social angst, even more so will he be second guessing his decisions, and how he is perceived by others. What your boy does not at all understand is that he will never be able to know what is going on in the minds of the people he is bent on trying to impress, and is therefore uselessly trying to crack an uncrackable code. You see,

it is so deliciously clear that he has not yet come to terms with who he is, (not many of them have at this point in their lives), and that his confidence is not in himself or in the Enemy, but in the reactions he gets from other people. His validation is sought externally, which is just as we'd have it. Then, that approval, that popularity, those likes on social media or the number of impressions on his snapchat story, are suddenly what he puts his whole value in, and he thinks that if he does not align himself with what he thinks people want him to be (something he could never know), then he has failed. He then will be willing to do anything to "fit in", because he is worried that his anxious thoughts will prevent him from living life to the fullest. Foundationless is a good word for what he is: he stands for nothing, so he will fall for anything.

I know what you may be thinking, *How could anyone be so stupid? It is so obviously silly!* But I assure you, Wormwood, in the past we have succeeded in this every second of his entire day! It is a sweet, hilarious treat for you, getting to watch him suffer without having to bat an eye. All that you have to do is remind him of an unfavorable memory, an undesirable thought, a rampant insecurity, or what *might* happen to him if he were to fail, and he will be wrestling with it for the remainder of the evening, and will miss any of the Enemy's attempts to pull him into the wondrous times of kinship and growth that are happening in front of him.

Do you see this pattern? Fixate his mind on approval, what society might think of him -- in a future that is to him a false reality -- and keep his mind on itself so long that he misses any opportunity for effortless joy, (which in reality is already within his grasp, if he were to ignore our tactics and instead focus on his relationship with the Enemy). Once he then "fails" to his standard of feeling himself wrestle with us so much in his thoughts that he let a great opportunity in front of him slip by, watch the sense of failure destroy him, and lead him to a gorgeous state of self-loathing. Anytime we can convince the humans that earth is their true home, and that their successes and statuses here define them entirely, any failure they experience leaves them devastated, and far more empty than it ought to. That is why the fear of failure -- one of our greatest inventions -- runs so rampant within their world, and prohibits so many from being who they truly want to be. The pressures of accumulating wealth and a "respectable" lifestyle

stagnates them, and enslaves them to the way of the world (our way). They miss all of the Enemy's attempts to bring them to the eternal bliss that comes from truly living in the present now, where time touches eternity and their burdens are lifted. This present version of themselves -- their true selves -- is what they *should* be looking for at college, but don't. This leads me to my next point: another reason why college is so uniquely in our favor.

College is our great weapon because it is one of the rare instances where humans are actually seeking us out, not vice versa; we have taken complete control over the stereotype surrounding what college is to be. For once, instead of our whites being their blacks -- how it usually is -- they actually *willingly* try to force what was once black for them into white. In other words, sinning is suddenly "cool" and "only appropriate, given the occasion".

You see, they have all heard coming in that college is to be "the best four years of their lives". This is not untrue in the slightest, for their college years are the freest, most formative years of their lives. But where our extreme leverage comes from is that we have tricked them into thinking that "best" really means "wildest". Once under this impression, they will then be working adamantly to subject themselves to our created stereotype, that is wrenched so deep within the heart of their society: they will be *clamoring* for wild nights they can't remember at the local tavern. For nights of unchastity. Countless nights of bingeing. Laughing at their irresponsibility, because "it's college!". It is a dream come true for us in capturing damned souls for Our Father Below. And each time, as they sip that glass bottle of New Amsterdam in their dormitory to the applause of each other, with reaching its bottom being the only acceptable method, they will be gloriously slipping away from their proper path, with their habits growing increasingly difficult to come back from.

Now, it would not be right if I were to leave you without advising on by far the most essential vice in his damnation at college: alcohol. I have spoken thus far as to why they are so easily corrupted, but I have not yet spoken on the means. Alcohol in excess is the essential vice by which you will bring him miles from the flourishing man the Enemy has prepared him to be. Alcohol is such a fantastic means because truthfully, they do have a lot of fun with it, and it often

produces the best times. Fun will always be fun, but eventually -- and this is where we come in -- it starts to come at a cost. You see, Wormwood, as damned souls, we are not ever able to create “pleasure”, or whatever word they use to describe positive emotion. That is entirely the Enemy’s creation, and he claims to do it out of “Love”, or some other reason we could never understand. But what we can -- and must -- do is *exploit* that pleasure, and convince them to indulge in it excessively. His first few weeks at college will be the optimal time to do this because truthfully, it will be a competition amongst the freshman to see who can indulge the most. “We were so drunk last night!” “Did you see so-and-so blacked out on that person’s story?”. Idiots. The ironic thing is, that horrible life decision to get that drunk probably *raised* that person’s credibility. And that concept, my dear Wormwood, is why college is fundamentally in our favor.

If all is done correctly, you will have your boy’s soul well on his way to us. More food! If not, your punishment will be unbearable, for I just explained how it is the perfect storm of vulnerability: a monumental lifestyle change, a new way of school, trying to fulfill impossible societal standards of “the best four years they will ever get”. Wormwood, we have *literally* convinced them that college is a land that exists outside of morality, and that sin is not only no longer bad, but acceptable, and cool. However, I must cut you some slack. (I am sorry, I have never had what they call “patience”, even when I was alive on earth). For despite all of these advantages, the Enemy does in fact have a very real vantage point. If the Enemy were to get through to your boy in his times of inevitable struggle, and to have him repent and find his faith—his legs—all would be lost, for both us and the Enemy fully realize that capitalization on vulnerability this intense could produce *real* results that last for eternity, as pain is always the predecessor of growth.

To avoid this, obviously keep him blind to our presence in his mind. Keep him in the future by having him focused on what *man* thinks of him, not what the Enemy thinks of him. Let him crave that external validation, for you and I both know that this is what will run his well dry. Also, keep any and all literature out of his hands. There are some authors who have such a profound understanding of us that they could write an entire book about our habits of corruption,

which would obviously expose us. Lastly, and this is an easy one, let the effects of alcohol run their natural course in perpetuating his laziness. Let him beat himself in choosing to avoid the responsibilities he knows he should do, because he does not “feel” up to it. Any time we get them relying on their emotions for decision making, we have already won. Their emotions, like their problems in life, eb and flow constantly, yet they are foolish enough to think them permanent, and to rely on them as the most significant factor in decision making. Sooner or later, if they remain emotionally reliant, they will unknowingly be deciding to join our camp. Keep me updated on his whereabouts, and next time we will discuss in depth how you can corrupt him through his screen.

Your affectionate uncle,
Screwtape



Two Cups

Tekla Shaw

I walked off the plane and took in a deep breath of the stuffy air in the airport. My back hurt, and I was dehydrated enough to have a small headache. It had been a long eight hours, and I was already wishing I could turn back around and head home.

“So, our bags should be showing up at baggage claim pretty quickly. You wanna grab the bags or the rental car?” said my brother who walked off the plane right behind me. “I’ll get the car, you grab the bags.”

“Sounds good.”

The Portland Airport was packed, making it hard to navigate the quickest path to the car rentals. Of course, once there, a tedious line full of indecisive people had formed. My mind began to wander as I waited. I thought about what we were trying to accomplish here and how to do it as fast and painless as possible. We would only be here for a few days before heading back home, where my wife and I would promptly leave again to go on a much needed vacation. Oh, how Hawaii was calling my name from here! My brother and I planned this trip too last minute, which meant extra stress was added to the already stressful and tiring task ahead. I really should have just come down here sooner.

When we finally got the car, we headed out straight away. There were still a couple more hours of travel to go before we reached our mother’s house. We didn’t waste any time navigating the quickest route out of the bustling city towards the distant suburbs.

Somehow the two of us avoided conversation for about thirty minutes while we watched the scenery of the city move and carry us to our next destination. Eventually, it was unavoidable.

“So I was asked by my wife to grab some of Dad’s art. There may be a couple collectable cars I want too, but otherwise we don’t really know what else we need,” said my brother, keeping his tone light and very conversational, knowing that it may not be that easy to claim things once we get to the house. I thought hard trying to come up with a response.

I still haven't worked out all my feelings towards the situation and I didn't want to blow things up too big and cause more tension between me and the rest of the family.

"When it really comes down to it, I don't need any of these things. I don't have the space, and a lot of Mom's stuff is just knick knacky. We were only thinking maybe a bed frame for the twin bed at Hannah's house and maybe a bookshelf for her, too. All that other stuff is just stuff. I can't use it, and I don't have the space for it. And neither does Mom."

"Yeah, I understand that. However, Mom is pretty attached to some of these things. How are we going to organize it all without, you know, completely cutting her out of the process?"

I looked at him briefly, then returned my eyes to the road. Already, my chest grew tight and my shoulders rigid.

"What we really don't need is hurt feelings and a power struggle," I half-agreed. The five of us kids and our mother could never quite find a balance, which made things tense at any formal gathering. Luckily, I live far enough away and stay busy enough to not get involved with most of the family drama. This time, I couldn't avoid it.

After what felt like the mandatory discussion about our situation, we made small talk the rest of the trip, discussing anything but what was ahead. When we arrived, we were greeted by a very small neighborhood containing my mother's even smaller house. Her home was located on the corner of a street surrounded by houses identical to hers in almost every way. The grass all the same shades of green, the houses all a similar shade of creme. Most driveways had a compact car or two except for my mother's, whose driveway was full of a variety of cars belonging to her various children who had showed up from all over to help divide her belongings between themselves.

We parked on the street and stepped out of the car. My youngest sister walked out to greet us. She looked tired, yet genuinely happy to see us. She had been at my mother's house the longest, and it showed in her eyes

"Hey, how are you both? It's been a while since you boys last visited," she said as she

gave us each a hug.

“We’re tired, but we will manage,” said my brother with a smile.

I only gave a nod and thin smile. My mind had started trying to create a plan of attack for the next few days right as I stepped out of the car and it wasn’t about to stop for pleasantries.

She gave us each a warm and knowing smile as she started heading back into the house. “Well come on in, we have some food and coffee waiting.”

We were greeted by the smell of fresh coffee and the sounds of the rest of the family when we entered the tiny house. Mom sat in the kitchen in a deep and heated discussion with her oldest son and daughter. Her face appeared drawn, weary. My brother’s shoulders were up by his ears, and my sister’s hands were absently rubbing her neck.

“Well, it looks like you decided to wait until we showed up to start having fun, and not a moment sooner,” said my brother.

They all looked up and seemed relieved by the interruption. We all exchanged greetings and sat around the kitchen table to finish coffee and food in silence mingled with small talk.

The house looked to be at the halfway point in the packing process. The couches were gone and so was the bed. Bubble wrap and boxes sat in one corner of the house and the kitchen held piles of wrapped dinnerware. Her living room was full of decorative plates, teacups, collectable cars, paintings, and other small objects that I didn’t pay attention to. The house felt cramped because Mom had filled it to the brim with too many useless things. “So, we discussed starting with some of the larger items and moving towards the smaller items later. Mom will take her couches and chairs to her new place, as well as the bed and dining room set. The rest, we can figure out between us,” said my oldest brother, taking the lead and getting things going as quickly as possible. He tended to do this, which usually made me bristle, but this time I was of the same mind and just wanted to get through this.

“Oh I can’t take some of the smaller things? There are some other dishes I would like

to keep and, well, maybe I can take some of these tiny decor items too,” said my mother as she went to what used to be the living room, but now resembled a garage sale all over the floor and mantle.

“Mom you don’t have space for these things.” I said, annoyed already. Her items covered the floor, spewed everywhere, and were all utterly useless. Porcelain people, porcelain flowers, porcelain plates, porcelain cups, and porcelain garbage. They would all just sit somewhere and never be touched again.

“Well I’m sure I could figure something out,” she said.

“Let’s get started somewhere else and we can figure out those things later. Keep in mind Mom, these things are staying in the family, even if they aren’t with you.” Her oldest son walked over and put an impatient hand on her back leading her over to the dining table to sit. She hobbled slowly and sighed deeply as she sat, looking ready to argue, but feeling overpowered. We began.

There were many arguments in the weeks before the arrival of my brother and I about some items that had yet to be resolved. The largest problem had been about who would receive Dad’s piano, with several siblings wishing to claim it either for themselves or for their children, who they felt had as much right to these things as we did. In the end, we decided that it would stay with my oldest sister and eventually pass into the hands of my youngest sister, who would pass her old piano onto the son of my oldest brother. There were several pieces of art that my various siblings divided up without too much argument, as well as some antique tea cups and plates. I ended up not getting the bed or the bookshelf that I had needed for my daughter’s house, but I got some art and cars that would please my wife.

We left our mother out of things, to her dismay. We knew she would cause extra drama and make the tower of cards that contained her stubborn children fall apart if she got too invested. She would tell us where things had come from and their origin every now and then, trying to remain a part of the decisions being made about her things, but for the most part we kept her away from the proceedings. We knew she had good intentions, but it

was easier for us that way.

We were able to take care of things pretty smoothly and without any major fights over the next few days. We all did our best to not jump at each other or be too willful. On the last day we only had a few heirlooms left to divide and decided to let our mother help with these last few pieces. I didn't have much left to say, so I resigned myself to just watching. All that was left were a few porcelain cups and painted figurines I had zero interest in. It took longer to divide these items than any of the other ones over the past few days. Each one had a story to go with it that my mother shared in detail. I had zoned out halfway through her telling us about how she received two brightly painted people from two separate friends and how the two of them just so happened to match.

"It was all by chance! I couldn't believe how well these plates went with the rest of my decor. They were the right colors for my first kitchen and looked nice in the hutch next to those pretty floral tea cups I got from my sister a few years later," she said with a smile.

"I can take those Mom. They will look nice in my kitchen I think, right next to the sink or something," said her oldest daughter distractedly. Mom smiled and agreed, putting them to the side to pick up the last items.

They were two tea cups made of porcelain. Neither were that significant or elegantly decorated. They didn't match in color or in size, making it obvious they weren't a set. One was large and pearly white with a small pattern near the top of the cup that ran down along the handle. The other was more of an off white, with small details in the plate and the cup slightly resembling a flower. They were thin, delicate from age, and looked well used.

Mom looked at them silently for a long time. Her children, bemused by her sudden quietness, waited for her to explain. She swallowed and looked up at us with small tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

"I received these as a gift on my wedding day. They were from a woman who I didn't know. She was possibly a friend of your father's parents, or maybe mine, who knows. She was small and moved slowly when she approached us, with nothing in her hands but these

two cups. They came as you see them now, unwrapped, well used, and already very old. I remember looking into her face as she spoke to us in a quiet, steady voice. She said ‘these cups are mine that I use for my tea. They are all I have. I would like for you to have them,’ and she gently handed them to me and Mark. Then she walked away.”

We sat in silence, surrounded by our mother’s items that she had collected through her life. I looked at my mom, whose small tears had left their comfortable spot in the corners of her eyes and streaked her cheeks. I watched her hands fiddle with the cups slightly, as she recalled the memory.

“I’ll take one.” I said, breaking through the silence as gently as possible.

My mother looked up at me, gave me a soft smile, and nodded.



The Fountain on Main Street

Jake Hyland

The public fountain in the center of Main Street's park has a particularly strong filter. The Parks and Recreation board as well as the current mayor laud the fountain for encouraging public sanitation in a combination of "artistry and realism". The other two park fountains at the North and Southeast edges of town are murky—*vomit-inducing*, even—but the fountain on Main Street always stays sparkling. Simply obnoxious. The public fountain on Main Street is a drain on the nearby area's plumbing. I live right across Main Street's perky. Little. Filtered. Marvel.

I cannot properly flush my toilet three-fourths of the day. I cannot wash my hands and I cannot wash my face without taking a gamble on getting bird "stuff" on my arms and head and hair. I don't think I'll be able to drink from a tap ever again, hell, I can't even *look* at a sink without dry-heaving now! Seeing as it has been a month since that monstrosity's construction, "living" under the oppressive stone thumb of that appalling playpen for diseased air-fowl has gone on one month too long. Watching the birds do all their hygienic business right in front of me day-in and day-out—the absolute nerve! It is the type of thing that'd drive a proper gentleman to do some ungentlemanly things.

It would be, of course, if I didn't have the perfect solution staring me right in the face. Enough blades. Give the can a shake or two. The water sure does sparkle!

All my years walking about this town's parks could never prepare me for such a flight of lunacy! Brandishing a bag of toiletries, a man in a full suit walks directly from his home, past the very bench upon which I sit, and sets himself up at our beautiful fountain... To shave! The gall—the absolute nerve! He's making such a racket with that Barbisol can, too; just the height of odium. The audacity to deface such a monument to sanitation and

decency. I have walked from my tiny, proud house, which my great-grandfather (God be with him) built, the ten blocks necessary to see this beautiful fountain since its immaculate creation one month prior. Now, from out of the blue, some spoiled member of my very own hometown tries to act out! Not today, I say. Marching up to the barely put-together man, I declare myself confidently.

“Excuse me sir—are you a pigeon?” The man has the continued streak of insanity required to ignore me, a sweet, sage, old woman. “Sir—you appear to be using the public fountain as a sink!” He wretches lightly at that; the freak must be coming to his senses somewhat.

“I’m shaving. It is a matter between me and my unneeded follicles. Kindly be about your own day, madam.” Seething now, I can do little but prove this dolt wrong.

“When you decide to pollute the fair and public waters of a pillar representing human civility, you bring others into your business, you—you germ! Perhaps a strong filter should be placed here to remove dirty impurities like you!”

“I suppose you’ll take that up with the mayor and all the boards that erect such *B-A-utiful* money pits. While you’re at it, mention how Main Street residents clean bird feces from our hands and bodies at regular intervals, thanks to this civil rock.”

Appalled by his language, I take a stand for all of us, as a crowd of onlookers begins filtering out from their nearby homes, bringing supplies to form a rally. Plenty of the denizens of Main Street had been enviously looking out their windows at the beautiful fountain. The people are on my side, and we can drive this interloper from our midst. We are the filter. We’ll make this place just as sparkly as the water before us!

The citizens of Main Street gathered around the fountain, many of them carrying full boxes or baskets from inside their nearby homes. Dishes, laundry, and toiletries sprang

forth from their containers. Men, women, and children gaggled around the fountain, pushing past the old lady and her delusional eyes. They proceeded to go about their business in the fountain. The water stayed crystal clear.

The old woman storms off, a bubble bursts before her—the entire town has devolved and gone crazy! Back to her tiny house, built board by board by her great-grandfather (God be with him). She packs in a flash, her tiny possessions stuffing her Station Wagon in under an hour. She barrels past the fountain, past the congregation of heathens in the heart of her once beloved hometown, now reverted back to the cro-magnon; bathing with one another, along with the beasts and fowl! The idyllic citizenry she had so respected, filled with hard-workers that kept to themselves, now destroyed by one antagonist.

It had been many a year since she drove the battle-weary tank outside the familiar streets. The suspension rebounds like a mass of moldy jello, and each of the mirrors move like rusted pendulums in their fixtures. Dirt invades the areas she doesn't know the names of underneath her rims—the parts her late husband had rattled off to her time and time again, as she braved the unpaved roads. Hours pass with the rumble of spare possessions in the back seat and trunk whining a homesick symphony. Brown, brittle boxes of knick-knacks and memories drum against one another over bumps and craters. The days of her father, the days of her grandfather, and the days of her great-grandfather (God be with him), are over. Her husband had been doomed to pass as the last good man. Steeling herself, the old woman never looks back. At least, not until a distant sparkling catches the rear view mirror's swinging path...

Finally, I can feel like a real person again! Clean as a whistle judging by that devilishly handsome reflection. My heart was doing its own little drum solo for a moment, what with all those people mobbing around, but it's nice to see some sanity return to town since

the stone menace was put up. I haven't seen some of these people in years, and now we can all meet as true equals, just doing some real human business. A true return to form! Maybe this fountain really is some kind of monument to our commonalities as fellow people. I can practically feel the swell of our camaraderie at this moment, moving me around like a bunch of hard-working bumblebees shaking the hive with our collective efforts!

The man was not entirely mistaken. The prideful shaking he felt was in part his own emotional tremors, but was mainly the factory-standard filters clogging under the sudden workload of Main Street's hygienic plight. Nearly three dozen people had let loose their pent up sanitational woes at once! Fit to make cracks in the ground around the fountain, the filters strained and vibrated with increasing fervor until the citizens above were forced to take stock of their surroundings. Quiet in that exact moment, peaceful even, the fountain trickled for a few moments more before releasing a deluge of waste and water all at once. Forming an impromptu portrait of screaming cherubs playing around sparkling clouds of waste rather than fluff, the denizens of Main Street rise three stories into the air, clean and godly for one more tick of time.

Reflected by the crooked rear-view mirror and behind inch-thick glasses, the old woman's eyes sparkled at a wonderful comeuppance meted out from a truly wonderful fountain.



— *Loomings* —
Poems

The Passage of Red Waters
Emily Heilman

The passage of red waters
makes soft these calloused bones,
sleeping in the riverbed made soft
by river stones.

Though fires reign above me
and surely down below,
my eyelids are a casket to my
never-waking soul.

Though what is left to wake me?
The stars are lost in smoke,
I am calloused, and at peace.
To sleep, I call it all a hoax.



Rotting Heart

Emily Heilman

Misery burrowed deep
into my rotting heart
to breed enmity
and bitterness.

Pulling at the scabs
like an alcoholic
opening beer cans:
settling in with self-destruction.

Stay still, I say,
let the dogs
gnaw the marrow
from my breastbone.

Like some parasite
of foreign origin,
a tapeworm
to filter my boiling blood—

let leeches suck
this evil
from my veins,
and I will let some other devil in—

no vaccine or pill or salve
could ever save me
if there's no way
I can believe it will,

because belief
is the prerequisite antidote,
turning sugar pills
to penicillin,

and if I wanted to let go
and be healed
I would be healed,
but

this rotting heart
felt safer dead,
and in my pride
I could not face the doctor

but with dread.



On Being Alone

Molly Thompson

There is a somethingness in solitude.
In the drip-drop of coffee made by yourself
in the tiny kitchen in your apartment, in which
you are alone for the next week. The roommates
come home after the holidays. There is something of
sweetened coconut flakes in the burning
of a three-wick candle for one. It is the cuddled
blanket forts of one, thin wrist slipping out to prop up
a book for greedy eyes. The slender, green-house-plant-stem-spike
of the wrist, the way in which it juts out. It is the delicateness
of not being tread upon. There is something about the snoopiness
of being alone. In the “day off” of it all. Greedy eyes slurp
and hands held behind your back as one looks in the rooms of
your friends, drinking up the hidden texts of their person
and reading the cards they pin to their walls.
It is the staring at strangers through a thick glass window.
There is something of marbled white and bittersweet chocolate
in painting at the coffee table, the sprawling of your things,
the satisfied curl of sleep while the house is cluttered
with what you haven’t put away. There is something of
a dog marking a fire hydrant, of a cat in heat, of an extrovert
being truly alone for the first time in a little over two years.
Steaming coffee—hold the cream, the directions to oneself,
the clitter clatter of quick slender fingers on a keyboard,
the resounding silence, as a thing to be shattered.



Pathos

Emily Rascher

The pathos in the grey vase
in the crowded bookshelf corner

of that tiny apartment downtown, where
there was always too much and not enough light,

where the sirens never fell asleep and so
neither did I. It's a miracle the plants and I stayed

alive despite the close proximity to cold.
The salt lamp beside the record player

next to the grey vase, all of which were never
mine, but I pretended them to be; they

all sat, perfectly framed in the windowpane,
the reflection hinting toward some perfect life that was

also not mine. I wanted to write a promise to God
and myself that I was once here, so I scratched

my initials into my vertebrae and then the wall
with a butterknife I found in the drawer beside the sink.

I wanted to promise that once I sat, cradled in that big
faux leather chair, caught somewhere between

a clear blue sky and forever, pressed
between the record player and the

wall lined with string lights. Once, I was here, and once
even before this, I was also here, the proof

clipped onto the lights with spare clothes pins, encased
in film, hanging above the frosted window

framing the pathos
held in the large grey vase.



Bend

Hannah Edwards

armor-bandages cling taut about her waist, about
her chest, about her neck, though she is unyielding
and uninjured; so many straps make up the battle regalia
of the beanpole assassin, the virgo phenomenon.

her garments are supple red leather, peacocking
the illusion of being soaked through, stuck fast
to her skin—her vocal fry is smooth in one direction,
course in the other— sugar-static to my ears,
her composure is that of a mother wolf.

the controlled breaking of her back bears the
weight of the theatrical mock-fight, a mercy-killing;
she does not prolong her crest artificially.
the stone-faced geisha did not stand a chance.

her zealots pay reasonably excessive amounts
to watch her contort all at once her vertebrae
and their perceptions, at once feminine and otherwise, at once
the queen of the milk snakes and knots and twenty-somethings.

her spider-leg hair kisses the floor insincerely,
without eye contact. one shot is all she's been
allowed, but she has earned the whole clip
several times over. she will not be robbed again.



(O)possum Box Hannah Edwards

the cardboard smells heavy, occupied.
i am disinclined to ease it off the ground,
records show i have the worst habit of
ignoring OSHA, and lifting with my teeth.

there is a difference between feral
and rabid, an important one,
one that separates rot from jailbreak,
writhing against primate-grip or

biting the hand that offers a couple of
bone-dry cheerios. the difference, regrettably,
is not on the standardized exam, will
not let you into the university.

the cardboard is all at once dry and
nasty-warm-wet, worn by finger-oils
into stale dust and saturated with damp and
the decay of inhabitation, of the squatting habits

of certain marble-eyed wannabe
rodents. i can smell the way they shake
in there, gaping mouths silently warding me off
because they can smell me, too;
they smelled me coming a long time ago.

nobody was ever able to provide a
real answer when i asked about the “o,”
and it seems like every time i demand
one from another god-forsaken search

bar, the verdict seems to flip-flop,
as if testing my nerve, daring me to
blow my cover. i stare out through
my human face with my marble eyes,

betraying no emotion. if they won't tell me
what i am even by name, it may come
to pass that i become yet another creature
with eyes illuminated, lit laser-red

by SLR flash, catalogued before
being run off, evicted, killed. i can
see it now, the overexposed image of
me, dangling by my tail, unable to bite,

an advertisement for the exterminator.
i pass over the box again and again,
spare the scavengers that cower inside
the burden of my cowardice.



Three Mile Island

Hannah Edwards

what's a child to do, forged and
steeped in fantasy and fair folk and
monsters, but invent a backstory

when confronted through the car window with
lethargic, cloud-belching creatures who squat
across the vast, vanishing patchwork countryside?

the ancient, nuclear monsters blink,
their red eyes comically undersized
as they sit, content in the susquehanna

they allow human passage through
the quilted hills of farmland, senile gaze
peacefully half-lidded, rotund, lazy beats

on their island in the valley. unmoving,
unnatural giants; concrete, not stone.
they blink, passing no judgement, and one

must wonder idly whether it registers
that the other two are long dead
and long empty, or indeed whether or not

the remaining monsters remember anymore
when their companions died, or if indeed
the survivors fear another meltdown.



Fridays in 2009

Kailen Skewis

I used to cross his backyard everyday to meet him in his kitchen for school. His father drove a beat up, tan Ford F150 with a covered bed, and he'd drive us five miles to our elementary school every Tuesday and Friday.

His mother worked as a nurse at a pediatrician's office and I only ever really saw her a few times a month when my family was invited over for a barbeque, or for dinner inside if it was winter. She was kind with a thin smile and didn't speak much unless someone spoke to her first.

On Fridays, he and I sat at the edge of his inground pool with our toes in the water, and the sun painting our shoulders. We were never allowed to swim in the pool unless his dad was sitting in a faded folding chair, acting as lifeguard with a warm Budweiser in his hand.

Once, the day before his parents divorce was finalized, we sat there alone. He dared to turn around and let himself sink into the pool until the heavily chlorinated water soaked his clothes up to his chest. He hung on to the pavement with his palms and forearms. I watched him tread the water without a word. Slowly he pushed himself away from the ledge, and soon he was only connected to the land by his fingertips. When he no longer had a grasp on the earth, he finally let his head sink under too.

When I saw him again, it was on my sixteenth birthday, and I remember thinking I liked the way he seemed to float.



Sharing a Bed

Kailen Skewis

On the first night we met, I thought
he might want to spend the night.
Our arms and legs intertwined like
our lives are now. Twisted and
braided around each other in an
impossible knot.

But on the first night we met, which
was a long night of heavy drinking and
awkward conversation, when I
offered him the left side of my
mattress, he politely declined
with a jab of his thumb towards
the north side of town, maybe
even leaning a little to the east,
and made a comment about his
parents expecting him to be home.

I remember sitting on the kitchen
counter feeling a little embarrassed
for offering my bed in the first place.

and I remember a little later crying
drunkenly on the kitchen's tile floor
and one of my friend's telling me he

is “just too nice for you.”

Now, pressing my freezing fingers
against his warm back at midnight
in the middle of October, I think of
The first night we met and wonder
where we would be now if he didn't
happen to be *just too nice*.



To Casual Sex and Wasted Sunday Mornings

Kailen Skewis

Morning at his place
Burnt pot brownies
Cold in the oven
We lay in his bed
Listening to whatever
Sound the sun makes
When it falls over your
Lovers face but not
The person you're in love with
Not many people know the
Difference between those sounds
I don't
But I'm sure I'm not in love
With him when we're standing
At the kitchen window
Looking across the
Parking lot and
He asks me what my
Favorite color is.



Lobotomy

Madelyn Erickson

I close my eyes and wait for pain,
Knowing that everything is about to change.
My manner, my thoughts, my quirks and flaws,
All laid bare by the teeth of a saw.

Bits and pieces taken here and there:
My sarcasm, my wit, my cautious air
Redesigned and repaired
With nary a familiar thing about me left to spare.

Some time after, I remember the traits that made me who I was,
But those were not seen as strengths, only flaws.
The vibrancy, the laughter, the brash assertiveness.
For the only way to be seen as more was to be made less.



Kiss of Ice

Madelyn Erickson

Deft corporeal hands trace the veins that run through my body
Outlining my heart, feeling each deafening beat.
Following the path my blood would take to my brain,
A cold chill left in its wake.
Tiny kisses of ice freeze and ignite me,
Scorching my skin,
Chilling my breath in the numbing cold,
Leaving my body in a perpetual fever.
My heart races,
My breathing slows,
A blinding light consumes.
This is heaven, this is hell
Life and death.
A passionate kiss, an agonizing torture.
Sinking me deeper beneath,
And easing me beyond.



My Therapist Doesn't Like the Phrase "New Normal"

Rebecca Davis

I drew a heart on my knee
because all the tattoo parlors are closed
and I need the semblance of permanence.
But I forgot it was there
and wildly swung at my imaginary roach;
now my cat is concerned
and my blood pressure shakes its head
at my childish wish for normalcy.
Now the smudged heart on my knee
makes me contemplate that moment
when I first wake;
before the sunlight hits,
everything seems okay.



A Living and a Life

Rebecca Davis

My daddy loves God. I can see it in his soft spot for Labrador retrievers, in his appreciation for a hammock on a breezy afternoon, in his peace found in the solitude of a tree stand, and in the way he smiles at chickens and turtles.

My daddy loves my mom. I can see it in twenty-seven years of attempted dog adoption restraint, in I know it's been six months but I promise I'll get you that screen door, in taking just one more sunset picture, and in the dark chocolate he learned to enjoy.

My daddy loves my brother. I can see it in the Legos bought for all twenty birthdays, in the relinquished hunting trips, in the avid support of Minecraft or pixel art or Spiderman or drones or whatever he's into these days, and in the quiet respect for opinions he doesn't understand.

My daddy loves me. I can see it in the ballet performances he refused to miss, in the times he let me take the big deer, in the way he helps me with my taxes even though this is none of the government's business, and in how he uses mowing my lawn as an excuse to come visit.

My daddy loves our family. I can see it in the conference calls he took instead of pilot's lessons, in the high mileage on his work car instead of his boat, in the midnight alarm calls instead of midnight movies, and in the integrity he maintains on two hours of sleep.

My daddy loves. I can see it in the way he makes a living so that we can have a life, and I am thankful.



Mantra
Rebecca Davis

the dirty laundry piled
in my closet isn't romantic
but I lack the divine assignment
of perfection
and perfection is thankful
she smiles at the socks in the corner
and leaves footprints in dresser dust
she doesn't straighten out
my bed sheets
or throw away the plastic cups

the topography of
my hips isn't romantic
but I lack the divine cartography
of perfection
and perfection is thankful
she traces my plumb stripes
and makes a roadmap for growth
she doesn't seem to miss
the hardness
of my once frigid, fragile bones

the corners of my
lived-in soul aren't romantic
but I lack the divine newness

of perfection
and I am thankful



Green Vines

Carah Gedeon

The white truck sits in the driveway, idling softly
When it finally reverses and drives off,
All that's left is the smoke exhaust hovering in the air
And a few drops of water on the pavement that had leaked out

Her small feet paddle up the driveway, unable to keep up with the pace of the tires
The pacifier that was being sucked and coddled,
Now sits in the dirt at the edge of the concrete,
A soft cry escapes her lips as the white dot becomes smaller and smaller

The house stayed the same size, one story tall, three bedrooms wide
But it became smaller to her, quieter, narrower
The green recliner chair no longer reclined, no longer was a place for naps during movies
The golf clubs never moved from the corner, no longer swung swiftly in the air

She could feel it – the vacancy seeping into her
It filled her with a deep, cut-out hollowness
And no matter how many blankets she placed on top of her at night,
It never felt like his hugs

The weeds in the backyard quickly overgrew their well-kept place
They grew so tall, that when she played in the sandbox, her mom couldn't see her
The green vines would wrap around her ankles, tripping her as she walked
And she could feel the weeds closing in on her, closer and closer

She sat at the edge of the driveway every day

Letting the sun burn her skin and the ants nibble at her feet

She sat until her butt was numb and her mom called her back inside

She sat until she realized that sitting wouldn't bring him back



The Blinds

Jolee Sullivan

All we knew about ourselves was that we didn't want to be them.
So we drew the curtains, and smoothed our sheets and made a list
Of all the things that they are.

And each day we slept on our project, making plans with our hands
On the bible we wrote; sunny plans to see the dawn, to be different,
To be what they are not.

Outside and above us, the leaves did their work,
Redressing and progressing through their
Vibrant cycle.

If we'd looked, we might've remarked that they are prettier now, that
That ingrained change was where they became beautiful,
But we didn't dare move our hands or eyes.

Finally,
We parted the blinds and found ourselves
Staring right at them in the clouded glass,
And past them

The sun was the same,
And so were we.



Just Yesterday

Jolee Sullivan

I got an abortion yesterday—you
Want me to say it again?

I got an abortion yesterday,
And I'm doing alright, and
What that means is
I'm not thinking about it.
I'm not thinking about it, the blood, or
The abortion I got yesterday.
Yesterday, I woke up,
Thirsty and hungry and not knowing
When I'd be allowed a sip of water,
Or a comfortable sleep in my bed.
Yesterday, I did not let myself feel
Fear.
Or pain, like the other girls did,
I did not let myself scream or cry like
The other girls did,
Yesterday.

Today, I drink water and spend more time
Scouring my mind
For the things that I feel, so
The lines—so that I
Can say precisely

The right thing here,
Because you can't just get an abortion
And write a shitty poem about it—
God forbid.



Happy Belated

Jolee Sullivan

You sent me flowers for my birthday.
They arrived one day late, which is fine.
They ruined my day.

To the most beautiful girl I know...

Why'd you write that? Why'd you end with,
Thinking of you...

One day late, I spent it not
writing *Thank you* to the people I love,
but thinking of you...

You: unshaven and red-rimmed, sulking in your basement,
writing *beautiful girl*, signing
not your name, but your initial: one

Lonely and woeful G
attached to your last word
only by an empty space.

A rounded symbol, almost one full circle, but
broken—drawn in, sharply—then
out again,

just enough to seem inviting,
to let me consider how it might feel to
perch my tired body upon its edge, but

never mind those belated thoughts.
My limbs are strong, and where they're not
I will put that letter towards my growth.

Your yellow roses are rotting already, and
I'm sweeping those brittle brown pieces
into my palms, crushing them to dust.



A Long Homophone Call

Ellie Prusko

February knights
bring in the hard truth
on supposedly noble steeds.

What I knead
from you is bread not so stale
and dough more malleable,
open to constructive criticism.

I've learned knot
to create daisy chains
made of your mistakes
and that even a shoelace tied correctly
can stabilize a smoking bridge.

It is sometimes hard to know witch
question is a good luck charm
or a poisoned apple,

but I would still give you a weak
to make me week.

And sometimes my waste
feels like a waist
since I can never fit into that dress
I want to where

even though I don't know wear
we'd actually go because we're two
much alike
because even though you're too cheep,
I'm a no-it-all.

But you've always claimed
to never stop trying
until you sea me
sore like the hawks
in your backyard that you were always
jealous of.

Phone cords
can cut just like swords.
But the discomfort
grows scars that produce
the seeds that make me a heroin
and you a liar.



I Really Just Miss Your Dogs

Ellie Prusko

While reaching a transparent hand towards locked doors and boarded windows,

I find myself wondering what you're doing day-to-day.

Wondering if your dogs are your only will to live

or if maybe you've found a secret treasure chest in the soft wall

in the back of your closet.

You'll have to excuse me,

memorizing every square foot of your secret hideaway

has left me with some strange daydreams.

Who would've thought that holding my chair out for me

and memorizing my coffee order

would leave me bored?

When your dogs bark at the brunette jogging

towards them during their morning walk,

tugging against your grip on the leashes,

do you think it's because she looks like me?

Little do you know

that I wear the shirt more often than you'd think

and I read the letter more often than you'd know

and I miss your dogs more than you're assuming.

Tell me, do they climb onto your bed to investigate

the fading smell of my hair on your pillow,

or have you bleached the sheets already?

If it's all the same to you,

I don't know why I'm here either.



To Jenna, Happy Halloween. With Love

Ellie Prusko

You came to me on pointed toes
and with a face hollowed out
from lapping up nothing but milk
and molly.

When I sat shaking from a bad reaction
from a tranquilizing pill,
you stroked my hair and fed me
Halloween leaves
and told me that the demons
inside my gray brain were far more treacherous
than any ear-licking staff member.

While my roommate taught me how to fight,
you taught me how to dance.
Borrowing one of your skirts,
we stumbled around your room in circles.
Your straw hair kept getting caught
in my mouth but if you had wanted to kiss me
that night, I swear to anyone who's listening,
I would've let you.

You talked about sex as if it were a tea-time topic
and when my eyes told you
that I declared it impossible
for anyone to love me like that,

you laughed and winked.

Just wait, your open eye said.

One day you'll find someone

who will make love to your monsters

instead of hiding from you under the bed.

Five years later I wonder if you ever realized

that you unknowingly cursed me

with the constant search for shards of you

behind another man's eyes.



A Romanticism of Us

Lindsey Smith

You'll never know about that guy

Who tried to get me in bed

The night we started talking.

Why my guard was up
from the very beginning.

The first time I saw you

I couldn't think

I was in a bout of rage

But your eyes rendered me

Useless.

I had never craved a pen more.

I needn't any paper

I'd engrave the perfection of you

On every inch of my skin.

Then, there was that night

When we played games and

I learned of your habits...

None of it mattered.

You are named after the writers of the past

Who could captivate me with words,

but not even Wordsworth can manage

what you do to me with a single glance.

Do you remember that day
When brown met hazel and held on
But that damned door
Slowly closed... Separating us.
That stupid look drove me insane
What was it in your eyes?

I wanted to ask you later that night
When you woke me.
But I was too shaky and unable to speak
My own habits accidently being revealed.

What did you make of me?

I wanted to ask you,
But we were in a crowded room
Both too inebriated.

You played melodies that

Calmed my nerves and

You seemed so at ease

As you snuck glances at me.

I've never been well-spoken so
I would have written you letter after letter,

Fractions of my soul in every line.

Now I have to resort to sad prose:

Pointless drafts of what never was.



Sensitivities

Lindsey Smith

My heart is sensitive.

I reside in a palace of my own making

marble and wisteria all around;

I built this beautiful cage to protect me.

My eyes are sensitive to the sun,

So I wake at twilight to live under the moon.

My ears are sensitive to the noise of destruction,

So I reside here millions of miles away from everyone.

My skin is sensitive to the roughness of fabric,

So I wander about these halls in nothing.

My mind is sensitive to its own thoughts,

So I turned the mirrors around.

My soul is sensitive to expression,

So I write down as much as I can only to burn these pages to ash...

Muttering:

No one can know.

No one can know.

No one can know.



Minds

Lindsey Smith

Your mind is a series of equations

Logical

Following a straight line

Everything mine is not:

It fascinated me

My mind is filled with words of centuries past

Compulsive

Obsessive

Chaotic

You couldn't comprehend:

It overwhelmed you



Thursday

Megan Lolley

On Thursday, I was holding a cup of coffee.
Little tongues of heat swept through my palms,
and steam curled past my lips.
Not that I was cold, but that human hands need warmth,
and after you left it started to rain.
The drops settled into my coffee like tears.

“Don’t you think the raindrops look like tears?”
You’re foolish, thinking you know the rain.
You sit and sip your hot coffee
folding and unfolding your cold palms.
Human hands need warmth.
“That coffee burned my lips.”

When you cried at night, I kissed your lips
so they wouldn’t need to explain the tears,
and I remedied your sobs with warmth.
I told you we needed to talk over coffee.
You said nothing, but covered my palms
with yours. It had started to rain.

On Tuesday, you sat outside in the rain,
and I sat inside to watch you. I remember—your lips
were blue. Why didn’t I move? My palms
were sweating, and there were tears

dripping down my cheeks. I picked up my cup of coffee
and threw it against the wall. I am appalled by warmth.

“Don’t you know that human hands need warmth?”

Wednesday screamed a scream that curdled the rain.

We didn’t drink coffee

that morning. I wished you would open your lips,

but you said nothing. Behind the bedroom door there were tears.

The pills slumped into your palms.

They didn’t cover your palms

with their white sheet—I thought human hands needed warmth.

I can’t cry—my tears

After I left the rain,

I found nine little pills forgotten by your lips,

and now they laugh at me through this rain-colored cup of coffee.

It’s Friday, and this cup of cold coffee is still between my palms.

My lips never brought you warmth, but

I hope you’ll tell me if raindrops are really tears.



The Greening of the Earth

Megan Lolley

The angels are beautiful, lost souls
With nooses hung around their necks like wreaths:
Delicate sparrows with eyes full of teeth,
Cupid's heart etched onto their cheeks of charcoal.
Be careful, you might see the story unfold:
How for twenty-two years they've been aching to breathe—
The air they've missed because of voices that don't leave
And fingertips that wrestled the night before being cradled in its slushy lull.

These angels don't haunt heaven, no—earth:
Peppermint coasting through the breeze,
Touching tenderly the wrists of those forced to their knees,
Yelling hymns to scream of their worth.
Only angel's nooses scream through closed lips,
And as silence settles, a new wreath fits.



Dandelion Boy

Megan Lolley

My skin flutters where the ghost of your lips lingers.

It must have been forever ago, I can never remember.

I began to discover the dandelion boy;

To watch the dewy sunrise wake in your eyes.

It must have been forever ago, I can never remember...

How you smiled at me with a thousand stories in your eyes:

The lemongrass freckles of the dandelion boy

That burst into a thousand roses in my cheeks.

There are thousands of stars in your eyes when you smile;

Little songs of what it means to be untethered

Bloom into a thousand roses on my cheeks at your touch.

Your lips entice me to forget this more or less world.

My dandelion boy, my song of what it means to be untethered,

Lays in my sheets like Achilles, awash in milky morning light.

You never fail in enticing me to forget this more or less world

With a sleep-ridden grin that blooms like sugar over my skin.

We spend days in my sheets, awash in milky morning light.

Every time you laugh, I'm torn apart all over again.

Sweetening my skin with your sleep-ridden grin,

I can't hear my own thoughts above your heartbeat.

Your voice tears my cotton heart apart
And replaces it with love's honey,
Protecting me from my thoughts with your heartbeat.
I'll always love your petals, dandelion boy, even if they're cracked.



Stargazer

Hannah Lore Salata

You whisper my name in the quiet of the night
and this makeshift bed of ours seems to warm. Twin
mattresses, despite the name, are not meant for two,
so our bodies curl around each other to fit. The odd space
between our bodies seems as cold and open as the sky
above us. I watch the breath leave my lungs.

All passion, you once stood on stages to empty your lungs
for strangers, as if it would change how lonely you felt at night.
How many hours can we spend together now, staring at a dark sky?
I'll nestle my head into your shoulder. You'll call me your twin
flame, only half-joking, and I'll grin up into space.
There has never been silence between our souls.

These are the secrets hidden in the silent depths of our souls:
That when you're upset with me I feel ice water in my lungs.
How sometimes I smile and you're ashamed of the thawing space
inside that you work to keep cold. No one knows how, some nights,
you try to write me poetry, how we cram this worn twin
mattress into your car and open the hatchback to watch the sky.

On bad days, I look into your eyes and see the whims of the April sky.
Eyes are windows, and as your sunny blue shades stormy, the souls
of the people we used to be threaten to stir. They are like evil twins,
doppelgangers halfway to being us, pain wheezing from long-dead lungs.

We don't argue often, but when we do, we fill up the night
With the sounds of wounded animals, until-- "I need some space."

Previously, you compared this pull between us to the vacuum of space:
"simply giving a name to the fact that nothing is there." Hands to the sky,
I ask you, if that were true, why would we speak almost every night,
talking of things like love and pain? God may not have paired our souls,
but damn him if this isn't meant to be explored. Frustration tears from my lungs
like paper. When I see you next, it's at my door, car already packed with the twin.

Out of Gemini, you joke, you prefer the left twin.
I tell you his name is Pollux, and you cast glittering eyes to space
before you lean forward and kiss the air from my lungs.
When you pull away, I am wide-eyed, and you are grinning up at the sky.
There is a pause before the laughter overflows from our souls.
I will never forget your lips caressing mine in the chill of night.

We finally voiced our love last night, curled together on that tattered twin.
I fell asleep to your voice singing soul into the open space,
and awoke to a sunlit sky, your name the first breath from my lungs.



River City Blue

Hannah Lore Salata

it is my last class of the semester & the deadline for the portfolio is Friday at noon & I have just heard about Kayla

she is lying in some hospital bed attached to too many tubes & the machines are doing the living for her now & we are both only twenty & that means I should not be so used to this sort of thing but she is in Bettendorf maybe dying & I am in the middle of an English class in Peoria & I am smiling back at a professor with chestnut hair & chatting with people more caring than I will ever be & I am writing a poem & it won't make sense to anyone else & it doesn't even make sense to me

I can't find my lucky pencil & it must still be sitting on that dorm room desk next to my happiness & I have my hand wrapped around David's pen & wouldn't I normally laugh at that thought

is there even any normal left for me now that a friend's suicide attempt doesn't even make me cry & did I cry any of the other times & I know I cried for Alexis & did I cry for Noah or Ethan & did I even go to Mitch's funeral

I know I didn't attend Danny's & Kayla was so angry at me for it & I told her I couldn't bring myself to care enough & it's not like I don't care at all I just can't make myself show it & since then Ian has passed & Jimmy is gone too & lately I feel like the gargoyles on the roof of Bradley Hall standing at the edge & watching everything decay & unable to do anything to help & does Kayla think I won't care & would anyone care if it were me & it's been years since I've been down that path & I can't start back now

the professor is calling on me & I don't even remember raising my hand & I'm watching myself describe shock to her & isn't that ironic & my right hand is still writing so fast & my handwriting is worse than I realized & this must be dissociation again right

the woman is sitting in front of the camera & the rocks are rattling in my shoes & I keep seeing orange plastic & public swingsets & lead-lined gloves & chain-link bruises & cut brake

lines & I am holding the shears & the razors rusted with blood & Crown Royal & Xanax &
I am staring down at the body &
the bodies & my body & no
class is nearly over & I am fighting the urge leave now & get in my car & speed my way to
Bettendorf & hold her mother's hand & I have another headache & I just want to sleep &
also cry & the bells of St. Mark's are ringing in the distance



Hydrate

Hannah Lore Salata

I cannot afford to buy my lover jewels. Instead, I pour myself a glass of wine and save the last sip for her. She looks down at the liquid held within the crystalline cut of thrift-store glassware, this buff-top ruby I have given her. She smiles, sweet and sparkling, and though I know how much has changed in recent years, parts of me still do not trust it.

My lover might actually be incapable of making a decent cup of tea. It's not that she doesn't try, but that she tries too hard. She starts with the water too hot, brews the leaves too long, so the cup is bitter, and her lemon and sugar attempts to find balance make it worse,

but it's a labor of love, so when she hands it to me, I drink every drop.

My lover has eyes like whiskey and a tequila smile, and I am nothing if not an alcoholic. She's the kind of person that is recommended in shots, but I'll drink her straight from the bottle. She is a deep bitter amber that keeps me warm through the night,

her presence helps me sleep, but none of that keeps me from feeling like hell in the morning.

My lover doesn't like poetry, but she reads mine every morning with her coffee, two spoons of bright white sweetness mixed into the dark and bitter cup. She drains the first half quickly, savoring the second on her tongue. "You never mention my name,"

she complains, but why would I, when her coffee order says more about her?



Palisade

Jeremy Portnoy

I feel an aching nostalgia
for something that I never lost, never knew.
I stare down its cold eyes in aged mirrors,
feel its pinprick in the heavy silence of empty embrace.
Know it in magazine albums and shrunken libraries:
monuments to sense's futility.
The cement baked it into the soles of my feet,
four blocks down and two to the right,
near the sandbox I never played in.

We met sipping cranberry juice one beating summer eve,
that crisp taste liquified in the air.
Your life before that was real. I was not,
yet my memories of it are;
epics of shotguns, of sprawling palisades,
speeding tickets and yellow paint.
The tapestries in my head will never tell me why;
Why I've known you my whole life,
met you before I was born,
felt you before that sunset
in the sand.

I miss people I've never met,
miss people I saw yesterday;
broken memory foam imprinted in the package.

Cling to them,
searching for what I never lost, never knew.
Better loud than too late.



Listen

Jeremy Portnoy

If I was a baby, I'd
never stop crying.
I'd wrinkle up my freckled face
and shout,
say whatever I pleased,
and it would be cruel to tell me to
stop.

If I were a monkey, I'd eat
the bananas that were still green.
I wouldn't know that they were
not ripe.
They would taste sweet.

If I was a photograph, I would
walk and talk
to the other photographs,
and we would reminisce on nothingness,
or the splendid day we were
shot and hung and framed.

If I were a blind man, I would
watch the breeze blow and
the crust move, and I would
predict the weather.

If I were a number, I would
be 8.

I'd stand on my head
and no one would notice,
or lie sideways and be infinite.

If I was a mirror, I would
marry another mirror,
and stand across from her,
so that we might reflect
ourselves and each other.

If I had just one more day,
I'd sit back and listen.



Pink Lemonade

Jeremy Portnoy

She could never will herself to the theater,
as if the eyes of the audience would shatter
some disillusionment, a ghost her eardrums
had shown her.

As if when the curtain drew,
it would splinter a spell of spoken word,
bedroom voices, and crinkled basement pages.

The bodies in the crowd, feeling and unfeeling-
petrified her private thoughts, poisoned her touchstones.

There's a difference between sharing
popcorn and emotion,
cappuccino and a nervous system.

It's an acrobatic feat, a balancing act:
privatizing what's public, falling in and out of love.

Description is corruptive,
a definition that blurs.

She could never will herself to hear them,
to place the creator above herself.

To suggest separation,
not entanglement
by one-sided pathos,
sweetly unrequited.

A poem is a release,
a spore modified in each host,

one word producing thousands.

If we are all unique,
universally relatable is an oxymoron,
and if we are not,
you've never thought anything real,
anything Yours.

And yet you have.

Who gave us the authority to interpret,
a jurisdiction over internalization?

There's the defiance in thought.

Intertwined consciousness instinctively rebelling,
the water dispenser mixing with pink lemonade,
squeezed out of syllables.

The artist can never be quite sure.



Depression

Mary Robinson

It's despairing in your mind
and feeling all the time
that you're overwhelmed.
Depression is hell.
It's waiting to exhale
the breath you've been holding.
It's outer smiles and inner loathing.
It's being in a state of constant distress.
It's believing your whole life's a mess.
It's having no appetite and no sex drive.
It's feeling as if a part of you died.
It's driving too fast to feel alive.
It's finding yourself on a ledge
and leaning out over the edge.
It's deep, humming pain
and tears overflowing.
It's emptiness inside
and God only knowing
the depth of your sin.
Depression is penance.
It's max security prison,
and you're serving a life sentence.
It's combinations of emotions
mixing, exploding.
It's the walls caving in

and your brain imploding.
It's staring down the barrel
of a loaded shotgun;
your finger on the trigger,
your back to the sun.



Superwoman

Mary Robinson

I wake up every morning
and—before I brush my teeth—
throw on my Superwoman cape
waiting for what the day will bring;
I have to be ready for anything.
Not many can save the world
if I don't get it done.
I am one more woman
beaten down by the sun,
as I fly here to there
with little appreciation
for everything I do—the
cooking, cleaning, shopping,
and managing schedules, too.
Hardly a thank you rises
from the lips of a man
who fakes playing hero
and thinks he can do better.
I let him try, and I
hang my cape upon the wall,
set aside my she-ro's load,
and wait for Earth to explode.



RE

Shannon Hofer-Pottala

I never learned how to style my hair because
I grew up with brothers
Who liked to push each other onto just-frozen lakes
The youngest was a test subject
An offering to the thin ice
To see if it would crack

I was young and cold when I was 17
And my brothers decided
Not to come back to our unfinished-basement home
The eldest took the first chance he got
Leaving me with bullet scabs
And frizzy hair

When I reach for my brush
I think of them
I wonder if we had stepped on the ice together
As willing sacrifices to the crystal floor
If it would have held our weight
Or if we would have drowned together



History

Shannon Hofer-Pottala

There is life outside of my bedroom

But I don't remember it.

My lamp clicks on

Beige-yellow walls and a ten by ten cube

The electric-blue glow of my computer late into the night

It makes me nauseous.

How long has it been?

How many have died?

My lamp clicks off.



THE CAFETERIA WORKERS DON'T NOTICE US AT THEIR NIGHT JOBS

Quinn Carver Johnson

When the setting sun turns
the outskirts gas station
into a greasy highway diner &
turns high school cafeteria workers
into night-shift diner cashiers,
they stare right through us, no longer
wearing their afternoon smiles
& school-spirit-colored uniform
like maybe they know, more than us,
that in the light of the sun,
we stare right through them.



BLOOD

Quinn Carver Johnson

My ex-girlfriend asks her gay
vegetarian roommate to drive
her to Chick-fil-A
& maybe there is no limit
to what we will tear up
once we dig into flesh

//

My ex-girlfriend & her new boyfriend
go to the Pride Parade, covered in rainbows
waving flags. On Instagram, a sign: ally
dripping in red ink &
if you zoom in / look close
you can see it / slick on their lips

//

I worry too

when I slip a dollar bill
from my wallet
I am handing it over
to the war machine

on the flesh of another
burnt fat / peeled skin
blood red / dipping sauce
I am keeping myself fed



Man On A Bench (1977)

Quinn Carver Johnson

after Duane Hanson, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

The man on the bench is waiting for someone,
sitting patiently on the promise of a boy.

I pass him on my way to work. Someone says
the man on the bench used to be the boy on the bench—

Before that he was just a boy—
says he's been sitting there for the past forty-three years.

His eyes turned to glass and fogged over.

His hair, once neat and clean, grew wild,

reached down past his jaw, past his shoulders,
past his ankles, wrapped him up and kept him warm

on bitter winter nights, but that, too, has left him now,
swept away in the hot, dirty gust of city buses. His clothes sag

over his skin the way his skin sags over his bones. A bag
that once held sandwiches, long since disintegrated by the decades,

still hangs heavy with the years. I pass the man on my way home,
sitting still / still sitting. I heard, once, that he was gone—

a morning where a bench was just a bench. But I don't believe it.
It would have made the papers. Someone would have called.

Someone else says that once the bench rotted beneath him
and he didn't move an inch, just hovered above the sidewalk.

They said the city came and rebuilt the bench underneath him,
but he still sat unmoving, only blinked once

to let them know he was alive. No, someone else offers,
it wasn't the bench. It was his clothes.

A swarm of moths devoured each individual thread.
The man sat on the bench, naked, for two weeks.

Finally, someone offered him a new pair, but he didn't even shiver.
They had to dress him themselves. People were complaining.

Teenagers sometimes draw on his face with Sharpie but we try
not to think about that. Everyone has a story about the man on the bench.

Every few years, someone claims they know the other boy—
the man not on the bench. His car broke down four decades ago

and for that long he's inhabited his own vortex. In that town,
everyone has stories about where he's headed and someone, maybe,

has heard about the man on the bench. I don't know. Maybe
there never was another boy. Maybe, if we survive long enough,

everyone who knew that the man on the bench used to be the boy
on the bench will die. No one will remember a bench without a man.

Then, no one will even ask about him. If they did,
the only answer: Just an old man, a bag of breadcrumbs.

He sits here and feeds the birds.



You Cry Every February 2nd

Giuliana Piccione

I know you

sometimes / sometimes

I don't understand

can't comprehend

won't

when the first-grader at the bee

spelled the word right

p-e-r-s-e-v-e-r-a-n-c-e

you almost cried

when every february 2nd you know

bill can't save pop

and even though you left the room / you cry

did you see your shadow?

or who do you see?

a baby rabbit

dead / you cry

in your hands

eva is gone

the friendly voice

you never heard

again losing

one that gave answers / never questions

conversations about forgiveness

make your choice

again / again

you cry

but

when they rejected your poem

about the two most painful

years of your life

you didn't

did you care? I thought so

you said you were glad - I know

- because now no one knows

and it doesn't matter

and the writing was important

I believe you

sometimes

why you experience life

this way I'll never know

I am you and you are me
and we are neither
who is poetry for
if not for me



My Anxiety was Right / I Told you so, 2020

Giuliana Piccione

it's always bad when
my nightmares come true
all i ever remember is when they do
and they do
they do

december/january - a virus
this is going to be bad - calm down -
(i was right)

february - spreading
schools, stores, will be closed
olympics cancelled
we don't think so -
(i was right)

march - a pandemic
it's coming here
we'll get it

may - our state's on fire
the purple map says it will always seep + stain on
we're going to get it
- but you're being so careful =
(i was right)

august - i'm sick of it / with it

my parents are going to die

(i was wrong)

hold on. remember.

i'm no psychic

i just expect the worst

(i told you so)



Bitter Brown Eyes

Sophia King

I hope one day

While you're sitting across from an empty chair, you stop putting cream
in your coffee.

I hope you press your lips to the rim

dive in the deep brown pools

and sink in the dark liquid like you used to sink into my eyes

I hope you can't stand to open yours, because you'll see an empty chair,
and taste the bitterness you left in my mouth.



Commitment

Sophia King

Learn the syllables of my full name

I will teach you the way my neck folds

As I sleep

Count the freckles on my back

Back and forth

Scratching until the tip of your finger burns Like a lit cigarette

Brand your name into my side



