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The Lantern, 2018-2019

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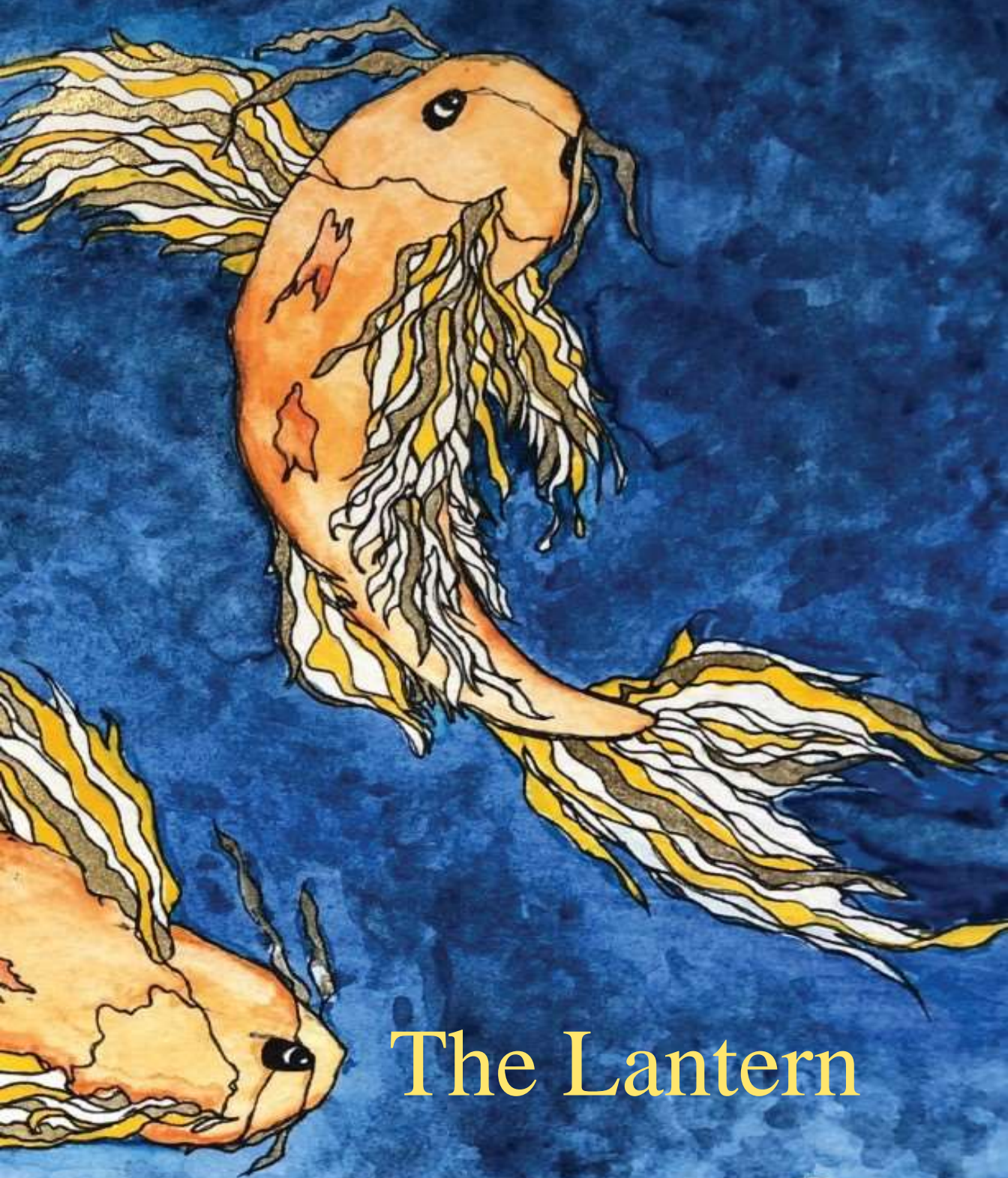
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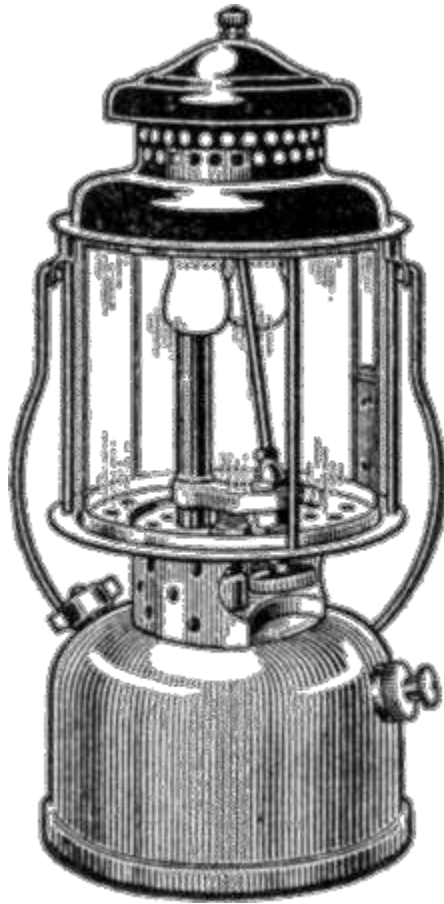
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The Lantern





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Editor's Note

I first read the Lantern as a prospective student, and I'm honored to cap off my Ursinus career by editing the magazine I've enjoyed so long. Editing entails responsibilities and challenges aplenty; I thank my page's worth of staff for helping me edit (especially Dr. Keita and Dr. Volkmer), and my judges for selecting the prizes. I'd also like to thank some others:

Albert Hahn and Solana Warner, I'm honored by your mentorship as the Lantern's 2016 and 2017 Editors. Your respective magazines and advice have been with me every step of the way.

Speaking of past experience, I also thank librarian Andy Prock and archivist Carolyn Weigel. I'm grateful to Andy for rendering all Lanterns open-access through the Digital Commons (including this one); I'm grateful to Carolyn for letting me explore the Lantern's past through the Ursinusiana Collection, and for similarly adding this Lantern to the collection. Your work preserves and circulates the Lantern.

I appreciate everyone who inspires my own creative work, but I would particularly like to thank Mary Makuc and David Ram for their consistent critique and encouragement. I also thank Jeffrey Lang for first teaching me editing and Anna Maria Hong for teaching me poetry.

Finally, dear reader, thank you for engaging with this Lantern! May you find plenty to enjoy and ponder in our magazine.

Joe Makuc

Cover Art

RAGTAG HARMONY

My piece was originally nothing more than a quick sketch of a fleeting idea I had one day. I came back to the sketch a few times to refine it, but never solidified the concept enough to move on to the rendering phase. This led me to leave this piece dormant for more than two years, until I was introduced to watercolors. The unnecessary amount of layers and work it required left the piece seeming ragtag, but in a charming, visually-harmonic way, because the piece was built through two years of experience and growth. My piece pulls in the progress of the artist, creating "Ragtag Harmony."

Kristen Cooney

POETRY PRIZE WINNER

“The Treasure Buried in Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth
Archaeological Park” by Madison Rodak

“The Treasure Buried in Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth
Archaeological Park” gives us a peek into a persona wholly original and strange. The language is lithe and wriggling as an eel, and the images are crystalline and clear and unexpected. It has a barreling energy barely contained and channels the bounce and joy of writers like Hopkins in the best way. The poem, like Ponce de Leon’s treasure, challenges us to return, and rewards a second and third and fourth reading with glee.

RUNNER-UP

“To Autumn (After Keats)” by Jenifer Joseph

“To Autumn (After Keats)” is a clever riff on an old poem. It retains the shape of the original while shifting the emotional core sideways, giving us something delightfully more melancholy, sexual, and decidedly modern. Unforgettable phrases (“Feckless fuckbuddy of the scraggly sun”) are born in John Keats’ silhouette, slipping an irreverence and youthful cynicism into a classic to make it something cold and new.



Blaise is a 2016 graduate of Ursinus College. He grew up in West Philly and someday will return. He has poetry published in *Apiary Magazine*, *A Hundred Gourds*, *Aux/Vox.*, and *Modern Haiku*. He’s worked as a bike courier, assistant teacher at Our House Montessori School, and workshop leader at Mighty Writers, and is currently a nanny for a wonderful two-year-old; Lucas if you’re reading this we have to start cleaning up the trains in ten minutes.

MADISON RODAK

The Treasure Buried in Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth
Archaeological Park

I sing you fantasy, clot your thoughts and gash
Smothered thrill. My stonecold grave stashed
Among twisted mangrove, oak, blue cedar.
I keep this soil restless, eager.
I slice this world with leopard fangs, slash

Truth from wish. Here my ruby heart thrashes
In a cracked glass coffin the brash
Gold of mango flesh and gleams—
I sing you fantasy.

Will you dredge me up in dream?
Whiplash To the ends of this luscious
boneyard, hash Apart wide-eyed gardens
on scraped knees To find strings of a
seaman's legacy? Will you die in
obscurity—or victory? I sing you fantasy.

PROSE PRIZE WINNER

“High Cards on the Low River” by Griffin Banks

In “High Cards on the Low River,” the writer paints a picture of five poker players in the Old West town of Moon River, Texas. The repetition of names and repeated short, direct sentences build the images of the characters and their stories from the ground up. It’s the varying sentence length and flow that then takes the reader on tangents, of what each player wants or has wanted in life, only to be dragged back to reality each time. The act of reading the story is as enjoyable as the content of the story itself.

RUNNER-UP

“To Romanticize the Restless” by Lola Holcomb

In “To Romanticize the Restless,” the writer dissects their experience of living with insomnia, including their own reactions to it—in particular, their past attempts to be proud of the lack of sleep, trying to turn it into a showcase of good a student, how hard a worker, they are. The writer weaves through the maze of advice and diagnoses given to them, without ever losing sight of their own experiences, lying in bed late at night. While many people wish they slept longer, or better, this piece reminds us that so many take the simple ability to sleep, to take a nap, for granted.



Henry Willshire has been a tutor, a financial compliance consultant, a Christmas tree seller, and most recently a sales assistant for a large publishing company. He lives and works in New York City.

GRIFFIN BANKS

High Cards on the Low River

Three cards laid face up on the table.

A four

A three

And a king

Buddy Bacall was tired. Buddy Bacall was damn tired. Not the sort of tired that made a man crave a bed. No, not that sort of tired at all. Buddy Bacall was the sort of tired that made a man crave a cheap drink and an easy woman. Buddy lifted his bottle real high and put it down real slow. From his lips he wiped a soft, wet whiskey kiss. Buddy's skin was a rich bronze, his fair Irish skin leathered by the rotten American sun. As he drank, and sat, and played, Buddy glanced at Madam Van Buren's girls. They were all lined up in a row at the bar, each more beautiful and less principled than the last. A pretty little redhead in a pretty little pink number gave Buddy a beckoning wink. Buddy removed a match from his jacket pocket. He struck it on the side of his work boot, ill-fitting and scuffed as it was. With one hand he raised the lit match to the tobacco cigarette hanging lazily from the corner of his mouth. With his other hand, he cupped the flame and took a hefty drag.

Buddy rubbed his shoulder with his raw, calloused hand. Doc Bronson had done his best to remove the buckshot, but straggling shrapnel nagged at Buddy's composure. Those Cassidy boys were sure ambitious, enterprising folk, but marksmen? That they were not. It was a shame, really. If those Cassidy boys had haggled with Mr. Dufresne, they could have gotten a real fair deal. Mr. Dufresne was a reasonable man, a good one even. It wouldn't have cost them more than twenty, thirty a head at most. Instead, those Cassidy boys had to go acting like fools, like damn and terrible fools. Instead, those Cassidy boys paid with their blood and with their souls, on some patch of dirt, on the bad side of no place.

Buddy didn't like the work. Hell, a few more whiskeys, Buddy might even say he hated it. Buddy was sick of cows and heat, sick of cow shit and Texas. But Buddy was stubborn, and Buddy was stupid. So, Buddy did the work of stubborn and stupid men. It was a compulsion really, or maybe it was some sort of tradition. Buddy's daddy had been a cow puncher, and Buddy's granddaddy before that. More than likely, Buddy's bastards too would make their living staring at a cow's ass. Men like Buddy, well, they couldn't much help themselves.

The only extraordinary thing about Quincy Maxson was his gun. It certainly was one hell of a piece. It was a masterwork, a special order from a Swiss gunsmith. It was a six-shooter. It was forged of rare and treasured metals, of gold and silver. The handle was ivory, with the initials “QM” carved into one side, and the sword and shield of a family crest carved into the other. Quincy Maxson was a walking, talking, whimpering tell. He had a nervous twitch and a nervous cough, but his hand on that gun was the worst of them all. When Quincy Maxson put his hand on that gun, everyone in Moon River knew Quincy Maxson had big obligations and small pockets. Make no mistake, he didn’t scare nobody. Quincy was a fangless cobra. He had bought the gun of gold and silver with the ivory handle, but Quincy Maxson had never gotten around to buying the lead bullets. Y’see, Quincy Maxson was a man of peace, or as they’re known around Moon River, a coward. He’d never really been in a fight, and certainly never been in a fight he’d won. That’s what the gun was for, to make wrathful men think twice about exacting their wrath upon poor Quincy Maxson. Anybody with any sense though knew that the only thing that gun shot out was dust bunnies and dead air.

Quincy dressed for cards like most men dressed for church. He wore a three-piece suit, black. The knot of his tie was high and tight. You’d have thought the man was trying to tie his own noose. Quincy drank gin. He took quick, panicked sips, wincing as it went down. Quincy’s little black eyes covered behind wire-framed glasses. The glasses were crooked, twisted. The left lens had been cracked by the balled fist of a fat-fingered Scotsman just outside of El Paso. This particular Scotsman took great exception with Quincy’s loan policy, that policy being that he took a lot and paid back very little. Quincy’s shoes were thin and narrow. His hair never seemed to be properly cut, always lopsided and uneven, damp with nervous sweat.

The Maxson family had been small royalty in a big city somewhere, in a St. Louis or a Kansas City. They were dressmakers. They advertised beautiful gowns and garments, hand stitched together from the finest silks of the Orient, second only in beauty to the royal wear of the kings and queens of Europe. The reality, as is so often the case, was far less glamorous than as is advertised. In reality, they sold corsets to heifers and wedding dresses to whores. It was good money, though. Well, the money wasn’t exactly “good,” but there was a lot of it.

Maxson came to Texas with a big Quaker family and big Quaker dreams. There was his wife Sophia. Sophia was a rich girl from a rich family. Sophia was a debutante, a desperately content one. Sophia had grown accustomed to the metallic tinge of the silver spoon in her mouth.

She would do just about anything for that taste, including marrying Quincy Maxson. They had six children the two of them. There was the oldest, Big Ed, the twins Marcy and Mary Belle, the other twins Gary and Cole, and the runt of the litter Lil Georgie. The eight of them packed all their earthly belongings into a deluxe stage, and hightailed it in the direction of the sunset. Quincy bought a big estate in the hills, the kind of place that seemed to just keep going and going.

Quincy Maxson though, had never been to Texas. Quincy Maxson had never tasted the liquor there, never got good and drunk like only the people there knew how. Quincy hadn't gambled like they did there. These were rough men. These were men who didn't play cards over fine brandy and Cubans. These were men who didn't play cards for the sport of it. Quincy hadn't known sin. That was his grave and terrible mistake. Quincy Maxson had never been to Texas, but he decided to live there.

Each game, each hand, was money burned over an open fire. It all went eventually, slow then fast. The deluxe stage had been sold at auction. The estate in the hills seized by the bank. The family was the last to go, but by then Quincy was numb to the losing and couldn't find the words or the care. Sophia Maxson became Sophia Rathbone. Big Ed enlisted, became a cavalryman. The last anyone heard he was stationed out at Fort Bliss, but that was a long while ago now. Marcy married some oil man, gone and started herself a big Quaker family of her own. The rumors surrounding Mary Belle were, well, unsavory. The prevailing scuttlebutt was that Mary Belle had fallen in with a madam somewhere out in the countryside. Apparently she was quite popular, charged high rates too. Gary had made his way to California, looking for gold and finding not much of anything. Cole went back to school, studying to be a dentist or some such doctor. Lil Georgie well...he was about six feet under, pushin' up daisies through a pine box. Lawmen shot him to shit just shy of Cheyenne. Horse thievin', believe it or not. Marshalls caught him with his pants down about a day's ride outside the city limits. Can't blame the kid, really. It was a thoroughbred, a stallion, as white as the first winter's snow. It would have fetched him a pretty penny too, if he ever learned to ride a horse well at all.

General Mathias L. Tuttle wore his medals as he played. He must have thought it made him look intimidating, but everyone else thought it just made him look damn silly. He didn't have many medals. The ones he had were small. They were lousy tin and copper. They were always well-polished, to his credit. Rubbed, spit shined, with a raggedy old handkerchief. Tuttle miraculously squeezed into his old shell jacket too. It stunk to high heaven. He never washed it. He could hardly bring himself

to, for every time he did, it smelled a little less like Virginia and smelled a little more like Northern smugness.

General Mathias L. Tuttle lost four toes in the Siege of Port Hudson. He had a nasty limp, but General Mathias L. Tuttle was fat and lazy too, so he never moved enough for it to be a serious concern. When he needed to get around, he rested on an old hickory cane that was never far from his side. The Reb' doc who stitched him up said he was lucky not to lose the whole foot. Funny kind of luck that was, Mathias thought. If you met Mathias, even briefly, you'd know he fought at Port Hudson. The story changed every time he told it, and he told it often.

First it was...

“And there we were Buddy, all four of us. It was me, Teddy Lang, Jeb, and ‘Battlin’ Man’ Bart. We was pinned down, stuck in the muck of some Louisiana, backwater swamp. Everywhere you stepped it was gators and Yankees, and we couldn’t damn near tell which was worse! It was hot, hotter than the seven hells it was! Hot, hot, hot. The bugs, the fucking gnats, were on us with the bloodlust. Then, just like that, right out of nowhere...BOOM! POW! BAM! Cannonballs cut through root, tree, and poor Teddy Lang and Battlin’ Man Bart. Those blue bellies caught me in the foot, but I just kept on shooting. Jeb, God bless his soul, dragged me by my collar all the way back to camp. It must of been a hundred miles, a hundred miles! And me well...I just kept shooting. Jeb was quite the soldier, and an even better man. The flu took him not long after that, unfortunately. But still...quite the soldier and quite the man!”

Then he guzzled a beer...then another...then another, and it became...

“Fucking Yankees, Quincy! Hundreds of those limp-dick cowards, poured right out of the trees. It was a flood, Quincy! Biblical! You read the bible, don’tcha Quincy? Well there I was, just me and... and... well, shit. Who was there again? Dagnabbit it was...well...it was uh...a few of us. A few against the many, David versus Goliath! They came down on us with cannons, with hellfire! They took my foot but I...well I took more than just a foot let me tell ya!”

Who knows what that story will turn into in a few more tellings. Perhaps General Mathias L. Tuttle will be President of the Confederacy Mathias L. Tuttle. Maybe he’ll ride onto the battlefield carried by a horse drawn chariot. Hell, could be he’ll mud wrestle Abraham Lincoln himself for the sweet virgin honor of the great state of Virginia. For if it was up to Mathias L. Tuttle, the Rebel flag would be firmly planted on the top of the White House. And if it were *really* up to Mathias L. Tuttle, he’d have been the one to plant it there.

Mathias was shit at cards, because along with four toes, Mathias lost whatever good sense he had in a swamp somewhere outside of Port Hudson. Mathias only ever lost at cards; it was Vernita Dubois who did the winning. She sat in his lap, her long legs crossed and her slender arm draped faintly over his shoulder. Vernita was one of Madam Van Buren's best girls. She wasn't the prettiest or the most agreeable, but she was the smartest which made her better than most. In her small, gloved hand she held a dainty little glass, from which she sipped tequila with her pinky elegantly high in the air. For even though she was a lady of the night, Vernita Dubois still fancied herself a *lady*. Every now and then Vernita would peek at Tuttle's cards. She'd peek at his cards, cover her mouth with her slender fingers, and whisper into his ear. What she whispered, though, was far from sweet nothings. Mainly because, well, Vernita Dubois didn't have nothing sweet to say to no potbellied Johnny Reb. No, this was war talk. Vernita had grown up with a deck in her hand. There wasn't much of anything like fun on the Buford plantation, but there were cards. Vernita knew faro and hold 'em proper before she knew anything resembling proper English.

Mathias never shared his winnings with Vernita. The way Mathias saw it, he was already paying her for unmentionable things, and, well, Mathias wasn't exactly charitable or even fair. Vernita got hers, though. After they would lay together, Vernita would always sneak a little something for herself from the good general's vulnerable pockets. Because the way Vernita saw it, beyond the principle of it, the things she did with her body for that man earned her all the riches she could carry.

When Vernita was young and pretty, she went by many names. She had been many different things, and she had many different names. In those days, you could see those names on posters and fliers outside of any bar or watering hole worth visiting.

“The Black Beauty”

“The African Queen”

“The Nubian Vixen...with *alllll* the fixin's”

Way back when and way down below the Rio Grande, Vernita Dubois had been a star. Men from all around came to watch her dance. They rode miles on top of miles just for a pitiful, measly glance. The Lobo de Noche Cantina had never been more packed than on those nights, when on those table tops she would move, really move. Vernita Dubois had a way with men, her way. They saw her and she touched them without even having to. She changed them, changed them deep and for always. Upon seeing the way her body moved, gunmen would lay down their pistols and their rifles at her feet. They prayed, on their knees, for forgiveness before

her swaying hips. Old men, upon seeing the gentle glint in her eyes, stirred. Old men who never loved anything beyond tobacco and harsh words, felt such a tremendous longing in their dwarfed black hearts so that there was no more room for hate and bitterness.

But that was when she was young and pretty, that was way back when and way down below the Rio Grande. Now she was wrinkling and sagging. Now nothing hanged right where it was supposed to. Now she was in Moon River. Now she loved men that she only really ever wanted to hate. Now, all she had was tequila. Tequila, to remind her of the strong arms of Latin men. Tequila, to remind her of Mexican stars in a Mexican sky.

When Cherokee Charlie laughed, you heard it. It was the kind of laugh that birthed a million little laughs in its wake. It was a queer sort of sound, low and loud. When Cherokee Charlie laughed, it rattled the freshly polished glassware of the Moon River Inn. Its ruckus woke Sheriff McCoy out of his drunken stupor, which was not at all an easy feat. It even startled Mrs. Farnsworth's chickens into a mad, clucking frenzy. Most men played cards like villains and fiends. Most men played cards with drinking, and swearing, and hating. Charlie, on the other hand, played cards with a wink and a smile. Charlie didn't take much of anything too seriously, least of all a game of cards. Charlie didn't care about winning. Charlie was a grifter. To him, money was something swindled rather than earned so he didn't have particularly strong feelings towards it.

Now Charlie wasn't a Cherokee. No one quite knew what he was, but wasn't no Cherokee. And his name? Well, it damn sure wasn't Charlie. He had an Indian sort of name. It was long, chunky, wholly unpronounceable by white tongues in white mouths. Most just took to calling him Charlie, and I guess he took to it too on account of he didn't seem to mind none.

Charlie hated Indians but he loved himself. Charlie didn't have a tribe. Charlie didn't care to have one, and well no tribe cared to have him neither. Charlie was real opinionated about the whole thing, though. Charlie had a thought and a story about every tribe and every Indian that ever was.

“Buddy you so damn quiet! It's unsettling! You remind me of an old Iroquois chief, motherfucker named ‘Bear Who Walks at Dawn.’ You see, Bear Who Walks at Dawn was like you. Real quiet, scary quiet! Everybody thought he was so damn mysterious. Those Iroquois respected Bear Who Walks at Dawn for that. Boy, did they ever respect him. He always spoke first. He always ate first. I mean damn, the man had six wives! Can you believe that Buddy? Six fucking wives! Here I thought

one was too many! But, one day, the cavalry came. The cavalry came and did what them cavalry boys do. Woman screamed, babies cried, and everyone turned to Bear Who Walks at Dawn for guidance, for his great and glorious wisdom! You know what that man did then, Buddy? All them people knelt before him, begging and pleading and you know what he did next? Nothing! Turns out, that motherfucker was just dumb!”

The women, too. Charlie knew everything there was to know about Indian women.

“Fat man, what you’ve gotta do is get yourself a Comanche woman. Stop playing around with these jungle bunnies. Comanche woman will treat you *real* nice, let me tell ya. Not like them Apache gals, hoo-wee! They look like shit, smell like shit, and can’t cook for shit.”

Cherokee Charlie didn’t drink much. For a man like Charlie, a man intoxicated by the lift of his own voice, liquor wouldn’t have done him no good. Lonnie Marsh claimed he had seen Charlie drink a glass of brandy last Fourth of July, though bear in mind Lonnie Marsh was something of a drunk himself so that very well might have been projection. No Cherokee Charlie didn’t drink much. He drank water when he was thirsty, and lemonade when he was in a particularly cheery mood.

Charlie always wore a white suit, a peculiar sight in a Cowtown like Moon River. The suit was always dirty. It was always splattered in Texas, in the piss and filth of it all. Charlie wore a ten-gallon hat, with an eagle’s feather sticking up from the brim. Underneath it, was a wide and grisly scar right smack dab in the middle of his scalp. Such a scar was the result of an especially foul disagreement between Charlie and a Navajo man over an especially fetching Navajo woman. Charlie’s hair was dark and thick, falling over his back and shoulders. Charlie’s boots were snakeskin, a sickly, faded green color. Charlie had a glass eye, you couldn’t miss it. It didn’t quite look right. The real one had been spooned out by a cavalry-issue hunting knife. Who knows how that happened, maybe Cherokee Charlie had looked at him funny.

The final two cards were laid bare.

A five

An ace

Quincy didn’t have shit, a seven and a jack. He put his greasy face in his bony palm, moaning and groaning as he did so. Mathias had two pair, a four and a five. Mathias let out a satisfied grunt, and Vernita beamed with a silent pride. Cherokee Charlie had nothing, a two and a seven. He still hooted and hollered all the same. Buddy flipped his cards over...

An ace

A king

Buddy thought for a moment. Buddy thought of whiskey. Buddy thought of its taste. Buddy thought of tobacco. Buddy thought of its smell. Buddy thought of his ex-wife. Buddy thought of all the women who weren't his ex-wife. Buddy thought of many things. But that rock called Texas? Well, Buddy didn't think too much about that.

CREAGER PRIZE WINNER

“Sestina of a Vagina left in the microwave too long” by Kieran DeMelfi

This poem, from form to content to voice is absolutely electric. After reading it once, I proceeded to read it five more times. It's an absolutely visceral experience. The images are dark and disturbing and at points utterly humorous. This is the type of poem that grabs you by the shoulders and screams, "I don't care if you like me, even though you'll probably love me." The final triplet will leave you haunted in the way only great poetry can. It will eat my dreams for weeks.

RUNNER-UP

“Keeps on Tripping” by Tommy Armstrong

This story is a laugh riot, but that's not why it's a great piece of writing. This story puts on a clinic in voice and characterization. The plot is constructed with nuance and care. Its use of language and dialogue transport you into the world of the narrator in an unparalleled way. But what really drew me to this story was its use of time and how every aspect of the story was built around the way time functions.



MJ McGinn graduated from Ursinus in 2013 and received his MFA from Adelphi University in 2017. His work has been named to the Wigleaf 50 best very short stories of 2017 and has previously appeared in the Guernica/PEN flash series, New Flash fiction Review, Necessary Fiction, PEN America, along with several other literary magazines. He lives in Philadelphia and co-runs the Don't Tell Anyone reading series with Sara Sherr ('13).

KIERAN DEMELFI

Sestina of a Vagina Left in the Microwave Too Long

My vagina's
Begun to smell like popcorn
Left in the microwave too long. I hear its tune,
Beep-beep-beep, gates opened wide
To an angry, dark cathedral,
The bag bruised with butter stains.

My underwear looks harsh with these thick, black stains
Melted from my candlelight vagina,
My holy, bruised cathedral,
My temple. Someone's burning popcorn
Between my legs, lying open and wide.
He hums a masturbatory tune.

I remember this tune
From scrubbing out period stains,
Washing machine open wide
In mockery of my gaping vagina.
She expands like popcorn
To fill this damp, sinister cathedral.

My bedroom was my cathedral—
A piano tune—
A warm bag of movie popcorn
Before he soaked my sheets with bloodstains,
Clawed out my sweet vagina,
And urged me to open wide.

I open wide
And take the Father of this cathedral
Into my body, my embrace, my loving vagina.
She sings a lustful tune
And stains
His fingers like buttered popcorn.

He bruises me under this popcorn
Ceiling, a hole gaping and wide
Where the light should be, water stains
Painting the walls beige. He says he's never been to a cathedral

With a single light or gentle tune,
Even though he has practiced worship here, in my vagina.

She cracks like popcorn, my vagina,
Stiff and wide and groaning a somber tune.
She ponders, briefly, the stains on the carpet of her ruined cathedral.

TAAHIRA DAVIS

Perception (Part 2)

Are you inclined to find me
Or are you fine being blind
Your standards don't align to mine
Unconfined by your lines
Bonded by your run down lies
You're impervious to what I say
How I feel
My whole spiel
Acting like my words aren't real

I'm talking straight
No room for debate
My freedom you confiscate
My mind you penetrate
My soul you desecrate
I refuse to assimilate

I'm expressing fact
Don't object
You're turning me into a TMZ subject
That you can exploit
That you don't take time to understand
To let shine

I'm not allowing that
Don't you see
I'm shrieking like a banshee
Because the only thing I have left
Is for you to accept me for me

DANIEL WALKER

The Gospel of Aggregates

No one had wanted to turn the TV on. If it was up to Dad or Uncle Sammy, it would have stayed in the attic forever—or at least until we moved out and threw it in a storage unit somewhere. But Cousin Hen's kid would throw a tantrum if he didn't watch *Heep Heep & Friends* every day at 5 p.m., so Dad courteously ascended the rickety wood ladder that led up to the attic, sorted through piles of junk (mostly excess books and discarded paraphernalia relating to the few tech fads we'd dabbled in over the years), and eventually found the old TV. He brought it downstairs a couple minutes before 5, and after all the male family members had crowded around to debate about which input jack went where, Hen sat her kid—I think his name was Justin—in front of it. The TV blinked to life at 4:59, and Justin sat rapturously watching his show. Everyone else, including me, sat around watching him watch it.

The show itself seemed inoffensive enough. Heep and friends were a collection of genderless, amorphous blobs that traversed a barren expressionist landscape, stopping every two minutes or so to confer with another amorphous blob or impart a valuable life lesson. Ari's siblings were pretty young, and I'd seen them running around his backyard with little stuffed Heep Heeps, but I had never bothered to investigate what they were. Sitting there in the family room, in the idle silence of my relatives, Heep Heep's exploits seemed at once amusing and disturbing—a side effect of low TV intake, I guess. Everyone else seemed to react about the same as I did. After about eleven minutes, Heep Heep disappeared and a new scene filled the screen.

Looking over a wooden table, in the kitchen of some suburban ranch home, sun streaming in through gauzy curtains and bouncing off the steel stovetop at the far end of the room. The table was bare save for a ham sandwich on a paper plate, two salt-and-pepper shakers, and a bottle of Miracle Whip looming imperially in the horizon. A face swooped in from the left. It was Uncle Sammy—a few years younger, with a different haircut and a much dorkier pair of glasses. He beamed with pride—taking care not to obstruct the view of the Miracle Whip bottle—as two tiny hands rose from the bottom of the screen and lifted the sandwich towards the camera. I looked over at the real Uncle Sammy, who was sitting on the couch opposite Aunt Michelle. His fists were tightly clenched and white at the knuckles. He looked like he was suppressing some kind of snarl. On TV, Uncle Sammy smiled and mouthed *Great job!* The sandwich pulled

away from the camera, revealing an infant-sized bite mark. Thin, jaunty ukulele chords played over the whole scene.

Cut to a picnic table at some outdoor pavilion. Cousin Hen and her husband Trace were sitting in front of the camera, on one side of the table. Trace was idly ladling little balls of watermelon onto his plate, an identical bottle of Miracle Whip sitting beside him. Hen leaned towards the screen, holding a forkful of potato salad. The noise of screaming kids—and the nasal honk of Jerseyan parents—hummed in the background behind the ukulele melody. Hen pulled the fork, now cleaned, back towards her. Trace looked up and smiled at the camera. I looked down at Justin, who was grinning in recognition. Uncle Sammy let out a strangled “*god-DAMN-it.*”

Then it was me, Mom and Dad on screen, sitting on the beach at Manasquan. I couldn’t see me, just Mom and Dad, but I knew I was behind the camera. Everything was just as I remembered it. The purple-and-blue blanket was spread out under us, and Dad was picking sandwiches one-by-one out of the picnic basket. Chicken salad on whole wheat, each one embalmed in a layer of cling wrap. I reached out and grabbed a sandwich, unwrapping it as I pulled towards me—I mean, towards the camera. Just as I took a bite, a grey gull swooped down and nabbed a sandwich with its beak. Dad leapt up and lunged at it, but he stumbled, swayed uneasily, then finally toppled over. As the gull flew into the blue horizon, Dad landed face-first in the sand. Then he got up, dusted himself off, looked at me and laughed. And all the while, he’d been holding a bottle of Miracle Whip. He hadn’t dropped it when he went after the bird. The label never so much as shifted.

Then the beach at Manasquan disappeared, and the bottle of Miracle Whip stood alone against a red background. A voice burst in—low, male, vaguely sandy—and said “MIRACLE WHIP: SPREAD THE GOOD VIBES!” The moment the commercial faded out, a vase flew across the room and collided with the TV, shattering in tandem with the plasma screen. We all looked in the direction of the projectile to find a red-faced Uncle Sammy clutching a fistful of leaves. He’d taken care to remove the English Ivy inside the vase before tossing it at the TV. Justin started to cry. Then, with dirt under his fingernails and flecks of slobber gathering at the corners of his mouth, Uncle Sammy began to rant.

“THAT WASN’T RIGHT! THAT’S NOT HOW IT HAPPENED, IT WAS A FUCKING COMMERCIAL! I’VE NEVER FED MY KID MIRACLE WHIP IN MY FUCKING LIFE! WE’RE A HELLMANS FAMILY, GODDAMNIT! AND SOMETIMES WE USE THAT

ARTISANAL SHIT THAT MARK SENDS OVER, BUT WE DON'T. FUCKING. USE. MIRACLE WHIP."

Aunt Michelle roused herself from the love seat and wrapped her arm around Uncle Sammy's shoulders. "Sweetie, shh, shh—I know they upset you, but you can't curse in front of the children."

"I HATE THESE MEMORY READERS, I HATE THEM! THESE FUCKERS THINK IT'S OKAY TO GO INTO MY MIND, AND STEAL ALL MY HAPPIEST MEMORIES, AND TURN THEM INTO A MAYONNAISE COMMERCIAL, AND THAT'S GONNA MAKE ME WANT TO BUY MORE MAYONNAISE! NOT EVEN REAL MAYONNAISE, MOTHERFUCKING CHEMICALLY PROCESSED FAKE MAYONNAISE MOTHERFUCKERY! IT'S SHIT! IT'S FUCKING SHIT!"

After that, Uncle Sammy went to the basement to calm down. Dad fixed him a little plate of crackers and olive dip, and we all casually exiled him to the sewing room tucked away next to the furnace. As he cracked open a spy novel and settled in, breathing slowly through his nose, Hen ran Justin upstairs to the guest room for a nap. Aunt Michelle and Trace hunted through the garage for epoxy glue, and just before 5:30 rolled around it started raining. I heard Dad mutter "*shit*" as he darted to the patio to drag in the cooler and the extra chairs. Mom went into the kitchen to check on the chili, so I followed her.

"Hey, Mom," I asked, "How come you didn't get as mad at that commercial as Uncle Sammy did?"

"I did." She gave a shaky laugh as she fiddled with the timer. "Oh, I did, believe me. But when I looked over and saw your uncle sitting there, I knew he was going to do something. And I figured I'd rather..." She paused. "Your Uncle Sammy...is a very *passionate* man. He always goes the extra mile, y'know? That's the nice thing about having him around."

"It's nice to have him around because he's always doing stuff?"

Mom lifted the lid on the slow-cooker then set it back down. "Not quite. He's always trying twice as hard. Being around him, you don't really have to try at all." She walked over to the basement and yelled down the steps. "Sam, you ready to come up yet?"

"Give me twenty more minutes," Uncle Sammy answered. Satisfied, Mom walked back into the family room, where Dad and Aunt Michelle were patching the vase back together. Now that the TV was gone, everyone was reclining on the couches and love seats watching Dad carefully apply glue to a chipped-off piece of the handle. His hair was still a little wet from the light rain. I hung out with the adults for a while, lounging in the noiseless void left by the TV's absence. The only person

here younger than me was Uncle Sammy's only daughter, Bernice. And whenever Bernice came over to our house, she bypassed all greetings and familial niceties and ran right to the backyard. Our backyard was much bigger than theirs, and it bordered a large stretch of woods. Bernice had probably been roaming along the creek's edge during the whole TV debacle, scooping leaves into her pockets and climbing the skinny trees. I zoned out for a while, thinking about the days when the woods held some kind of wonder to me, and when I snapped back to the family room Dad had repaired the vase. He'd re-planted the English Ivy, and everybody cheered as he finished patting down the dirt with a flourish. I excused myself and went up to my room.

Sometimes, calling Ari was the only thing that got me through the day. When we were younger and first getting to know each other, I used to go days without talking to him. It was what I was used to. But he'd come over or call me on the house phone; and he'd talk about Bionic Force Five and I'd talk about Chester, my monkey doll. We both liked books—the goofy ones about gods and monsters and plucky, adventurous boys who were just a little bit older than us. Every week, on Monday afternoon when I'd be exhausted from school, he'd call up and ask what I was reading. We didn't talk much about books anymore, but I still treasured our conversations.

“What are you doing for the Fourth?” I asked him.

I heard him shrug—sometimes he'd forget I couldn't see him over the phone. “Uh, nothing much. My dad wanted to go to Cape May, but it's supposed to rain all weekend. Thunderstorms and shit.”

“We got a little rain over here too. Everyone's sitting around inside.”

“Everyone?”

“Oh, a bunch of my aunts and uncles came up. My Cousin Hen came up with her kid. I'd never met him before, he's like four or five.”

“Was Uncle Sammy there?”

“Yeah! You wanna know what he did?” And I regurgitated the story of the Miracle Whip ad and the vase. Ari laughed for two straight minutes. And I laughed along, clutching the phone to my ear like a sacred seashell.

We went on for another hour, talking of our summer plans and the teachers we hoped we wouldn't get next year, before Ari told me he had to hang up. “It was nice talking,” said Ari, “but in case you've forgotten, President Piscopo's having one of his national addresses, and y'know, you GOTTA watch that. Except if you're, uh-”

“Conscientious objectors,” I said slowly, every syllable etched into my tongue. The words came to me like an old nursery rhyme. My childhood was full of explanations—explanations from my parents to me, explanations I repeated to kids and teachers and adults I didn’t know but who seemed to know me. And Ari, of course. The first time we ever met, I asked him if his parents were subversives too. It became a joke between us—as we grew older, Ari liked to refer to himself as “subversish.” “I used to be normal,” he’d tell me, “then you showed up and *subverted* everything!”

“You sure you don’t wanna come over and watch the Prez’s address with us?” Ari asked. This was another one of our running jokes—Ari trying to convert me. I laughed again and said no thanks.

“Why don’t you come over here?” I asked. “Things have been kinda dull since the TV got smashed.”

“Nice try,” Ari replied. “Last time I visited your house while Uncle Sammy was staying over, Bernice crawled into my backpack and took a shit.”

“She was four! She’s older now, much more mature.”

“Is she still shitting in people’s backpacks?”

“I hope not.”

“Are you sure you don’t wanna come watch with us?” Ari pleaded, his voice full of mock sincerity. “I think he’s gonna break out his Sinatra impression. That always kills.”

“Does it really kill,” I asked him, “or is it mandatory to say it kills?”

Ari laughed again. “I really gotta go. Have a good Fourth. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

Dinner was starting in fifteen minutes, so I went to look for Uncle Sammy. He hadn’t rejoined everyone in the family room, and he wasn’t among Mom and the other adults, who had gathered in the dining room with beers in hand. I looked outside, upstairs, in the guest room where Justin still stirred. Then I went down into the basement. And there he was, sitting at Mom’s old sewing table. He was hunched over something, his head staring straight down and his hands cupped behind his head. Whatever he was looking at glowed a dull blue, and the light bounced off his glasses. He didn’t move, and he didn’t acknowledge my presence.

I crept up quietly behind him and peered over his shoulder. It was a tablet, playing something I didn’t recognize. Uncle Sammy kept on watching, and it slowly dawned on me just *what* he was watching. It was *An Enclave Of Clans*, the most popular fantasy show in the universe. I

knew enough about it from Ari's frenzied secondhand recaps that I could almost figure out what was going on. Onscreen, a big bearded guy (who I guessed was Bjornmir the Mightful, the show's hero) was looking over a nude and prostrate wench (who I guessed was an elf). He tied her hands roughly to a bedpost with a bit of loose cord, then reached for a foamy mug of ale that sat at his bedside. He overturned the mug and doused the elf-girl's bare vulva with golden-brown brew, then lapped furiously at her soaking nether regions.

That's when Uncle Sammy finally looked up and saw me. We both stared at each other, saying nothing, for about two minutes straight. When Bjornmir finally saw fit to unsheath his mighty cock, Uncle Sammy flicked the tablet off. We sat motionless and noiseless for another two minutes before Uncle Sammy spoke up. "I watch it for the sword fights. They're very well-choreographed."

"Uncle Sammy, what's going on?"

He sighed. "You know something? At least I have the decency to watch it in secret. I don't inflict it on anyone who doesn't want it or would prefer not to see it. Okay?"

"Mom said you were really committed to this whole no-TV thing. Even more than she was."

"Well, your mother doesn't know about this, does she?" Then Uncle Sammy sighed again. I knew he was getting tired of getting angry. "It's easier when you're a kid. It always is. But when you're an adult like me, you have a social life you have to maintain. There are friendships, partnerships, work relationships—and you have to keep those alive. You don't know what a watercooler conversation is, do you? Or a Super Bowl party? There are times when you have to make a compromise. Because sometimes, not knowing what anyone else is talking about is a pretty big detriment. It's fine when you're a kid, and you're living in this little commune with Daddy and Mommy, but not in the real world."

"This feels like the real world to me."

Uncle Sammy looked like a dog caught in the rain. His head hung down, his face was drooped, and he scanned the room like he was looking for somewhere warm to hide. Then he pushed the tablet toward me. "I'll tell you what," he said. "Your mom and I are both pragmatists. We'll try anything once. If you don't tell anyone I was watching *Enclave*, I'll let you have five free minutes before dinner. Deal?"

I look down at the little silver slab. "Can it read my mind?"

"I blocked all the channels that aren't ad-free, so no. You'll be fine." And with that, Uncle Sammy ventured upstairs to taste-test Mom's chili and grab a frosty ale of his own.

I turned the tablet's screen towards me. A humongous dragon was razing a field of crops with its fiery breath. I watched it for a little over a minute before I got bored and started surfing channels. As I sat there, images flickering past me like stalks of wheat seen from a passing car, I started thinking about that day in Manasquan. I had almost forgotten about it—we hadn't been back to the shore since I was nine. Sitting on the couch, watching myself watch Dad grab at the gull and fall to the sand—it had all felt so pleasant. I remembered being so scared when he fell; but when he looked up and laughed, I started laughing too. And we laughed so hard we couldn't even eat our sandwiches. *What else I had forgotten?* I wondered. So I went to the Settings menu and fiddled around until I got the non-ad-free channels unblocked.

I sat around for a couple more minutes, waiting for an ad to come up, and then one did. I saw the hallway at Dell Valley Elementary, and all the finger paint projects and hand turkeys that lined the wall. Then I saw Ari, standing next to me in a puffy purple coat. This was back when he had an awful bowl cut, and it bobbed up and down a little as he waved and said hi to me. That same ukulele music from the Miracle Whip ad—or maybe it was a slightly modified version—played in the background as Ari mouthed *What's your name?* And I could faintly hear myself answer, then ask *Are your parents subversives?*

Then it was me and Ari running through the aquarium on a field trip, me and Ari walking his two dogs by the creek, Ari posing like Bjornmir on top of his kitchen table. Then it was sixth-grade Career Day, and Ari's dad was speaking to our class. He worked in marketing, funnily enough, and he talked to us about aggregates and statistics and demographics and units while me and Ari sat at the computer and switched the slides on his PowerPoint. Then Ari and I were kissing, in a tent by the creek in the woods behind my house, we were kissing, then it was May, just a couple weeks ago, middle-school graduation in the stuffy auditorium, and I figured the ad was going to end there.

Then I was standing in an unfamiliar hallway, looking through a doorway into a darkened bedroom. Someone was standing by the bed, their form a black shadow outlined in blue. It was Ari, naked, looking over his shoulder at me. He looked older, like a college kid, and the eyes I looked at him through felt much older. Ari walked into the light of the hall, smiling and laughing, every part of him in motion, then extended a hand in invitation. I reached out, from the bottom of the screen, and took it.

Then we were hiking up a green trail, one of Ari's dogs trailing very slowly behind us. We were sitting on a park bench, we were standing

in a bar, we were sitting side by side in a subway car. Then we were in the backyard. The backyard looked much bigger, like some of the woods had been cleared away. There was a gazebo at the far end of the yard. One of Mom's hippie friends was waiting for me in the gazebo, holding a little sheet of paper. So was Ari, fidgeting with his lapels in the summer heat.

Then we were in another bar. Everyone was quiet. On a TV screen mounted in the corner, a cloud bloomed in some foreign country, bringing up dust and swallowing little houses. Then I was driving home alone, through the marshy land around the airport. Then I was huddled around another TV, in someone else's apartment, with a bunch of unfamiliar-looking people. Some girl who looked kind of like Bernice was sleeping on the couch. On TV, there were more clouds. Big beige ones, with little flecks of darkness and light within them. Ari was somewhere in those clouds.

Then I was standing in the airport, waiting for someone. As I stood at the mouth of the departure tunnel, the camera darted in all directions, like I was writing letter Zs with my eyes. I was scared to look away from the tunnel, and I was scared of what might come out of it. Then the ukulele music stopped, and Ari walked out. He was pulling a suitcase behind him; his eyes seemed cloudy and distant. His uniform, green like English Ivy and beige like the dust he'd been dodging, hung from his frame. He was exhausted, but when he looked up and saw me, his eyes cleared up at once. Then they grew cloudy again—with tears—as I ran to greet him. That's when the ukulele music kicked back in—but it was triumphant this time, with drums and xylophones and people going *oh-oh-oh*. We embraced, and then we faded away, and the words on the screen said “RAYTHEON: BUILDING A SAFER FUTURE—FOR YOU.”

And all I could do was sit there. The ad break ended. Whatever show that was playing before came back on, and I turned it off. I didn't even know what a Raytheon was, but I knew what I saw. There was a happiness in this world that I couldn't even name, and it was waiting for me. And all I had to do was buy a couple Raytheons, or donate to Raytheon or whatever. Then I heard Mom's voice calling me from somewhere in the house. I walked back upstairs, a little drowsily, feeling like I was floating as my eyes readjusted to the light.

At the table, everybody was devouring their chili. Mom handed me a fork with a concerned look on her face. I took it, trying not to show any emotion. Uncle Sammy looked me over from across the table. Hen mentioned that she was putting Justin into karate class. Dad said that would be a good outlet for him. Mom and Uncle Sammy started talking about the old days, of all things—the shows they watched as kids, before

everything went to shit. Uncle Sammy said one of his coworkers was renting a house in LBI later that month, and though he didn't formally extend an invitation to Mom, I knew he would before the sun went down that night. Everyone was sitting around and talking about how great things were going to be, and I knew I couldn't tell them anything.

Hey everyone, I have a confession to make. Are you sitting down? Here it is. There's an idealized world out there, and I want to be part of it. I want to make it real. I want. I crave. I am the units; I am ready for the house. I yearn for the gospel of aggregates, the motherly coo of Statistic, and the bottomless, neon-lit grave.

VALERIE EICHLER

Cigar

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”
—Sigmund Freud

The first time I thought I’d fallen in love, it was in high school. The person I thought I’d fallen in love with was, to be frank, abusive. By the time I’d come to college, I had become jaded by the notions of love. I assumed I would live a long life in a small apartment in Philadelphia with three dogs, that is, until I started school at Ursinus.

Everything changed the first time I saw them. I felt some kind of spark, a notion that my life would never be quite the same. Sure, they seemed socially incompetent at band rehearsal, but I brushed past this observation. Weeks later, we hung outside of our classes and rehearsals.

Winter break rolled around and I casually texted them every few days. Most of my thoughts about them had vanished from my mind. Maybe my love was actually just immature infatuation? The first night back to campus, I lay on my bed in the basement of the freshman dorms. I had the pleasure of listening to my neighbor’s extravagantly loud stereo system blare “Gucci Gang” for the millionth time that hour. “Hey mind if I come over?” I texted them. Upon seeing them again, my infatuation returned with a vengeance.

It probably all started with a flirty joke, but next thing I knew it was mid-February and I was lying next to them in bed. We stared out of their window, watching the snow fall tenderly on the Earth. It was late at night and the snow lay softly upon the earth, untainted with dirt or footsteps. The lights outside cast a warm glow in the flake-ridden air.

“Can I kiss you?” they asked. “Of course. Please do.” We pecked each other’s lips. “You have the most adorable tiny lips,” they said. I giggled; a quick peck turned into a six-hour conversation on everything and anything that had ever happened to us. We both had the same opinions on partying at Reimert (that is to say, both of us hated the party scene). We had the same dark and ironic sense of humor. We finished each other’s sentences when mocking awful teen movies on Netflix. At four AM, I realized that I was too physically exhausted to walk back to my dorm on the other side of campus. They said I could stay over; their roommate wasn’t there. I wore their oversized T-shirt for pajamas.

I couldn’t sleep around five, so I went to go over to their roommate’s bed. They stopped me and told me they would go over

instead. I fell into a deep sleep, nestled in the warm sheets on a snowy night. The bed smelled like them, and I felt immediately comforted.

At nine, I woke up, and they were back in the bed next to me and cuddling me. “Good morning,” they said, kissing me on the forehead. We immediately went right back to talking, naturally finding endless topics to discuss. I grabbed his arm to cuddle and noticed it was icy cold. “Sorry—the window is open next to the bed I was sleeping on and I’m kind of cold,” he said sheepishly.

They went to get up. I grabbed their arm. “Hey, I...love you,” I blurted out. There was a long pause, and I immediately loathed myself for being so dorky right off the bat. “I love you too,” they murmured before going to take a shower and get ready. I curled right back up in their bed and waited, swooning.

When they came back, they tuned their guitar and strummed a bit, singing a Pink Floyd tune. They were in their jeans, shirtless, with messy hair. They stumbled over to the bed and sat next to me. “I can’t believe I kissed you,” I whispered. They lay down and looked up at me, studying me and my messy hair and oversized-t-shirt-as-pajamas. “I can’t believe I got to kiss you either.”

I eventually left to head back to my dorm, wearing my clothes from the night before. If this is what the walk of shame felt like, I didn’t mind.

The next two months were bliss that I had never experienced before. We just fit together in a beautifully unexpected way. I had never felt so comfortable just being able to talk to another human being. Unlike other relationships that I observed, we didn’t spend every second together. Rather, we would take time to catch up between classes. During the weekend, we hung out at night when our friends would go to Reimert to party.

There was just one little thing that was off. At first, I had tried so hard to ignore it, to suppress it, but I was an open secret. Their friends knew me, and I was close friends with their roommate. However, if you asked, they weren’t in a relationship with me. I would see their friends in upper when we ate together and go to say hello. They wouldn’t directly stop me, but they would change the subject so I would forget they had friends sitting nearby. Their parents didn’t know me, but my parents knew all about them.

I tried to forget this little detail. My friends were intrigued by our somewhat-covert relationship. One of them stated that we seemed to bring out the best in each other when we were together. She said that she hadn’t seen me thrive like this the entire time she’d known me at Ursinus.

One night they came over to my room and we watched Netflix, although I believe they wanted to probably chill in addition to watch Netflix. They asked if I would ever be interested in sex with them. The answer, in short, was yes. I loved them. In reality, the answer was so much more complicated and I struggled to find the words to describe it. I had been assaulted in high school; I wasn't vaginally raped, but I was orally raped. I was a virgin. I didn't like talking about it, but they wanted to know more about my experience with assault. Long story short, sex didn't work out because I just wasn't comfortable enough to participate in such things. I assumed this was all right with them, because we always had each other's support. This, of course, was a rookie mistake.

Three weeks later we went thrifting at Goodwill just off campus. They had a band concert that night for an ensemble that I wasn't a part of. I stayed behind in my dorm and studied for my chemistry exam that I would ultimately fail. They came back to campus and texted me that they were outside of my dorm. I eagerly let them in and led them to my little basement room. "I have to tell you something," they said. My heart skipped a beat, but I cheerily responded, "What's up?"

"I don't want to be your boyfriend any more. I think that we work better as friends. I think I'm working as an agent of chaos in your life, and you already have so many problems to begin with. Also, the whole sex thing—look, I don't mean to pressure you into doing things that you're not ready for. It's awkward for me, and I'm sure it's awkward for you. Is this okay with you?"

I felt like I had just been punched in the gut. I hadn't fully processed all of the information before I heard myself enthusiastically blurt out "of course!"

That night I had the worst case of dissociation that I've had since high school. My brain kept flipping through memories from just a few weeks before. A "destabilizing" force in my life? I'm open about my struggles with my mental illnesses. Was it that? Had they realized that my non-stop thoughts would always take me to the darkest shadows around me? Maybe I had scared them; they were ultimately my confidant in all of my personal struggles. Who would want to be around a terminally anxious, depressed person? That must be some kind of letdown.

Obviously, sex had something to do with it. Was it that important to them? Had my fears caught up with me? I recalled earlier in the semester, when my friends who were wiser about relationships warned me that I couldn't be so openly demisexual. I couldn't stick with being a part of the asexuality spectrum if I was going to be in a relationship with a college student.

The disassociation hit the hardest when I remembered one of the earliest secrets I'd confided in them. They were the first person to know about my true perceptions of my gender. I'd known since my early childhood, but the first person I came out to was them. God, were they so straight that they couldn't be with a genderfluid person, a human being who didn't act traditionally "female?" I should've known better. In fact, I should have just stuck with presenting as a feminine young woman.

Regardless, my obsessive-compulsive mind couldn't stop conjuring up past conversations, past memories of them. I was already in a deep depression when I decided to take a nap—a twelve-hour slumber. I had a dream. It wasn't sexual in nature, yet I felt that it drove me towards physical intimacy. It was this dream that would change my opinion on the nature of our relationship. I then arranged to make the most uncomfortable conversation I've ever had.

That weekend I went on a two-hour pacing, obsessive walk around campus, trying to gather my thoughts after sending a text that said, "I have to talk to you about something- can you come to my room?"

Once they were in my small dorm room, I had no way to bring this subject up without being horribly awkward. "Hey, look at the wall over there—there's a huge spider. It's like Shelob from Tolkien's Two Towers, no?" I paused, remembering that they weren't a Tolkien fan.

"What do you want to talk about?" they inquired. Was that nervousness that I detected in their voice? Maybe it was just my own conscious desperately hoping they would be nervous about being near me?

I took a deep breath and wandered over, hiding my face in their shoulder. "Hey, you don't still happen to be interested in having sex with me?" It came out so much faster than I'd anticipated.

A day later, we were still very much platonic. Except for a few things. In the library, we sat together and they would pat me on the shoulder, put their arm around me. They came over to my room and asked to kiss me. Platonic. The last day of finals I wore overalls; they remarked that I looked cute. In the confines of their dorm room, their hand ran small circles on the base of my back. Platonic. That night I asked for a kiss and received a small peck on the lips. Funny, that was how everything began.

They traveled abroad, I stayed behind in my hometown. They saw the Vatican; I saw my assailant when I was driving to my summer job every day. We texted; despite a request to have a personal tour of my hometown and eat one of the endless numbers of burritos I concoct at work, I sat and told myself one word. Platonic. I wanted to hug them and hear their voice. Platonic.

I wanted them to come up and visit; I had entire itineraries planned out in my mind. I'd take them to a local animal rescue. No, maybe the used bookstore with all the shelter cats. We'd walk through the aisles, looking at the political and social studies books—we always disagreed in the slightest ways about the way the world should be. Snap out of it. Platonic.

I've read all of our old texts more times than I can count. Were we ever in a relationship? There was never a formal acknowledgement of anything. So what if we shared so many memories on campus? I'd shared those sacred moments with just as many of my non-romantic friends. I remembered one night when they were drunk, after they'd broken up with me. I visited their room against my better judgement.

“Do you love me? Did you ever?”

“Yeah, I liked you. At first, I wanted to be friends because you seemed so lonely so often on campus. I realized you're always stressed; your life is hard. That's when I decided to be in a relationship.”

I was a pity friend? I felt the world spin around me.

I've sat back, I've tried to convince myself that we were in love. I was; they were confused. Would they ever be certain of their feelings? I didn't know, and I didn't have the time to figure it out anymore. Platonic.

I've spent hundreds of hours wondering, considering their words. I've wondered if there's something wrong with me. My first boyfriend was my assailant, my second boyfriend never even admitted to dating me. Am I hard to love?

Just a few days ago, I sat in a corner nook in lower with an acquaintance. My hot chocolate burnt my tongue, but I hardly noticed.

“You see that kid over there? I've seen them talk to you. I think they like you.”

They stood in line, chatting up the girl ordering in front of them. “They seem so funny. I think they're a good guy.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I don't really know them that well. Hey, do you remember the assignment we had for our English class?”

To quote Freud, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

KILEY ADDIS

Crossing the Line

1

We spoke senseless thoughts. Time passed hazily. She smiled, a laugh jumping from her mouth. Her teeth parted, corners of her mouth curled up.

2

We argued explosively. Her mouth was a tight line, edges curved ever so slightly. Eyelids close together, warning. Brows furrowed, jaw tight.

3

He said something funny at dinner. She laughed with her eyes closed, mouth open.

4

He yelled at her for something she didn't do. Her eyes glossy, wet. A thin line on her face, lips barely seen.

5

She yelled at me for making him yell at her. Her eyes were enraged, eyelids close. Brows furrowed, tight line on her face.

6

Before life got hard you smiled at me, your mouth open. A beautiful laugh escaping your lips, teeth showing. You were mad at me moments before.

7

I looked at you with my eyelids close together. The line on my face without teeth showing curved ever so slightly at the edges.

8

You looked at me, your eyes wet, tears brimming. Mouth a thin line, no curved edges, no lips to be seen.

9

I never see your happy smile anymore.

10

And you never see mine.

MADDIE RESSLER

A Simple Moment

Sitting on the edge of the bed.
The sheets white and cool.
I sit right in front of you.
Your legs wrap around me.
I can feel the water drip down my spine.
It's cold.

You brush through my hair.
Small sections at a time to get out the knots.

You put the brush down.
I feel your arms embrace me.
The warmth of the hug makes me melt inside.
I look over my shoulder.

Before I kiss you a lock of my hair falls.
It covers my left eye.
I see you smile through my rose strands.

"I love you."

"I love you more."

12/25/17

I once traced the Mississippi river on a map all the way into the upper provinces of Canada before resigning from that task. And through those countless miles, the rushing water collects heaps of silt and deposits them in the gulf. Visit New Orleans and the water at the mouth of the river is this opaque brown. Seemingly like mud, but with the same viscosity of water. Florida beaches often receive praise, and that's because the currents redirect the sediments westward. Texas gets dark, sloppy beaches, Florida gets white, sparkling beaches.

I took my dog, Maya, for a walk along the beach today. It was sunny and maybe close to fifty degrees. Strong winds whirring up sand.

It was her first time at the beach. She sprinted along the tide, her tongue trailing her face. Sand embedded itself in her fur as she stopped to catch her breath. She noticed the seagulls and magpies on the beach and designated herself to chase after them. One of the birds was either hurt or sick, because it was unable to fly. Maya noticed and almost got a hold of it between her jaws, but I interrupted just before that could happen. I grabbed her by the collar and gave the bird time to get away.

I don't think I saved the bird's life—it only managed to float away for a few feet before taking refuge under a truck. Each jump lasted only seconds. I noticed the bird jump up, then begin to tilt to the left. As witness to that unceremonious escape, I can't imagine it lived much longer.

Maya continued to run around afterwards. It's surprising how long and how fast she could run. I figured the cold air and the foreign setting would make her reluctant to sprint back and forth. The sand in her toes didn't bother her as much as sand in my toes bothered me. I thought, maybe the muddy sand would deter her from enthusiastically oscillating between in and out of sight. But it didn't. And she went on, for roughly thirty minutes.

While watching Maya run off, chasing swift gulls and tiptoeing around incoming waves, I experienced a flood of recollections and sentiments.

I thought about how happy my dog must have been to reign over the beach. We were basically alone there. "No regular person would want to go to the beach on Christmas," said my sister's boyfriend before I left for the beach. He was right. Part of me did not feel like dealing with the cold winds. I thought about the significance of the holiday. Of all the past

good and bad Christmases. Of the past four months that separated me from the familiar. Of that magpie.

They were generally positive emotions, and after the episode mellowed out, I was left with a sensation of “okayness.” I was fine with the way my life was. I was having fun with my dog. I was spending time with family. I was back in Texas where I had my close friends and where I had a better understanding of day-to-day life. For a moment, that sensation culminated with me being able to perceive and gauge my, like, “capacity of happiness.” I felt like I could attach a percentage to how happy I felt at that moment, and to any past moment. A stronger connection with my emotions, though that feeling seemed increasingly untenable the more I reflected on it.

SYDNEY GONZALEZ

Adulthood

Dear _____,

Monday I leafed through the real estate section of the newspaper
The pale yellow house on the corner of Amwell is up for sale
We could make a life there

Yesterday I went window-shopping at IKEA
Taking note of what a bride-to-be in the store scanned for her registry
How many plates is too many

Today I have to go to J.Crew and shop for professional clothes
The first day of the rest of my adult life starts tomorrow
I hope the reason you made me stay is sewn into the pantsuits

See you at home,
Me

SAMUEL ERNST

Minimum Wage

The Interview

“I’d like to know where you see your company in 5 years?”

“I don’t know, man. We’re still going to be selling hamburgers.”

Xavier shifts in the chair. The air smells of ketchup.

“Any other questions?”

“What do you think this business needs the most right now?”

“We’re out of Crunchy Sauce. We’re supposed to get another shipment on Tuesday, I think.”

“When you posted this job offering, who did you want to apply? What was your ideal person?”

“Someone who could put burgers on the grill. Someone who knows how to operate a cash register.”

“Does technology play a big part in your company?”

“Absolutely. See my computer here? Windows ’98, baby. I’ve kept it running like a champ this whole time.”

“I’m sure you saw, on my resume, I’m proficient in Java and C++.”

“I handle all the tech stuff here,” Jerome says. “I actually want to get into game design. You know I solved the Turing Test in one line of code. Easy. System dot out dot print line: I am not a computer. I could even do it in Scratch. Do you know Scratch?”

Xavier shakes his head.

“Any other questions?”

“What could I do to improve myself?”

“Start a skincare routine. Worked wonders for me. You know how to use YouTube?”

Xavier nods. Jerome sits back in his chair.

“We’ll contact you, and let you know if you got the job.”

“Thank you very much,” Xavier says, extending his hand.

Fifteen minutes later, Jerome gets the following e-mail:

Dear Sir Jerome Apothecas,

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for the interview we had today. I enjoyed speaking with you and hope to hear from CrunchySide Inc. soon. As a reminder, you can contact me at my email address XavierDenham@Obsidian.org, or use the phone number located in my resume during business hours.

Sincerely,

Xavier P. Denham

Jerome interviews another candidate two days later.

“Do you have any questions about this job?” he says.

“Do you get mice here?” Phil says. “My old job had a lot of mice.”

“Not too many,” Jerome says.

“Darn it. I loved playing with the mice at my old job.”

Fifteen hours later, Phil gets the following email:

You're hired

Sent from my iPhone

COURTNEY DUCHENE

An Interview with God

The scent of sweat lingered on the desk chair. There were coffee stains on the baby animal calendar that had been hanging on the wall since last year. There was a leak in the ceiling, which someone “fixed” by placing a trash bin underneath it. The bin, however, was mesh, so water leaked onto the floor whenever it filled more than half an inch. God was standing in a strip-mall office cubicle. The waterlogged carpet squished under his feet as he walked towards the desk, which tilted toward the side with the short leg when he sat his briefcase on top of it. He sighed and sat down at the desk. He had rented this office in Dorset, Minnesota, a town so small that they select the mayor by drawing a name from a hat, in order to interview candidates who were hoping to become Chief Universe Officer. Only one candidate, Dr. Wallace Grant, a general dentist and the recently-drawn mayor of Dorset, had applied.

On paper, Dr. Grant seemed like an ordinary man. He was white, 5’8”, and 205 pounds, with a little paunch belly that his wife, Judy, assured him was appropriate for a man of 54, even though it disgusted her. He had three children, all sons, a golden retriever, and a cat whom he pushed off his lap every day at 8 AM so that it was easier for him to do the crossword. His resume listed his experiences treating 8 to 12 patients per day and performing routine dental procedures, such as cleanings, cavity fillings, and sealants, as well as more complex procedures, including teeth extraction and orthodonture. It also noted the ways in which, as Mayor, he had tried to help the town recover from the fire that destroyed most of its restaurants. A brief Google search revealed two single star reviews, both of which described Dr. Grant as not using enough local anesthetic.

“You, like, asked for this?” Shirley, the receptionist God hired for the afternoon, appeared in the doorway.

God gaped at Shirley’s thigh-high boots and leather mini dress. “Shirley, you can’t be serious. What are you wearing?”

“I am serious, like, and don’t call me Shirley. I told you, I am Agatha now. It, like, suits my haunting personality.” Shirley was a nineteen-year-old temp worker God found smoking behind the strip mall when he came to reserve the office. She had no experience managing multiple phone lines, but did know how to use Excel, so God promptly hired her to be his secretary for the day. She agreed so long as she could leave at 4:30 to go to a “save the trees” protest in the park downtown. No

trees were scheduled to be removed in the park for at least another five years.

“I thought I told you to dress professionally.”

“This is like, the nicest shit I own. My mom hates it.” She looked down at the floor. “Are you gonna make me change?”

“It’s fine. Did you get the file I asked you for?”

“Here you go, that guy seems like a mega douche.” Shirley disappeared down the hallway.

God opened up Dr. Grant’s heavenly file. It contained a long list of venial sins, including that Dr. Grant was a regular at the local strip club, that he was a pathological liar, and that he always ate the last fry without offering it to his wife. He had committed only one mortal sin: an extramarital affair with one of his hygienists. He did not list any of these sins during his last confession.

God closed the file and tossed it in a desk drawer. “Shirley, can you get my head architect on the phone and transfer the call to me?”

“I’m like, super busy right now. Can you do it?”

God dialed the number. “Moses, how’ve you been?”

“What do you want God?”

“Is that the way to greet an old friend?”

“I’m not building anything for you.”

“But...”

“After that last assignment? You’re out of your mind.”

“Please, the ark wasn’t that bad. I’m running out of time.”

“That’s your problem.”

“Moses, I can’t keep delaying the Earthquake. Every hour the continent feels more pressure...half the west coast will fall into the ocean.”

“God, I’ve told you it’s a structural problem. There’s nothing I can do.”

God began winding the phone cord through his fingers, pulling it so tight at times that they swelled red. “But I didn’t mean for the world to end so quickly. When I wrote Revelations, I thought over 2,000 years would give the all humans enough time to find world peace.”

“I thought you had a plan to get the humans to fix it?”

“I’ve only received one applicant for the position...” He tugged the phone cord tighter.

“So hire him and be done with it.”

“Moses...”

The line went dead.

God reopened Dr. Grant's file and started flipping through it without comprehending the words. The pages slipped through his fingers. He was trying to find the factor that caused him to feel like his guts were twisting every time he thought of Wallace Grant running the universe, but he could not discern what it was that he disliked. It wasn't the fact that his Heavenly File stated that he never attended church, temple, mosque, Wiccan rituals, Quaker meeting, or even meditative walks in the park on Sunday afternoons, although God did appreciate those modes of praise, nor was it the fact that running a general dentistry, while complex, was nowhere on par with managing the universe. He sighed and kicked back in his chair. Maybe Gabriel, his husband, was right and all this consternation was due to a kidney stone. He would make an appointment with Heaven's top urologist when he got back.

At 8:50, ten minutes before his scheduled interview, Dr. Grant swaggered in with a slight limp. His handshake was firm, but sweaty. When he extended his wrist, his Armani jacket slipped to reveal a Rolex. "Mr. God," he said.

"Just God, please. It's like Prince, or Madonna, or Beyoncé." God tugged at the fraying edges of his white tunic. He waited for the awe to overtake Dr. Grant.

Dr. Grant clapped God on the back with such a force that it almost tipped God over. It was like he thought they were old buddies. "Well damn, my wife's a big fan of all of them too. It must be the one name thing."

"Must be." God frowned. He gestured to the office chairs. "So Dr. Grant, what made you interested in the position?"

"Look, I won't bullshit you. I'm trying to shorten my commute. Stay in town a few days a week. The dental office's a real haul."

"Hmm. What are your leadership qualifications?"

Dr. Grant straightened his tie and grinned so that the fluorescent light shined on each of his too white teeth. "I was captain of my hockey team in college and president of my fraternity. 'Course, I suppose I'm the Mayor now."

"Yes, on your resume it says you have some experience with natural disasters. Can you tell me a bit more about that?"

"You mean the fire?" He hid the break in his voice with a cough. "It really impacted my family."

God leaned forward. Finally, he felt a hint of empathy for this man. "How so?"

"My wife's bakery burned down." Dr. Grant paused and looked at the floor. "As Mayor, I've really tried to help the town recover from that."

“What concrete actions have you taken?”

“Well, I had the old structures bulldozed, and I sold the land to a developer.”

“Will the developer help rebuild the old businesses?”

“He’s looking to put up a Planet Fitness and an Applebee’s. It’ll bring jobs to the town.”

God grimaced. “Minimum wage jobs.”

“What does it matter? Work is work. Besides, anyone who’s trying even remotely can make more than minimum wage.”

Dr. Grant leaned back in the chair and spread his legs. He was taking up so much physical space in the office that it was beginning to make God feel claustrophobic. He wanted to evaporate into the air, to become one with the wind, and shoot himself straight back up to heaven. Instead, he asked, “How does your wife feel about this? As someone who lost her business?”

“What does it matter? It’s better for her to be home with the kids anyway.”

“Would you say that you have a good marriage?”

“I... don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Women are a huge part of the universe, nearly fifty percent. Well, in this universe. On Centaurus they recognize 75 distinct genders. Triangulum recognizes nearly 1,000. White people are just beginning to realize the complexities and fluidities of gender. Er, where was I?”

“Women are part of the universe.”

“Right, if you’re going to be Chief Universe Officer, you will need to demonstrate your ability to communicate with not only women, but also people with many gender identities, and to understand their issues, such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, child marriage, and gender pay inequality. Otherwise, how can you effectively answer their prayers? You’re not just running a good ol’ boy’s club.”

“I mean, you know how women are. They’re always nagging about something.”

“Have you ever worked with women who are your equals?”

“I have assistants and hygienists.”

“There are no female dentists in your office?” “No.”

God sighed and leaned back in his chair. “What about volunteering? Your resume doesn’t list any civic engagement...”

“I haven’t really participated in much.”

“You’ve never even taken one of those voluntourism trips? Or added an extra buck to your grocery bill at the register in support of childhood cancer research?”

“Nope.” Dr. Grant leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk.

“Then what,” God says, “makes you feel qualified to manage the universe? What makes you qualified to listen to the weeping of a father with a dying child and decide whether or not to give mercy? How do you think you will manage?”

Dr. Grant laughed. “I’ve been looking for a side gig for a while. I’m trying to make some easy money so I can buy myself a seat on one of those hunting safaris in Africa.”

* * *

God slammed the door of his two-bedroom condo and tossed his coat across the dining room table. Gabriel peaked his head around the kitchen door. “Interview went poorly?” he asked.

“Will you call the urologist? I think I have a kidney stone.”

“That bad, huh?” Gabriel swept the coat off the table and gave God a peck on his way towards the closet.

“Oh, leave it there,” God grumbled as he unlaced his shoes and flung them across the room.

“Dear,” said Gabriel, who immediately went to retrieve them. “We need to keep the house tidy. Jesus is coming over for dinner.”

“Is he bringing that whore?”

“Yes, Mary Magdalene is coming. She’s his wife.”

“I never acknowledged that marriage.” He added, under his breath, “And to think, I’d picked out an angel for him.”

God sat himself down on their white leather sofa, while Gabriel ducked into the kitchen. He reappeared moments later with a seltzer water and a bowl of oyster crackers. “This will settle your stomach,” he said. “You always get gassy when you’re stressed.”

God took a sip from the soda. Gabriel put a hand on his knee. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“He was terrible. He wants to use the pay from this job to hunt tigers in Africa.”

“I told you. Dentists are shitty people.”

“But what choice did I have? He was the only one who applied.”

Gabriel began rubbing slow circles on God’s back. “Why don’t you set the issue aside for a few days? Jesus can manage the desk if you want to get away for a weekend. We could get out of the Milky Way. Take a trip to Centaurus or Andromeda.”

“Hah, Jesus. That kid’s the whole reason we’re in this mess. All because you wanted a baby.”

“Hey, I didn’t know our surrogate would tell everyone he was the son of God. We selected her so carefully.”

“And I thought he could help the humans make peace, but he got so flashy about it. With his long hair and his miracles. Don’t even get me started on that feet-washing nonsense. What ever happened to a good old burning-bush initiated conversation? ‘Course then he went and married a whore and got himself killed...”

“Dear, the veins in your neck are bulging.”

“Sorry,” God took another sip of the seltzer, before setting it down on the coffee table and staring back at Gabriel. He was such a wonderful angel. With tight blond curls and afternoon stubble that grazed God’s cheeks whenever they kissed, he really exemplified the perfection of the universe. “Gabe,” he said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well maybe you just need to take out more ad space. Where did you post the call?”

“On Craigslist.”

“Dear.”

“What? Isn’t that what you do these days. I used the internet.”

“Only the depraved use Craigslist nowadays. You need to use LinkedIn.”

“Well, I also posted it in a few local businesses.”

“Which ones?”

“A strip club.”

“Seriously?”

“It was the only place that still had a bulletin board.”

“Well of course you got a sleazebag. Someone who goes to a strip club and is there long enough to read a bulletin board? I bet he’s there now.” Gabriel switched on the TV. “Which one’s the Wallace Grant channel?”

“69.”

Gabriel smirked. “Of course.” He flipped the channel and Dr. Grant appeared on the screen through a haze of neon. The thump of a bass line pounded against their surround sound speakers.

A woman with enormous breasts was pushing herself up against Dr. Grant. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “How ‘bbbbout I buy you a car, baby? We can drive it on out of here”

She averted her eyes and laughed, nervously. “I can’t really accept gifts from customers.”

“Pleasssse?” He dragged out the word in a gasp that he thought sound sexy, but in reality made the woman cringe at the scent of his breath. “Can I at leasssst buy thosssse panties from you?”

“I’ve seen enough,” God reached for the remote.

“Wait,” said Gabriel. “Look, he’s getting up.”

They watched as Dr. Grant stumbled towards the bar. “Two more whhhhiskey sssours,” he slurred. His hand raised with three fingers.

“Sorry, man, I can’t serve you,” said the bartender as he whipped off a glass. “You’re wasted.”

“I’m fffine.”

“Dude,” said the bartender, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Let me call you a cab.”

Grant flailed his arm and knocked the bartender in the face. “Ahh,” he cried.

“Okay man, that’s enough.” The bartender practically picked Grant up off the ground. “We can’t have you in here if you’re going to be throwing punches.”

“Fuck,” Dr. Grant cried as he hunched over his hand. “I’m going to sssuuuuueee you.”

“Sure you are, bud.” The bartender tossed him out the door and onto the curb.

“Call a cab. Get someone to take you home.”

“I have a wife you know. I’m not some loser who needs a cab,” he yelled back, but the bartender had already disappeared back inside. Grant dialed his wife. “B...b... babe?” he stuttered. “Can you come get me from the club?”

God flipped the channel.

“What are you doing?” Gabriel cried. “It was just getting good.” “I want to see what his wife says.”

The Judy Grant channel was number seven. It opened on a warmly lit dining room, where a woman and three children sat around a casserole. Their hands were joined in prayer.

“Bless us oh Lord,” the youngest son began when Judy’s phone started vibrating.

She glanced at the screen. “It’s your father I have to take this. Hello?” she said.

As she listened to Dr. Grant, her shoulders slumped. “Where’re you at?” She took out a piece of paper and scribbled down the address. “We’ll be there. Patrick,” she said to her oldest son. “Get your coat. We have to go pick up your father.”

They rode in silence to the strip club. Judy kept glancing at Patrick, who was slumped in the passenger seat. His body was turned away from her to hide his phone.

“Who’re you texting?” she asked.

“Nobody,” he said. “God, leave me alone.”

“Let me see,” Judy reached across the aisle and swiped at the air. He shuffled the phone out of her reach as the car swerved. A chorus of car horns erupted.

“Mom, what the hell?” said Patrick.

“I don’t want you telling anyone what we’re doing.”

“Why, because it’s fucked up that I have to help you pick up Dad from a strip club?”

“Patrick.” Judy’s eyes filled with tears. “Please.”

Patrick tucked his phone in his pocket and slumped in his seat. When they turned on the dirt road that lead to the strip club, Judy said, “It could be worse, you know? At least he doesn’t cheat on me.”

Patrick pressed his lips together. His hand shot towards the door handle and he shoved it open before flinging his body so that he tumbled out into the ditch.

“Oh my, God!” cried Gabriel. He looked anxiously towards his husband for an answer. Was the boy okay?

“Patrick,” yelled Judy. She pulled over and leapt out of the car. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Patrick said.

“You’re bleeding,” said Judy.

“He’s bleeding,” repeated Gabriel as Judy ran her fingers along the cut on her son’s forehead. “Does he have to go to the hospital?” he asked God.

“We need to go to the hospital, you might need stitches,” said Judy.

Just then, the doorbell to the condo rang. “Shit, that’s Jesus,” said Gabriel. “I haven’t even started dinner.” Gabriel walked backwards towards the door so he could keep watching the TV. The scene shifted to the ER, where Judy sat in the waiting room, her phone blowing up with texts from her husband:

Where r u?

I thot you were comin?

Wat the hell wher r u?

Bitch.

She began biting the fingernail polish off of her nails.

“Dad, it’s so good to see you. Mary’s sick, but she sends her love,” said Jesus, as he tried to wrap Gabriel in a hug.

“Shh, shh,” Gabriel waved his hand, motioning for Jesus to be quiet as the doctor reemerged, followed by Patrick.

“Everything’s just fine, Mrs. Grant.”

“Who are you watching?” asked Jesus.

“Shh, shh, shh, it’s the wife of that dentist your father interviewed.”

“What is she doing?” Jesus joined God and Gabriel on the couch.

Gabriel reached for the seltzer water and took a sip. “She was going to go pick up her piece of shit husband from a strip club, but then their son jumped out of the car.”

“Oh my,” said Jesus.

“I hope she gives him an ultimatum when she gets there,” said Gabriel.

When they pulled up in front of the strip club, Dr. Grant began yelling at them. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Patrick, get back in the car and drive home,” said Judy. “Your father and I will follow you.”

“But Mom...”

“Now.”

Patrick slammed the car door and ripped out of the parking lot.

“I can’t believe you embarrassed me in front of our son,” Grant slurred.

“Wallace, you’re drunk. Please can we go home?”

“Fuck you. I’m not drunk.” Grant started storming over towards the car.

“Wallace, please give me the keys.”

“Get in.”

Judy bit her lip and obeyed. She prayed using her pocket rosary as Wallace swerved the whole way home.

The answering machine in the condo began ding. “You have one new prayer,” the automated voice sang. “You have two new prayers.”

“Aren’t you going to answer any of those?” asked Jesus. “You know it’s her. Just help her get home safe.”

“She chose to get in the car. She knew the risks,” God retorted bitterly.

The machine dinged again.

“You could still help her.”

“Son,” God said. “I can’t just go around dishing out miracles willy-nilly. It’s improper. Remember what happened to you.”

“What are you supposed to do, then? Just let her die?”

“Jesus, your father makes very difficult decisions,” said Gabriel.

“You know that’s a load of shit. He just likes to act all high and mighty with his free will bullshit.”

“I trust humans to do the right thing,” said God. “I want them to love me by choice, not out of...”

“Oh, when have humans ever done the right thing?”

“Jesus.”

“I’m sick of it. Free will is just garbage. You’re just leaning on it so you can have the drama of watching them fall into the ocean. So you can reinvent the world all over again. Their lives are your hobby.”

God stared at him in stunned silence.

“Jesus,” Gabriel said. “Apologize to your father.”

“Why? So he can go back to shitting on the humans? At least my miracles saved people.”

Gabriel started, “Free will is an important...”

“Oh, that’s bullshit. If he really trusted humans to do the right thing, he would’ve just given Grant the job. No interview.”

“You think I should give him the job?” God asked.

“I think that’s what you would do if you truly believed humans deserve free will.”

“Fine,” said God. “Let’s make a wager then. I’ll give Grant the job and if he saves the planet from the earthquake, then humans get to keep their free will.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then next time around, we’ll try your approach. No free will, just miracles from God.”

“Deal.”

They laid out the rules. As the impartial moderator, Gabriel would give Grant a series of prayer files, selected by Jesus, to go over and accept or reject over the course of the week. Among those prayers would be one to stop the earthquake.

* * *

God, Jesus, and Gabriel tuned their television to the Wallace Grant channel.

“Look,” said God. “He’s looking at a prayer file at least.”

Grant skimmed through the file quickly and tossed it in the trash.

“Fuck,” said Gabriel. “He just tossed out a little girl’s request for a puppy. Those prayers are so damn easy to answer.”

“Maybe her parents are allergic,” God mumbled.

Grant flipped through a few other files before shoving them into a drawer. He kicked his feet onto the desk and turned on the TV.

“Demographic research, that’s good. He’s probably checking to see if the people who sent in prayers are worthy,” said God.

“Just wait,” said Jesus.

Grant flipped through the channels. He paused when he caught a glimpse of Susan and Bud Johnson, his neighbors, fucking wildly on the screen.

Grant scrambled for his cell phone. “Bill, you won’t believe what I’m seeing right now. Susan and Bud are fucking. Yeah... um I can see it through the window. You were right about her tits. They do point out a little. Definitely look fake.” His phone vibrated in his hand. “Fuck, that’s the wife. I’ll call you back.”

Grant muted the volume, but kept watching. “What do you want Judy?”

“Can you pick up the kids from school today? I’m swamped...”

“I’ll be at the office.”

“Please, just close early this afternoon? I need to be at the church to set up for the benefit...”

“I can’t. You’re just a volunteer. They can’t force you to work.”

Grant hung up the phone and began masturbating.

“Well,” said Jesus. “We can see this isn’t going anywhere.” He reached for the clicker.

“Wait, wait, wait,” said God. “Let’s keep watching.”

They watched as Grant drove to his dental office, where no patients were scheduled, and napped in the exam room chair. Instead of going home afterwards, he drove to the strip club and his wife and son had to pick him up again.

“Change back to Judy,” said Jesus. “I actually liked her.”

God flipped off the TV. “You’re not being fair.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jesus.

“I mean what files did you give him? Little girl wants a puppy? That’s not always emotionally moving. What if he’s not a dog person?”

“His file says he has a Golden Retriever. Besides, the prayers were supposed to be inconsequential so that he would know to grant the one that stops the earthquake. A prayer which he didn’t even touch.”

“Well, what other files did you give him?”

“Kids asking for A’s on tests, moms praying for traffic to move faster. You know, easy stuff to make happen.” Jesus paused.

“I’m not trying to make this unfair.”

“Well, prayer files are so bureaucratic,” said God. “They’re filled with corporate mumbo jumbo. They aren’t impassioned. They won’t change anyone’s heart.”

“Well what would you like me to send him to help him decide?” asked Gabriel. “The dry language makes prayer files impartial.”

“Send him an activist, someone who’s out there fighting for a worthy cause. Someone whose file he can’t throw out,” said God.

Gabriel turned to Jesus. “Is that alright with you?”

“Fine with me,” said Jesus. “Nothing will change that man’s heart.”

That night, Gabriel visited Shirley in a vision and told her of the earthquake that would strike the West Coast any second now. She woke up panicked the next morning and immediately stormed the office. “Like where’s God?” she shouted at Grant.

“I...I don’t know,” Dr. Grant mumbled.

“I don’t like this,” said God. “I don’t think you should’ve sent her.”

“What’s more impassioned than someone storming his office?” asks Jesus.

“But she’s not a real activist. There’s no real passion...”

“She seemed so excited when I spoke with her,” said Gabriel.

“You angels and your visions,” God grumbled.

Shirley tossed a stack of research on the desk in front of Grant. “I received a vision from a, like, Angel who told me you would be able to help me get a tsunami wall along the West Coast. In my dream he showed me how the wall of water would rise up from the sea it was like so terrifying I couldn’t sleep. I started like googling...”

“Slow down, what do you want?”

“A tsunami wall. The Cascadia subduction zone along the North West coast, like, hasn’t experienced a quake in 318 years. Geologists agree that it should have produced a massive earthquake, like, 68 years ago. It could happen literally any second and when it does the magnitude of the quake will be huge, like 8 or 9, huge, and it will produce a tsunami that will destroy everything West of, like, interstate five. We like really need a wall.”

“I don’t even know what you’re saying. What the hell is a subduction zone?”

“A subduction zone is where two of the earth’s tectonic plates, like, meet up...”

“Whatever, I don’t care. I can’t help you.”

“But there are schools that will be destroyed. Like, thousands of children will die. And old people, and the, like, disabled...” She looked down. “People’s homes will be destroyed like they were in the fire.”

“Look lady, I’m not a construction worker. I don’t know how to help you.”

Shirley hung her head. “I will, like, totally organize a protest outside your office.”

“I’ll call the police for trespassing.”

“We,” said Shirley, “are like not afraid of jail.”

Shirley stormed out of the office, past Judy, Dr. Grant’s wife.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“No one. I can’t get lunch today. I’m going into the dental office.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I can’t believe he kicked her out,” said God.

“Maybe the protest will wear him down.”

“Flip the channel,” said God. “I can’t see what Judy’s doing.” Judy followed Shirley. “Hey,” she yelled. “What did you want?” “In there?” Shirley gestured. “I was trying to, like, convince him to help me build a tsunami wall so that the West Coast doesn’t, like, fall off the country in this, like super serious earthquake.”

Judy pursed her lips. “And you think my husband can help you?” “I don’t know.” Shirley looked up at the sky. “Some weirdo told me he, like, answers prayers or something.”

“I don’t really know what he does. He just took on this second job.” She took Shirley’s hand and squeezed it. “You seem like a nice kid. If you want, I can sneak into his office tonight. He might be getting into lobbying. I don’t know.”

“Y...y..., you don’t, like, have to.”

Judy smiled. “I’ll just look.”

That night, after Dr. Grant passed out and Judy carried him to bed, she snuck into the office and started pulling open the file cabinets. She pulled out file after file, each marked with a single name and filled with people’s unanswered prayers.

“Oh my God,” she said, glancing around the office. On Grant’s desk, she noticed a red stamp of approval. She pulled out a stack of files and began stamping the prayers one by one. They piled up beside her, filling the floor. She stamped until she fell asleep.

“Ha,” yelled God. “I did it.”

“What do you mean?” said Jesus. “His wife is doing it. You’re losing the bet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said God. “She stopped the earthquake.”

“By answering every prayer. She’s basically granting miracles.”

God ignored Jesus and hurried down to the office. He arrived just as Judy was preparing to drive back home.

“Excuse me miss,” he called out to her as he ran towards the car. “I need to ask you something.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to get home,” Judy said as she opened her car door. “My kids are waiting for me to drive them to school.”

“Please,” said God. He stuck a hand out to prevent her from closing the car door.

“I really need to go, sir,” she said.

“It’ll just take a minute.”

“Who even are you?”

“I’m your husband’s boss. I’m God.”

Judy’s eyes widened. A strange man approached her in a parking lot. He won’t let her leave. She knew this narrative. She was about to be murdered. “Look,” she said. “I don’t know what kind of lunatic you are, but please leave me alone. I have children.” The pleas rolled out of her mouth. She clutched her car keys, ready to stab him if need be.

“No, really I am,” God said. “I can prove it. Here, follow me.” God said. He stepped towards the cubicle.

Judy stared at him. She wondered if this was her chance to get away.

“I promise it will just take a minute.”

Judy clutched her purse and followed him inside.

When they got to the office, God flipped on the TV to the channel that followed the Governor of California. “Do you remember that activist you met yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“When you stamped that file you answered her prayer. You saved California from an earthquake and a tsunami.”

“Hmm, that’s all it takes to answer prayers?”

“That’s all it takes.”

“Well,” said Judy. “Then you’re a pretty awful God then.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been praying for years for my husband to be a better man, a better father, and you never granted it. I was about to leave him and then you destroyed my business, my only financial independence.”

“But you can’t grant every...”

“Why not? If it makes people...”

“Because then humans would never understand the consequences of free will. You can’t solve every problem with a miracle.”

Judy frowned and shoved the pile of answered prayers at him. She grabbed the stamp and began stamping the prayers she didn't answer the night in rapid succession. "What the hell did you come here to do then? Take the prayers so that nobody would have them answered? Or is that why you hired my husband?"

"Judy, please..."

"Because I won't let you take them. People deserve to be happy."

"I know. I just needed someone to show me that they knew how to use their free will."

Judy stared at him. "I don't understand," she said.

"Judy," he said. "I want you to be Chief Universe Officer. I want you to be in charge of guiding people to the right decisions."

"I don't understand."

"People struggle with free will," said God. "So much so that they've destroyed the world several times. I've had to rebuild it. I don't want to do that anymore. You understand free will. You use it correctly. Will you guide people?"

"Can I answer prayers?"

"Some of them. I will still have to evaluate more serious concerns."

"Will there be pay?"

"Of course."

Judy nodded. "Okay," she said. "I'll do it."

SOPHIA DIBATTISTA

Church: The Italian Market

Neighbors, relatives, comrades
All gathered for a sacred feast.
Prayer and piety married into mass;
At least that's what it should be.

Today I sit in a slick, wooden
Pew and perceive plastered eyes
Against the exit, waiting for
Salvation in the form of Father Time—
A watch on the nearest wrist.
Zealous parishioners perish along with
Profound homilies, and priests Crave
cash like Mary needed an inn. It's all
desperation.

Psalms were bouncy back then,
Swaying the soul, while
Any hum now is a blessing.
Church was the Italian market
Where attendees vied for holy water,
But now it weeps from the banal tap.
The day of rest is
A sad bath Sabbath,
Where we swim in awkwardness
And have apathy prune our spirits.

Is God proud?
I'm not, but for faith's sake, Choose
to interlock peace with Family or
strangers despite cupped Coughs in
the hands I shake, the Archaic
perfumes of seniors, Leaning on
tennis ball walkers, That still clog
my nostrils, and Cardboard Jesus
lingering
On tongues hours after chewing.

ANASTASIA DZIEKAN

Sacraments

The priest arrives fifteen minutes late, but he assures us that he'll try to finish the service on time. The conference room of the resort hotel has been turned into an imperfect replication of a church—tables and chairs organized where the pews would be, an aisle of emptiness leading to a standard table in place of an altar. The people around me hurry to silence their phones and tuck them away, seemingly ashamed to have been playing Candy Crush in an imitation church, the existence of which has become holy by the presence of a priest who opens a small suitcase and sets a smaller crucifix on the table at the front. When the service begins to reach the end, the priest takes out a Tupperware container, and he opens it with a loud pop, the rubber lid being pulled off of the plastic prism beneath it, breaking the seal. Inside of the Tupperware is the holy Eucharist, wafers blessed and transformed into the Body of Christ, in the most sacred miracle we humans can witness. The body of our lord and savior came out of a Tupperware. Amen.

The first time I received the Holy Communion, I was in third grade, as were the rest of my classmates in my after school religious studies classes. I learned there that the Catholic faith was about reading simplified versions of bible stories, and doing little arts and crafts activities, and memorizing lists of virtues, and saints, and prayers. The “Glory Be” prayer was everyone’s favorite—it was the shortest. The sacraments were organized by grade, second grade was first confession, and third was First Communion.

I wore a dress that was white and relatively simple. Plain, straight, accented with fabric roses. It was much simpler than the dress I had worn not long before, as the flower girl in my Aunt Joanna’s wedding. That dress was elaborate, decorated with lace, beads, tulle, and floral designs. White and champagne-colored and shimmering. It had a headpiece too! A crown with flowers and ribbons down the back. I still curled my hair for special occasions then, and it sat so nicely in the curls. The flowers in it matched with the flowers in the spherical bouquet I carried down the aisle. The wedding photographer took a photo of me sitting and looking down at the bouquet, the ball-gown skirt spread around me, and the headpiece like a halo prominent in the photo. It might be the most beautiful dress I have ever worn in my life. Aunt Joanna, the bride, wore electric blue flip-flops under her gown.

We were required to wear white dresses. We, of course, meaning the girls. The boys in black or grey suits, the girls in little white dresses, walking two by two. One boy, one girl shuffling nervously down the aisle of a church. It resembled our vague understanding of what a wedding looked like. Males in suits, females in white dresses. The same thought occurred to all of us, and we were all thoroughly embarrassed by the thought. We agreed that we wouldn't talk about it, because it made it too awkward, and we weren't allowed to laugh when we were walking to the priests to receive the Eucharist. The church would be near silent, and every sound echoed. I became almost close with the boy I was walking next to, although I only knew him for the day. I wish I could remember his name.

We were given the choice, for our First Communion, whether we would take it "by hand" (as was most common at weekly mass) or "by mouth" (as was the more traditional way, and thus special, for our first). I was the only one who chose "by mouth". This was proven when we raised our hands to indicate which one we were planning on, and I was the only one who raised my hand for orally receiving communion. I got strange looks from some of the other kids. My mom asked me to take communion this way. And I did.

In sixth grade, we had our confirmations. Thirteen years old is evidently the age at which we were completely prepared to dedicate ourselves fully to the Catholic Faith of our own responsibility. To solidify our dedication to the faith, we took the name of a saint and added it to our own. We weren't allowed to take on a name that was already one of our names, first or middle. I had significant difficulty in choosing a saint after those restrictions. I wanted to choose a saint based on her story (although it would help if she had a nice name, as well). After the book of saints I was given didn't clear anything up, I turned to my mom. I have the same confirmation name as her now. Elizabeth. Patron of nurses, the homeless, charity, widows, young brides, bakers, countesses, and the falsely accused.

Confirmation is supposed to complete the promise of faith that is started at our baptism. I, of course, don't remember my own baptism. I have attended baptisms since my own, however. Notably, the baptisms of my three younger cousins, on my dad's side of the family. My cousin Rhyan's baptism especially impacted me, as that was the day I became her godmother. It's a lot of responsibility, in theory. I'm supposed to be the example of faith for her. I fear, above all, that I'll give off false confidence. I worry that I'll seem like I have all the answers, when in the moment, in the church, between the holy water, the acceptance of

responsibility, and the purifying blessing I swore I felt reverberate through me, I just got so swept up in it all that I forgot the question.

Sometime before my confirmation, I had all kinds of questions about God, and faith, and religion. I told my parents about all of these questions. Not long after, my afterschool group went to a mass service. After that service, I told my parents that I heard God talk to me. My mom exhaled shakily, a sigh of relief, telling me how great that was, and how I had assuaged my parents' fears. They were worried I would lose my faith completely, as perhaps someone else in my family had, but once I told them that I heard God speak to me, those fears were relieved. To speak with the Lord directly, what an ultimate demonstration of faith.

Did I really hear God that day? I can't answer that. What's important is that I believed in that moment that I heard God speak to me.

My favorite picture of my parents is from their wedding. It's overlaid with the beautiful, colorful stained-glass windows of the church. Images of saints and holy crosses shining over my parents on their wedding day. It's stunning. It's breathtaking, even. That's what faith looks like. That's what love looks like.

My parents have always been the ones who led me into my faith. They brought me to church on Sundays. Dragged me there, really. I was often annoyed by the service cutting into my time, especially as school got more intensive, but I didn't put off any less work until the end of each weekend. My mom told me not to think of mass as the time it takes as it is going on, but as "insurance for the time after." She'd like for "us all to be together", in the end. I haven't been to mass yet, since getting to college. Blame it on scheduling. It makes me feel like I'm carrying a heavy weight inside of my heart. I'll find time for it soon.

We went to church, as a family, even on vacation. All the churches try to look perfect. They want to seem inviting when they welcome "returning parishioners and new visitors." They try to seem clean and safe, make themselves into slick, heavenly oases that sit on the edge of tourist towns. No one in the room knows each other, but we all know the routine, when to sit and when to stand, what prayers to say and how they go. And we all know the church isn't perfect. We're tired and sunburnt, we're dressed in jeans and tee shirts, and it's early morning on the second-to-last days of everyone's vacations. The churches that actually manage to fabricate the perfect facade feel slightly off. We're all aware of the flaws, and I want to tell them that they don't have to worry so much about hiding them. The people track sand into the church, and then we all shake hands and offer the sign of peace to people we'll never see again, and then we leave. Your church doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be there.

The only thing that really matters is that the church is a Catholic church. My dad told me that you can always tell it's a Catholic church if it has a large crucifix over the altar. He told me that to emphasize to me that one church we had visited was not a Catholic church. No crucifix. Near the end of the service, they passed out the communion. We didn't even have to get up from our seats. They gave it to us in little prepackaged plastic containers. The wafer was placed on top of a measured sip of wine, separated by a seal, the whole thing trapped in an airtight plastic casing. We were polite enough to participate in the service, sitting and standing, when necessary. But regardless of politeness, my parents told me to pass on the prepackaged communion. It was a very strange visual for me, being in elementary school at the time, and so nearly all of my religious knowledge was confined to my own parish: Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, and those like it. The Eucharist, the Body of Christ, wrapped up in plastic. Wow.

My family went on vacation to a resort in New York for a week. Near the end of our time there, it was Sunday. The hotel at the resort held a mass service. The priest came in from a bit of a distance away and arrived fifteen minutes late. Everything he needed for the service came out of his suitcase, including the crucifix, bible, and holy gifts for the sacrament of communion.

It was never supposed to be perfect.

The Body of Christ came out of a Tupperware. Amen.

JULIA STERN

Lord, Let Me Catch a Fish

Sugar Pond, 2001

My father said to take the fishing pole,
to hold it tight, to
throw the string into the blackish water.

A small stick, a piece of string, and a sharp hook.
Warm, heavy air. Mosquitoes
chewing my legs right above my socks.

My clammy hands clenched. I tried to
swing the string into the pond, but the
hook snagged on the back of my purple, velvet
sweater.

He released it, tossing
the string back into the water, watching it
disappear beneath the glassy top.

I immediately pulled it out, hook
empty. "You have to be patient
with it."

The string went back in the water while I made cakes in the muck.

The line began to
wobble and then I heard him
call, "Yank it out! Yank it out! Yank it
out!"

Providence Bay, 2009

The rocks by the river side were jagged,
so, we sat at the top of the bike path above. He
pulled out from his backpack the *Quantum PT*
Vapor and attached a thin line, a
hook, blue jellied lure. My rod

was bubble gum pink and had no
name, but we threw the lines
into the brown water. Ducks
tossed in the lapping foam.

“My uncle used to take me out on this old sail
boat, I’m sad you and your sisters never got to
experience that.

We never caught shit.”

The wind stung in my nose
as the knit scarf covering my mouth became wet with spit.
The line tugged while he cheered.

I reeled it in, the line came back
clear, no hook, no lure.

“Must have snagged on a rock.”

He replaced the missing parts as
we sat on the path in the

quiet grey light.

THEA PASTRAS

Jukebox Memory

My father can't sing, but he does
anyway. John Lennon turns notes into a
lasso that reins in the sun, and when
Harry Chapin opens his mouth,
it's like driving down country roads
in the summer, windows down.

My father's voice strains like rope,
pulled taut and fraying,
but I can't listen to
Taxi or Nowhere Man
unless he's the one singing,
waiting for me to join in.

I can't dance, so I don't.
I stand in corners, wrap
shadows around myself
until eyes and neon lights
pass over me like skipping rocks.

My father can't find the tune,
so he makes his own
and teaches it to me.
I can't find the beat,
so I wait for the song
to end, and head home early,

trying to remember
the way I stood on his feet,
swaying back and forth
across the kitchen's linoleum floor,
listening to him croon
"If I could keep time in a bottle..."

ROBERT WILF

Hel Hath no Fury

I was born with my face half in darkness. Interpret that how you will.

Perhaps it's literal. Perhaps when I was born, my mother's back was to the fire. Her leg cast a shadow over one side as I was born into this world, a small mewling thing.

Perhaps it's racial. That my pale Nordic skin would gradually tan along the bridge of my nose into to a deep rich chocolate. Halfway up my head, my long, icy blonde locks would curl in on themselves, becoming black coils that crowned my left side, the likes of which were unknown to the Vikings who spoke my name in fearful whispers.

Perhaps I'm half dead. If anyone saw my profile, I would appear as a lively maiden with pink cheeks and a bright green eye. And they would wonder why such a spritely thing would walk by herself, nearly-nude, through the snow without so much as a shiver. But before their minds could turn to darker thoughts, I myself would turn and walk back. They'd now stare in awe at the cracked blue skin clinging to shriveled flesh and protruding bone, without so much as an eye left in the socket, like a corpse left out in the cold for the ravens to peck at. I like this interpretation. It makes my career far easier.

And perhaps I simply look like Cate Blanchett with an absurd taste in headwear.

Imagine me however you like. Either way my tale is the same.

I was raised with my brothers in the Iron Woods of Jotunheim; you'd know it as the land of the giants. I never liked that translation. My mother and her kin were larger than humans, yes, but giant goes too far. That title should be saved for my two brothers and them alone, but not until later, for I remember a time when the great Jormungandr, the world serpent, and Fenrir, the wolf of the bog, were both far smaller than their tiny sister.

We frolicked in the Iron Woods and played games like "trick-the-trolls" and "eat-the-sun." Trees and stones were our nemeses; fangs and claws were my brothers' weapons, while I made do with snowballs. And after glorious battles, we celebrated by feasting on the setting sun. But sunlight fed only plants, and when come dusk our stomachs rumbled. Only meat would feed my brothers.

That was when our grim-faced mother would come out from her long day of weaving and she sang to the trees, and the trees listened. First

she'd sing of necessity, and of hard love. In response to her song, the tree would sway and drop the last berries or other fruits they've hid. Mother would take most of this for herself, but save some for me as well. Then mother would sing again. Her song would grow faster, her voice deeper, and the notes harder. To this song, the animals of the forest would wander out in a trance right into the waiting mouths of my brothers.

At the end of a long hard day, full of fighting evil humans and tricking prideful gods, my mother would lie by the hearthside and we would lie with her. Jormungandr would coil his thin body around her neck. Fenrir would curl up in a ball on her chest. And I would lie in her arms.

And sometimes, when the frost turned to dew on the grassy fields, Father would come home. Sometimes he'd arrive in the form of a horse tired from a long travel, other times in the form a man with wild orange hair and a scarred smile. Whatever form he took, we'd know him by the smile on his face and glint in his eyes. Sometimes I'd pretend that Father never truly left us, and that he just took the form of ravens who can't truly smile so we wouldn't know he was watching. But raven eyes lacked all glitter and hope. When Father did come home, we'd have a great feast and he'd bring the heavy mead Mother didn't normally let us drink. We'd sit around the fire and he'd tell us all the stories of his travels: how he saved Odin by tricking evil dwarves or how he convinced Thor to wear a dress. You may have noticed by now humor does not come naturally to me, but in those days it took very little for Father to get me squealing with laughter.

One day, Father was followed.

It was the dead of night when the gods broke down our door. I woke to Mother's screams as they barged into our room with ropes and gags. They grabbed Jormungandr first, pulling him from around Mother as one would pull rope. He hissed and unhinged his jaw, but they grabbed him around the neck and tail and tied him to a branch so he couldn't move. Mother tried to stop them, but a red-bearded god hit her from behind with a small hammer he was concealing, silencing her screams. Several went off to look for Father, who had escaped in the form of a fly. Another stayed behind to pull Fenrir out from under the bed and muzzle him. Finally, one came for me, but stopped in his tracks when I turned to face him. I stood still, an island in the middle of the churning sea. Do not take my lack of reaction for lack of care, though. It's not that I was able to stay still, I was simply unable to move. Still, I suppose I was not as terrified as the shivering god who bound my mismatched hands.

We waited patiently for the other gods to return, Fenrir whimpering the whole time. My mother woke up once or twice, but

another hit of the hammer was all it took to bring her back down. If I'm being honest, I'm not quite sure if she was alive or dead when they finally abandoned the chase of my father and decided that we were enough. I have searched for her many times down here in the dark, but I learned nothing except that her name was Angrboda.

The gods led my brothers and me out of the Iron Woods. Many times Jormungandr tried to slither free of his chains, and many times they rebound him as he spit his poison. So scared were they of his long venom-drenched fangs that they refused to feed him until his stomach shrank to a thin line running down his body.

When we started the adventure, they feared Fenrir little as he too was little. He'd have to stand on his hind legs to even reach their knees so they had no fear in letting him off his leash and feeding him bigger and more succulent meat than we've ever seen before. In a matter of days Fenrir grew until he could lick their faces on his hind legs, and then until he could do it on all fours. At that point they were too afraid to not feed him, and still he grew more and more.

One night, when all the gods had drunk themselves into a stupor, I nudged Fenrir from his sleep and asked, "Brother, you are far taller now than even mother was. You are unbound and could surely eat these sleeping gods right now and free us. Why don't you?"

Now neither of my brothers were known for their way with words, so it surprised even me when he lifted his head and spoke. "I want to see where the funny men are taking us. We're going on adventure, right? Like in father's stories, where the heroes set out on a journey to fight monsters? I want to do that."

The giant wolf cub spoke this to his half-blackened sister while their eldest brother watched through his serpentine eyes. Who did he think were the monsters in this story?

The next day we came across the rainbow bridge. While my subjects have argued against this, and suffered for their insolence, I still hold that such a flamboyant display of blinding colors serve only one purpose: to disorient and confuse those traveling to Asgard. My captors must've thought I was trying to kill myself, I nearly walked off the bridge so many times. In retrospect, perhaps I should have, but then where would I be? Here just the same.

While keeping my eyes off the bridge, though, I did come across a small stroke of luck. I saw two ravens up ahead, flying in aimless circles looking for food that might never come. I had a plan.

At last we came upon the gates of Asgard. Father had told us about this place; the stone walls were built by one of our people,

unceremoniously killed before he could complete his task so the Aesir could avoid paying their due. Only Father prevented all-out catastrophe when he lured the wall-builder's stallion away, though he never did explain how. The point is that the west side still missed a few stones the builder was never able to place, and a small crack ran along the unfinished mortar where the red was far richer than the rest of the bricks. The gods led us through the iron gates into a land with neither grass nor snow. Rather stone grew in regular paths between the innumerable houses, each filled with Aesir and Vanir that gawked at us as we passed. Above all these many houses was the great Mead Hall of Valhalla, where dead warriors drank themselves to a second grave. In this hall stood a regal throne adorned with animal horns, on which sat an older man with a long grey beard tinged with gold and an eyepatch decorated with runes I couldn't read. Odin looked far more regal than Father had made him out to be.

"So these are the children of Loki?" Odin said, in a booming yet weary voice. "I shouldn't have expected anything else. Slaughter the beasts, as for that thing in the middle--"

"Mr. Odin, if I may!"

A silence fell of Valhalla, even the ghosts stopped their drinking to stare at me.

"I have a present for you." Before any gods could protest, I sang a song like Mother always did. I sang of Father's gifts, of tricks and tactics. I sang of love for my brothers and of patience. The world heard me and responded. In through the window flew two ravens that circled the hall and perched on the horns of Odin's throne, startling the king of the gods.

"These are--"

"Ravens. A gift to you. Their names are Thought and Memory. I named them that to make it easier for you to command them. You can have them fly over the world for you and spy on everything. And they'll tell you it all too, that way you'd know about stuff like my family much earlier!" I forced myself to smile and tilted my lighter side to him. I've never spoken so much in my life, but once I started, the words came spilling out, building on top of each other, forming new walls before my very eyes. Was this how Father felt when he told his stories?

Odin looked back and forth between the ravens. Each cocked its head, staring back at him on one side and at me with another. Then he turned to me. My green eye looked up into his eyepatch, and his hazel eye stared into my socket. "I find your gift...acceptable. Thor, Tyr: bind the beasts. As for the girl, I have a gift for her as well. But that is for tomorrow, for tonight she is our guest. Freyr, take her to the spare room."

I stood silently as my brothers were led by chains. Jormungandr hissed and wiggled as well he could as ten men took hold of his long, thin body, and pulled him out of the mead hall. Behind him one god gently coaxed Fenrir to duck so he could fit through the great doors, but not before he took one last look at me with his yellow puppy dog eyes. That was the last time I saw my brothers.

After the gods ripped them from me, they untied my arms and led me out of the room to leave the old man alone, watching his new bird friends fly in pretty circles. They led me to a small windowless room which they said was mine for the night. By the window on a chair sat a woman, though I did not recognize her as such at the time nor her brother as a man.

“What are those things?”

“That is Ganglot, and the one next to her is Ganglati. They are to be your servants.”

“Do they ever move?” Neither had so much as lifted its head the entire time we were speaking.

In response, I had only a door click behind me. As soon as the guard was gone, I crumbled to the floor and hugged my knees to my chest. I would die here, I knew. Odin would imprison my brothers in some bizarre zoo and kill me for speaking out of turn. He had promised me a gift and I was sure it was death. I was right of course, in a manner of speaking, but whatever irony found me in that moment, I was blind to it behind a veil of tears

I suppose I must have fallen asleep at some point, for a banging woke me near evening. And what did I see upon waking but a grey rotting hand reaching toward me. I thought Ganglot was knocking on my head, though upon crawling away, I realized she was only reaching for my shoulder. Frozen the moment before she could console me. Her brother was in his place beside the bed, though he now stared at the spot where I had just been. Neither acknowledged the pounding on my door.

Behind it stood an Aesir boy about my age with shining blond hair and bright eyes. He carried a plate with him, upon which sat an undersized chicken leg robbed of nearly all its meat and a knife too dull to even cut butter. “My father told me to bring you this, my lady.”

“Isn’t there more?”

“None left, I’m afraid,” the boy mumbled. Behind him a chorus of warrior ghosts cheered as they dug into their food, wrestling steaks from each other in a way Fenrir would never shame himself to mimic.

“What’s your name?”

“Balder.”

“I hope you die, Balder.” I slammed the door.

I sat in the corner with my back to the twins. The meat was stringy through I knew how to suck the marrow from the bones. I just never had to break them myself before, and the knife was no help. At last I put it down and stared at the bone shards.

“I name this plate hunger. And this knife famine.”

I turned back to room. Ganglati had worked his way into a kneeling position, and Ganglot was turning her head. Perhaps if I waited a few hours, she’d meet my eyes. I walked past them.

“My servants are Languor and Lethargy.”

I nearly stumbled pulling myself onto the bed, and like the insolent child I was, I jumped on it, throwing all the rage down onto the bed only to be propelled back up again.

“My castle is Sleet-Sprayed. It’s entrance its stumbling block. Its curtains are gleaming disaster.”

I missed a step and tumbled down into the sheets.

“This is my sickbed.”

Before dawn the next morning, Odin himself came to wake me. Gone were the regal robes. Instead he wore only a traveler’s cloak, plain black eye patch, and a broad-brimmed hat. One of the ravens still clung to his shoulder. “Come child, I shall take you to your gift.”

I followed him slowly out into the courtyard, and there waited a large dappled grey horse with twice as many legs as the few others I’ve seen on my way here. Odin went up to stroke her mane, “Her name is Sleipnir, and she’s your half-sister. Do you know what half-sister means?”

I shook my head.

Odin smiled. “It means that your father is her mother.”

I didn’t want to smile. I refused to smile in his presence. But he made me think of Father. Father was a mother! I hid my face in Sleipnir’s side. She sniffed me, then licked my blackened side. We hugged until a calloused hand pulled me off and onto my sister’s back.

“She’s not your gift, she’s just taking us there.” The humor in Odin’s voice was gone as if trampled to death. “Now get on, we’ll arrive there shortly.”

“What about Ganglot and Ganglari?” I’m not sure why I thought of them; in truth I was more worried that I had left the plate and knife there, though I knew not why.

“They’ll catch up, now come on.” Odin pulled my sister’s reins and she took off galloping. Within a mere second, we were over the rainbow bridge again. Another took us to grass, a third to snow, and still we kept going. The world bled into one grey mess until I could see it, the

brown pillar rising in the middle like a tree. We were circling it and didn't stop until we passed Jotunheim and the Iron Woods. Still we rode on past my home, descending straight for the deepest roots of the world tree.

Sleipnir slowed to a canter and stopped on the edge of a great canyon. I've known snow before, but this land was covered in nothing but ice. I dismounted to peer at the edge of the canyon and saw the shadowed valley held myriad transparent figures, mostly women, children, or the elderly. All of whom wandered aimlessly along a river bank. And they were only a fraction of the ones here now

“Who are they?”

“The dishonorable dead,” said Odin gravely, “unlike the valiant ghosts you met in my personal hall, these ghosts never amounted to much in their lives. They never died in battle, instead succumbing to simple pests like disease or childbirth. The cowards, they are unworthy of my hall.”

I thought back to the chorus of drunk dead men who watched me in Valhalla. The ones who looked on as children were bound and tried in front of them and did nothing. “Why should dying in battle make them better than those who die in other ways?”

Odin looked at me as if I asked why water was wet. Then he laughed and met me with the one depth perception-less eye. “At least you like them. Which is good, because you're their queen now.”

Then he mounted my sister and rode off, leaving me in the cold.

That was millennia ago. As you can see, this place is no longer the desolate canyon it once was. You can thank Ganglot and Ganglari for that; they may be slow, but they are dutiful workers if you're simply patient enough. And I have all the time in the world down here in Helheim. Why look, they've nearly finished cutting your nails! Oh, don't be scared, you're already dead, what's a nice nail clipper going to do to you? I also found new helpers, the serpent Nidhogg and the great dog Garmr. I'm sure you met them on the way here. They're no replacement for my brothers, of course, but they are a much-needed reminder of them.

According to some of the earliest arrivals in my new kingdom, the gods have found a way to keep my siblings alive, stagnant in their bondage. They tricked Jormungandr into devouring his own tail, unable to break free or end the cycle of auto-cannibalism. They say he was a beast of glutton, but that's easy when they refused to feed him anything but himself. As for Fenrir, it took them much longer to find a way to even hold him for long. They had to resort to dwarf magic to forge fetters strong enough. And all the time, he thought their fruitless attempts to bind him was no more than a game.

And then there's my Father, he who saved the Aesir time and time again. And what reward has the great Loki-Skywalker received for his service? Slander and betrayal! He's bound now, not by chains or magic ribbons but the entrails of another one of my half-brothers. The gods placed a serpent above his head so that it may spray poison into his eyes every second of every day.

As for my Mother, I've heard no word.

And then there's me. Do not mistake my title, I am as much a prisoner here as any of you. A pack mule forced to carry out Odin's dirty work like my half-sister. It seems I'm not the only one who can give a curse in the form of a gift. No matter, Lord Odin knows I will never betray his trust. I have no quarrel with him, no fury. Just the same impersonal judgement I declare on all the dead. What Odin doesn't know is that that includes him too.

Even the great Odin, king of the gods, will die someday and be trapped down here with us. Fenrir will get to kill monsters after all. But we won't be here when it happens. We'll need your help for that.

That's why I cut your nails and told you this story, you see. Nothing grows in here in Helheim, so we must make do with what we have. We're building a ship made out of dead man's nails, one large enough hold the all subjects of my realm. You are the first death of the final winter, which will soon freeze the bindings of my brothers and father until they can shatter, break free, and assault Asgard's unfinished walls. And I intend to join them with my people. Whether they be women or children, pacifists or the sick, disfigured or disabled, any whom Odin may have judged unworthy of his great halls shall have a chance to sail back and take Asgard for themselves.

Will you join us?

JANICE PARTEE

Mysteries are Wrong

Heavy silence webbing fresh from gulps of fear,
Eyes whispering soft electric shocks,
Patience fraying at the ends.

Crystallized indifference charges a plush atmosphere
riddled
with
prey:
living things unprepared.

One heartbeat shrieks too loudly in a thirteen-year-old body,
Slowly walking home alone.
Though the wind is warm,
The footsteps easy,
Moon full and calm,
Bright lights begin to leave her journey,
Is she beating away her odds...?
Welcome to the world of takers,
Where “thirteen-year-old body,”
Suddenly,
Is gone.

SARAH HOWELL

Star-Crossed Lovers

We fell asleep after shooting up, like we always do. I remember watching her eyes slowly force themselves shut in unison with the needle as it emptied into her arm and then we were asleep. When I woke up I was sitting on the floor with my head resting against the couch. Juliet was lying on her side sprawled out across the cushions, her right arm limp and hanging off the side. A dried trail of blood accessorized her arm from where the needle had pierced her skin.

I lifted myself up using the coffee table for support and sat by Juliet's feet on the couch. Brushing her hair from her face, I tucked her golden strands behind her ear snagging her most recent piercing. She was breath-taking as always, but she wasn't waking up. High and confused, I put my ear to her chest listened for a heartbeat. I couldn't make out the difference between the sound of the refrigerator running in the kitchen and the grandfather clock clicking in the hallway, let alone the sound of her heartbeat. I checked for a pulse. Frantic but moving in slow motion, I tried her other wrist anyway, and her neck, and then the left side of her neck, then I put my finger under her nose to feel for breaths. There was nothing to feel. No breath. No pulse. No heartbeat. No life. Just the body of Juliet, now as empty as everyone assumes when they see someone as pretty as her. They only see her body; they never see her person. Saw. They never saw her person.

Now these fake assholes are here, crying. Real tears, like they're sad. As if they even knew her. Maybe they are sad. But they aren't sad because Juliet died. They're sad because they have to attend extra drug classes in school. They have to walk by posters every day with stupid ass quotes like "pet pugs, don't do drugs!" and shit like that. They're tragedy whores. "*Oh Juliet was in my chemistry class, one time she sneezed and I said God bless you.*" I bet you're real broken up. Her sneeze was cute, sure, but not worth crying over. What about the way she sat in class? How she wouldn't say a word; her participation grade was shit. But if you looked at her notebook, it was mesmerizing. My personal favorite, "*She was so beautiful, what a shame.*" It's funny, because even though she's dead, they don't see the tragedy in her beauty. She was beautiful, and I loved her, but neither of those things meant that she would amount to anything. So, I don't really see where the real "shame" of it is.

Her beauty wasn't going to get her anywhere. Beauty doesn't get you anywhere that you want to be. She'd end up in the bed of a frat boy.

Not as much as a drink deep but unconscious nonetheless. She'd wake up the next morning scrambling to find her underwear, walking out of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house with one shoe, frantic and wondering, but really knowing, why she was so goddamn sore down there.

Or maybe she would have ended up pregnant at 17. She wouldn't graduate high school because she fell in love with a fuck up. But she also wouldn't have the baby. She wanted the baby; she wanted to give her a good life, a better life than the one she had. But she couldn't give it up. She couldn't give up the one pain that numbed her pain. She wanted to, but she'd shoot up and eventually when the fetus just couldn't take anymore Juliet would be holding the cold corpse of what looked like our child. But that tiny little human would be empty, beautiful and empty.

Her story doesn't end well no matter how you play it out. I loved her. Her laugh, her smile, the way she could make everything feel less awful. But with or without her I'll never amount to anything. I'll be that frat boy. I'll be that fuck up. Instead of letting my own tragedy play out, I think we can draw the curtain here. "*What a shame.*" Scene.

JENIFER JOSEPH

To Autumn (After Keats)

Season of missed and yellow frustration,
Feckless fuckbuddy of the scraggly sun,
Seek you every effort to unload validation
Through kegs of Bud Lites. Stomachs, like dew, run;
Bruise you apples, crush you like cottage cheese,
Fill you with august sickness to its core.
Swell you your gourd, if you know what I mean,
With a fool's kernel. I'd thought Truth pegged its store
For more. But late-night lovers lay. Still. Like beasts.
I hope to God these warm days' warnings cease,
For Summer's hoisted chills up to her seams.

Who hasn't seen you? I am not unsure
That anyone seeking someone will find
You trudging, careless, hunting by the door,
Your words unflinching at an unstitched wind;
Or on a half-made bedsheet, sound asleep,
Absent via absinthe, while your scythe
Pays life's redress, undressing the flowers
And drowning tulips. Like lipstick, you do keep
Unsteady that lilting smile, in a hive
Swarming over South Street. Patiently writhe,
Stealing my last mornings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Yeah, where are they?
I try not to think about it. Their tune
Forgot by weekends, stumbling away, their drunk
Psalms cut like stubble. Summer's strewn
In memory of boneless gnats, who mourn
Over a lack of blood. You came so soft
At first, as a beacon lives or dies, sunk
Me like a girl caught in a storm, then
Hit hard. Love wiped my stomach off
And left me there. Open as a trough.
Gathering swallows never gave a fuck.

To Romanticize the Restless

I count the number of stray paint splotches and extraneous marks on the ceiling for the seventh time tonight. Yep. Still twelve of them. I have to make sure, though. Sometimes the darkness makes a shadow look like a splotch, or a splotch look like a shadow. However, I am confident about this count; I'm pretty sure I remember saying twelve last night. And the night before. I could be imagining false memories, I guess. Let's face it: I'm tired and starting to hallucinate tie-dye mice coming out of the walls.

One, two, or sometimes three days go by without sleep. Only once has it been four. And I hope I never live to see four again.

I'm not entirely sure what would happen to my sleep patterns, or lack thereof, if I stopped popping little capsules full of psychoactive powder into my mouth every night, at strictly the same time, regardless of whether or not I am ready to sleep. Readiness isn't much of a factor, anyway. When I want to sleep, the drugs don't work. When I don't want to sleep, the drugs don't work.

I suppose that can be counted as a win, half the time.

The psychiatrist tells me that my insomnia is somewhat unexplainable, as a depression patient. Depression is often brought on by a lack of serotonin in the brain, but the brains of insomniacs usually have higher levels of serotonin than what is considered "normal."

She explained all of this to me after a long and grueling trial about my mental health state and environment. "How many hours do you sleep per night?...Do you feel tired or sluggish during the day?...Do you have difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep?...Do you lack motivation in your day-to-day activities?...Do you feel sad or anxious multiple times per day?...Have you ever experienced suicidal thoughts or actions?" She cautioned me to be honest during the questioning. Lying could make her diagnosis and prescription faulty.

It's impossible not to lie on some of those questions. They're too personal, and I was afraid of what she would think of me if I told her "yes, I constantly feel like the everything in the whole world is going to smash down on top of me, and I'm afraid I won't die. I'll just be crushed under the pressures of having to complete several essays, exams, and readings per week, while training three hours a day to maybe, just maybe, drop a few seconds off of my best five kilometer cross country race, and then

make it to work on time to start my shift. I'm not breathing, but not dying. And yes, that makes me sad."

It is her job to judge what I say.

Maybe my medications are fighting each other and using my neurological pathways as a battleground. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors vs. sleeping pills. And the ruckus from all the fighting is what's keeping me awake! That's just what I theorized one night in between paint splotch counts.

Medical opinion is that the depression is not really a huge factor in the fact that I can't seem to sleep a wink. What's really messing with me is the anxiety. Apparently, even if my anxieties aren't at the forefront of my mind, they are still powerful enough to cause distress. Fears of academic failure, athletic failure, social failure, and just plain failure to be perfect in every way keep my brain on high alert all night, regardless of whether or not I think I'm scared. The psychiatrist tells me that insomnia is a byproduct of moderate to severe anxiety disorders.

As a tormented and proud sixteen-year-old, I would brag to my friends about the throes of not sleeping. It made me seem like a better student. A harder worker. More dedicated. Tougher.

I would take a nice, long blink in class and proclaim to anyone who happened to see that I hadn't slept in ninety-six hours because I was all too preoccupied with homework. Or I'd turn to some friends and ask the loaded question: "Did you see the sunrise this morning?"

Of course they didn't. I knew that, and they knew I knew that. But I would still follow it up with, "Well it was gorgeous! I figured I would watch it since I was already up all night."

What I prefer not to romanticize is all the scary discomforts that come with being a functioning insomniac. Like the dark circles under my eyes that only become more obvious as my face gets paler. People look at me, at my eyes, as if they are looking at a ghost. Someone with no life. No words are spoken about it, but their subtle drop of the lower lip when eye contact is initiated says it all.

The constant light-headedness and frequent fainting don't make for pleasant conversation, either. This sort of physical ailment worries the regular sleeper. Normal people are scared of losing consciousness. But as a person who has been fully conscious for days on end, a decent faint every now and again is welcomed. It's like a brief intermission from being always awake: almost like a nap.

The most daunting side effect comes after only one or two sleepless nights: hallucinations.

At first, the hallucinations aren't really hallucinations. If I wasn't expecting them, I wouldn't have noticed them at all until they took the form of full-blown *Alice in Wonderland* images. Most often I see the tie-dye mice, about six at a time. They slither out of the wall and proceed to crawl around on it. They never come near me, and they rarely make noise. Other times, I see faces of friends and family.

Now, it's easier to pick up on the slighter hallucinations. Spots in my vision, fuzzy images, a dark hole in the corner of view. Things one would normally blink once or twice at, and then carry on. But later, when I lie down to try to sleep after failing two nights in a row, color begins to emerge from the darkness. Swirls of all shades of reds, blues, yellows, and greens take to the third dimension. Faces appear from nothingness. Sounds drone and ring in my ears only. Sometimes, at its worst, imaginary water drips onto my forehead. I will see it, hear it, and feel it.

On my one and only night four of no sleep, my late grandfather appeared, asking if I was ready to go to church. I explained to him that I was tired and no longer religious, so I would not be going.

Nothing ever truly scary happens during my hallucinations. I don't scream, or struggle in fear of what I am sensing. The only terrifying element is the sheer fact that I am hallucinating. My mind is so confused and exhausted that it creates wild visions for me to see. Maybe my brain misses the dreaming accompanied with sleeping.

Or maybe because I'm awake all the time, it doesn't know how to see nothing at all.

The phrase "trying to sleep" takes on a whole new meaning. Because I do try. I try everything they tell you to do to promote rest. Every trick in the book.

I've drunk the warm milk before bed. Sworn off caffeine for life. Listened to the sounds of ocean waves crashing on beaches. Meditated. Taken melatonin. Counted back from one thousand. Even counted sheep.

A lot of people, those in their mid-thirties or older in particular, think I bring the insomnia upon myself. They think I'm asking for it. The first question the psychiatrist asked when I complained of insomnia was how many hours I spent on my phone before trying to sleep.

As if the fact that cell phone blue light is a neurological stimulant was something unbeknown to millennials.

"Those damn screens you kids always have your noses in," the older generation barks. "The blue light keeps you up at night. It stimulates your brain, ya know!"

I know.

Not having gazed upon a cell phone screen for five hours doesn't change the fact that I am still here, back against the mattress, chin up, eyes fixed on the ceiling, unblinking. Awake. Trying too hard not to be. Focusing too much on what I cannot do and what I cannot have only pushes it farther out of reach. So the psychiatrist says.

In all honesty, I do sleep. Sometimes for a few minutes at night, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for a normal amount of time, and sometimes for sixteen hours at a time. Falling asleep and staying asleep is a challenge most of the time, but sometimes it isn't. Sometimes I fall asleep standing up. Sometimes I fall asleep with the first blink after getting into bed. Insomnia works both ways: sleeping too much and sleeping too little. The vast majority of the time, I find myself in the realm of too little.

In some warped way, I thank my insomnia for that. It only sweetens the feeling of waking up well-rested after having slept for hours after not having slept at all for days. Unfortunately, it makes waking back up again even tougher.

However, as I've grown, most of what little dreams I dream have become nightmares. These sort of horrific images I see in my sleep often leave me feeling worse when I wake than before I had slept. So in a way, the insomnia protects me from my own nightmares by not letting me have them. Maybe one day if I escape the insomnia, I'll finally be able to tell which is worse: sleeping with terror, or not sleeping at all. The psychiatrist says the same sort of anxiety that causes my insomnia likely causes my nightmares, as well.

Statistics show that insomnia and other sleep disorders only worsen with age. That terrifies me. I'm tired of being tired. I wish to never see a tie-dye mouse ever again. But sitting here in the black night, wishing or wanting to cry but not being able to because my eyes are just too dried out, won't stop them from crawling out of the dark walls of my bedroom. So I close my eyes, and try to focus on breathing. I see laughing, colorful faces dancing on the inside of my eyelids. Eyes open. I watch my stomach rise and fall with each breath. I hear my heartbeat in my ears.

Sleep is supposed to happen. So the body can stay healthy. I wish my mind cared enough about my body to let it be healthy.

But on year five of my sleepless journey, I'm beyond wishing and hoping for sleep, at least. I can always dream of moving into a new home, with a new bedroom, with a new number of paint splashes to count on the ceiling. Well, not really dream, I suppose.

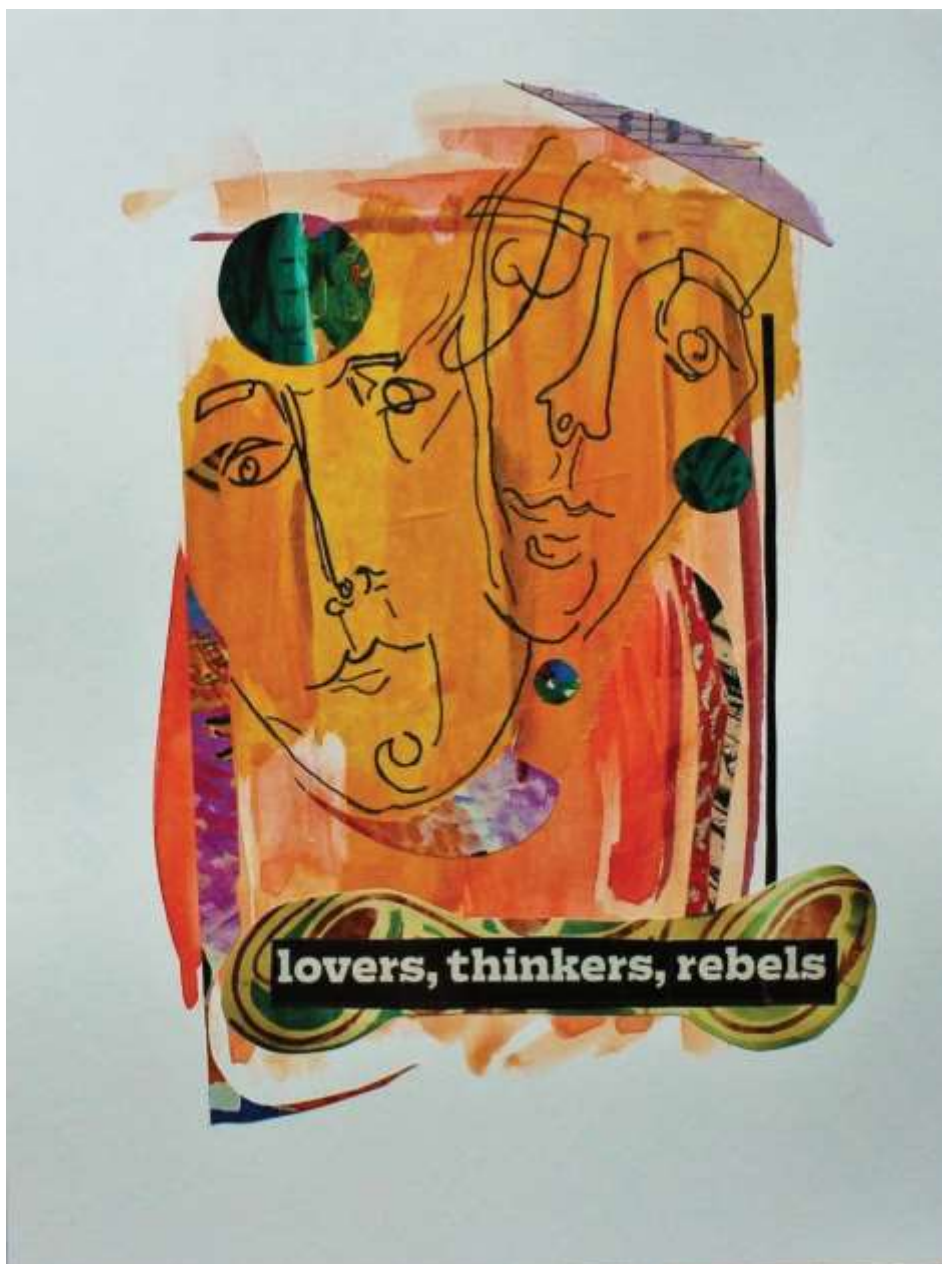
SARAH DEFELICE

Goo Girls



SOPHIE GIOFFRE

Lovers, Thinkers, Rebels



MELANIE LEE

home in paradise



EMILY COUNTS

lanternflies



ALEXA BEACHAM

skylight



MILLIE DRURY

Toi Le



LILLY MCQUEEN

The Fisherman



KEVIN LEÓN

Irreverence



ROBERT VARNEY

St Mary Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh



TAYLOR WILSON

Mirror 2



MATT DWYER

Forced to Ponder

Will this silent shrieking be the sound that takes me out?
Or is it left to the shadowed hum of cicadas,
That slinks below the doorframe & feels nothing like
Summer's final squeals.

Will the trumpets measure my footsteps? Staccato stumbling
In A minor sounds like a sympathy of separation,
Every note suspended by a glance over the
shoulder, Still someone in the shadows.

Will they save me like a seashell too jagged to stay in the sand?
Not suited for the Sage's sound, where small waves crash
With striking clarity, and barefoot travelers shrink their shadows
To the size of snap-peas.

Will I ever strip the question marks from each "I love you"?
From my good morning's and my toothy smiles? Or will the shaky
Sounds of uncertainty stick to the shadows of every sentence?

REN TOSCANO

The Thing

nothing is working the way it should—
my window, my brain, my phone.
i wish i could scream it all out of me.
foam up at the mouth, scare it off.
it creeps over me like a pair of fingers looking
for a waistband,
like something desperate to be let in.
but i need to shut it out.
if i sew everything up,
nothing can creep inside.
if i just do everything in order,
i'll shut it out.
if i bury my face in my sweatshirt,
if i can't see the sun in the sky,
if i stop hurting my skin,
if i stop listening to the people
upstairs, maybe i can shut it out.

maybe it's an infestation,
maybe i need some outside help.
an exterminator. a lover. something.
i called you last night and you told me i need help.
i think you're right.

but it doesn't matter sometimes.
i could scrub my skin raw,
pick holes in my skin to extract the mites,
sew them back up if they pass my inspection.
i could cover myself in a plaster cast, but it
would not be enough to escape it.

it is everywhere—
crawling in through my ears
and making a home somewhere behind my eyes,
begging me to make it stop make it stop make it stop.
but nothing is enough to clog it out if i can find it,

i can hold it under the bathwater long enough to drown it out.
i can kill it.

and last week i tried.
i held it there in my hand,
i looked it in the eyes.

it looked back at me and said, *you are my home.*

TOMMY ARMSTRONG

The Auction

Dourine sweat through her sheets last night. Despite her protesting, tomorrow she was starting as a drug dealer.

Lutz reasoned that they'd hit rock bottom. Just yesterday, they'd had to borrow money from Lutz' French teacher. She counter-offered a discount on his French classes, but he borrowed \$300 instead, telling her in his best French, "It would be irresponsible to accept favors for the achievement of poverty." She crooked her head, so he clarified that he might as well accept free dental coverage for taking meth and making brown nubs out of his teeth.

Dourine decided from reading the backs of cereal boxes as a child, that arriving at rock bottom defined by her financial situation would be wholesome of her. Lutz decided from those cereal boxes what would be the next civil step.

You become a drug dealer.

Dourine sat in her sweat and thought she might fly into the water-stained mix-matched tile ceiling at the banquet she was hosting for people with fatal allergies.

She hardly slept but she'd woken at five a.m.¹ to go the church auditorium and arrange on a table articles she'd printed about food allergies, allergen statements, and the paleontologist diet.

When guests had arrived, Lutz turned off the air conditioning. He was going around taking peoples jackets to the coat room.

Testy, shiny guests kept coming up to Dourine, asking when dinner might be ready or the AC might be turned on. Each she gave a different time. It was nearly 9 p.m. when she caught some old woman eating a breadly snack out of aluminum foil in the bathroom. People with fatal allergies always had snacks.

At 9:30, Lutz came out of the coat room with his backpack and nodded to Dourine, who held her arms slightly forward to cover her pits stains and announced, "Dinner! Have a seat in the dining room!"

The smelly guests were too hungry to be self-conscious and they squished to find their name card at the table, where their meals had already been placed.

Guests dug in while Lutz went around the table rooting through his backpack for the wallets he'd taken from the jackets, and returned each

¹ Like a farmer.

one. The guests were too starved to notice and most left their wallet on the table in front of their plate and name card. Lutz handed the backpack to Dourine.

“Okay!” Dourine announced. “Now I’m not thrilled about this, but I imagine we should start the bidding sooner rather than later.”

Half the guests were too busy chewing to give her much attention. The other half were too busy coughing.

“So, each of you had a specialized dish tonight, per tradition of the PL-double-A², but what we’ve tried out tonight is giving each of you exactly what you’re allergic to.”

The guests had tears in their eyes and were really starting to wheeze. One took an epi-pen from his pocket and stuck his leg.

Everyone else felt desperately for their pockets.

“And I know most of you left your epi-pens in your jackets, which is okay, because my friend Lutz here has plenty of epi-pens.”

Several became so strangled and desperate, they grabbed at their neighbors’ thighs to see if anyone had one but simply not used it.

“We’ve got just enough for everyone minus one person here,” Dourine said. “Shall we start the bidding at 3,000?”

Guests wheezed selfishly, making a tough crowd for Dourine and Lutz.

Lutz reached for the backpack and started taking out some epi-pens, holding them up for everyone to see. “Hey! We’re serious here! We’ve got epi-pens, and you’re going to die if you don’t— you can Venmo us!”

Dourine waved epi-pens at a safe distance. She didn’t want anyone shoplifting. As the pens moved back and forth across her face, she noticed small differences in all of them. Some pens appeared longer than some. Some wider. Most had dark text, but only some were black, some navy, and some maroon.

“Lutz,” she said. “Did you get these all from the same store?”

“Store? Oh my god.” He rubbed his nose and yelled, “How about 25 hundred!”

“Lutz. Where’d you get these?”

“What’s the problem here? Can’t you help me sell these? You’re bottom-feeding.”

The man who had an epi-pen in his pocket was recuperating on the floor.

“Lutz?” Dourine pursued.

² People with Lethal Allergies Association

“I got them from their jackets! Okay!” Lutz said. He picked his nose self-consciously. “If we’re going to keep their epi-pens from them, why not sell those epi-pens back to them instead of spending a fortune on *extra ones*?”

“That’s *stealing*, Lutz!”

“Dourine!” He lowered his voice. “Stealing is very classic drug dealer practice.”

“*What sort of drug dealer are you talking about?*” Dourine asked.

Lutz cleaned his nails with his other nails.

“Drug dealing is, when you hit rock-bottom, you know,” Dourine said, “It’s a role. And it’s environmental. Because drug dealing, it’s free trade. And if we bought the epi-pens and then sold them, that would be *free trade* and it would be *civil* and it would be fine!”

Lutz noticed all the people were dead at this point, save the one on the floor. He was coming to.

“And we’ve murdered these people!” Dourine said.

“Hey. Hey. There’s one.” Lutz approached the man on the floor, who was starting to crawl for the doorway. “We’ve got to kill him,” he reasoned.

“No!” Dourine said, sitting down in the prone man’s seat.

“We’ve already murdered all these people.”

“Only if this guy gets away and tells people. If we murder him,” Lutz said, “It’ll be as if we murdered no one.”

Dourine thought about this for as much time as it took a young woman they thought was dead to die. Lutz’ thesis seemed to make sense, so she figured: walks like a duck, talks like a duck. She brought over the bag of epi-pens and stuck another into the back of the man’s calf. He winced.

“Good thing we didn’t sell any of these!” she said. She stuck another in the back of his thigh.

The man started to lose his breath. The sight disturbed Lutz; he looked it away so it didn’t exist.

Another pen in the small of the man’s back. In the crook behind his knee. In his bicep. His buttock. His shoulder. Then Dourine remembered a childhood trauma and stuck another in his neck. The man died of an asthma attack.

She collected the used epi-pens and put them in her backpack, thinking maybe she could sell them as refurbished. Lutz went around the table, picking up wallets until Dourine saw and scolded him for stealing.

COURTNEY DUCHENE

Landscape with the Fall of Hillary

I gathered the streamers off the floor, crepe paper
wings in my fingertips. They crumbled, the leaves under my feet

yesterday in Pittsburgh. All I could see was blue, corrugated
plastic horizon. Now, I pick up plastic cups, paper plates,

turn off the TV, pat a staffer on the back, look at Bill.
Reminisce about the other 44 times they solved

the maze of corn stalks and constitutions. Fought the
Minotaur, blood red, veins blue. Gather the plastic cups,

pick up the streamers. Of course they all were men.
Their bodies valorized on the pages of history books.

Their adorned skulls warn women to
stay near their fainting couches. Like Icarus,

I wanted to fly above the maze—
I sang campaign songs with stupid

little birds. Built stump speech wings
Lifted off with the laughter of 44 jeering men

Who bloodied their fists trying to beat me out of the bar exam.
I aspired to stand above the United States, gaze upwards,

Glass sky above me. I thought of my mother behind the
curtain. Gingham housewife. What did it mean for her that I

wore the purple blood of suffragettes?
That I wanted to leave elephant-tusk towers behind?

She held both my hands in hers, told me I could be anything.

I know now that Icarus had to be a daughter—
Sons aren't punished for sins of lusting.

KILEY ADDIS

You Kept Me Quiet

Growing up, I could always read my mom's true emotions from the smile that was on her face. She might be smiling, but that didn't always mean she was happy. When she was happy, her smile was normally paired with a laugh, eyes closed, and teeth partly separated. When she was angry at us her smile would be tight, eyelids closer together giving us a look that we knew never meant anything good, and her teeth would be tightly clenched. When she was upset her smile would be small, tears in her eyes, and her teeth not showing. I got used to seeing the last two smiles more than I ever saw the happy smile.

I didn't think much of my mom's emotions when I was growing up. I was used to only thinking about her in terms of myself. She was there to help me with my emotions. My mom was a happy housewife; she took care of the family and was content with not working. At least, she looked content from my perspective. As her child, I never noticed her emotions unless it was very noticeable. I noticed her emotions when she fought with my dad or when I or my other siblings fought with my dad.

"You just need to learn not to say anything back to him," she would tell me with her tight smile. Her teeth clenched in a way that could tell me she wasn't happy with me. Whenever any of us fought with my dad that's what she would tell us. "You know how your dad is," she would say when we would make any argument back.

I've watched her act the same way toward him as well. They didn't fight a lot in front of us when we were growing up, but once all of my siblings entered high school they didn't keep their arguments as secret. "Sometimes I have to remind myself of what I tell you," she says to me. This time her smile is a line on her face and there are tears in her eyes. "I can't say anything back to him either, we just need to keep quiet." In a way, I understood what she meant by this. My dad needed to be the loudest in the room, he needed to have the last word, and apologies were not in his vocabulary. When she told us not to say anything back to him, she knew it might be in our best interest. Nothing good ever came from yelling back.

I kept this idea with me when I came to college. There was this belief ingrained in me that I was supposed to keep quiet and not say anything back to anyone. I wasn't aware of this thought until it started to become a problem. I was walking home from a party my freshman year when two men started following my friend and I. "You guys look like

you'd be a good time," one of them said to us. We couldn't see their faces in the dark and the shadows. "We're not interested," my friend said back to them, grabbing my forearm. I felt her grip tighten slightly and could hear the waver in her voice.

"Oh come on, let us take you home," the other one said with a laugh. I couldn't see his face clearly, but I could hear the smirk on his face as he said it. I knew I should say something or stand up for myself, but I couldn't. All I could think of was my mom telling me to keep quiet. "Don't say anything back to him," I could hear her saying in the back of my head with her teeth clenched, eyelids close together, disapproving look smile.

I didn't realize until I came to college how much those values were instilled in me. I always thought of the way my mom smiled any time anyone yelled at her. That thin, tight-lipped smile, no teeth showing, and tears in her eyes threatening to spill over. I was always amazed that even when she was that upset she could smile. I was never sure if that was a sign of her strength or a sign of her weakness. She could smile through pain, but she also couldn't stand up for herself.

Freshman year wasn't the first or the last time I dealt with cat calling. My sophomore year, I was walking a friend home from a party when we were cornered by a man on campus. "You have an amazing ass," he said to my friend, biting his lip and smirking. I could tell she was uncomfortable, so I said back to him, "we're just trying to go home."

"Why go home when the party is just starting?" he asked, waving his drink in the air. I tried my best to grab her and shove past him but he blocked our path again. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked me.

"Home," I said again, firmer this time. I wasn't normally one to stand up to anyone who cornered me, but I knew my friend couldn't and we both wanted to get away.

Trying to shove past him again just enticed him to yell at us for playing hard to get. As he yelled, I couldn't help but stand there and smile. My smile was a mixture of my mother's angry smile and her sad smile. My teeth weren't showing, but they were clenched, my eyelids close together in anger, but tears were also welling in them. I was angry at this man for cornering us and yelling at us. I was upset that this was happening at all. What made me angriest and saddest was that I couldn't bring myself to say anything back to him.

Seeing my mother smile and keep quiet has made me realize how much I follow suit from what she has shown me. I smile and I keep quiet and I feel my smile change depending on the situation. I'm not sure why this is something my mom instilled in me that I can't quite kick. I know if

If I ever asked her about it she would look at me with her teeth-clenched, eyelids close together with that look on her face, smiling big enough for me to know it's not a real smile, and say, "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

KEVIN LEÓN

Selected Tweets

Apr 26

wish my parents had money so i could pretend they didn't

Jun 18

theres a strip club named heartbreakers and next to it is a giant billboard that reads "jesus mends all broken hearts"

Jul 3

can i call myself "straight edge" if i do the occasional psychedelic but nothing else?

Aug 25

lots of white passing latinos suddenly embracing their heritage now that being a PoC has become trendy

Aug 29

getting emotional thinking about how many library books will be ruined by the floods

Sep 4

ive owed the harris county library \$28.50 for the past 7 years
[#badboysoftexas](#)

Sep 5

wondering if any "friend" of mine (from elementary) has died already

Sep 18

getting a glock is roughly \$1,200, like the iphone x. the correct choice is clear i reckon

Oct 18

would be cool if memories had a monetary value, would probably sell a lot of mine

Nov 8

quit smoking cigs and started eating vegan but like as a bit or something

Nov 9

to join your schools young republican club you gotta be able to list the age of consent in every state by memory

Nov 19

booking my ticket to the aquariums stingray pool, gonna stomp these fish out in tribute to steve irwin

Nov 23

all babies are ugly, except for baby carrots. theyre mad cute

Nov 29

someones sitting in the library chair that i sit in to to read; am now reading on a similar chair adjacent to that one. feeling very anxious, cant read. am i spiraling?

Dec 7

not worried about net neutrality because it'll finally get me to *log* off

Dec 14

someone writes something racist in the snow and the admins call it "bias"

Dec 21

is it "ethical" to order a book off amazon and return it for a full refund after reading it?

Jan 5

need a movie focusing on a troupe of US soldiers that die for meddling in countries they have no business being in

Feb 10

haven't had a cigarette in 281 days; have kept a daily blog for 94 days; haven't killed anyone in 7163 days

Feb 21

wish i could mute the word "juxtaposition" from my life

MICHAEL KIBBLEHOUSE

Romeo Echo Alpha

It's an early autumn day in Fish Crossing, Montana. It's been ten years since North America was overrun by a viral infection similar to Ebola. However, unlike Ebola, the infected wake up afterwards with a hunger for human flesh. Kelly, a 21-year-old survivor, looks out the backseat as the SUV speeds down an abandoned highway leading into the town. They've been gone for six months, far longer than they were meant to.

"You think Hannah is still growing those flowers?" Kelly asks, breaking the usual silence of the passengers.

"Doubt it," her best friend and mentor Bridgette replies, gruff as usual. "She was having trouble with an ample water supply, zombies contaminating the well water."

"Maybe they got rain over the summer, Montana is normally a dreary place even before the apocalypse," Clayton, the driver and Bridgette's old police partner, adds.

"Hopefully they got the generator up and running, I really need to take a hot shower." Bridgette takes her iconic NYPD ball cap and tosses it on the dashboard, scratching her scalp.

"What you need is to get laid," Kelly teases from the back, knowing Bridgette really wants to get back to her girlfriend Harper, a former news anchor.

Clayton lets out a big laugh as he takes a turn down towards the town entrance. The highway continues on towards Missoula and eventually into Washington, but last spring a storm took out the bridge near Arrowtip, leaving the ravine impassable. Bridgette frowns in the rearview mirror at Kelly. Although the girl is now 21, Bridgette still treats her like the 11-year-old she found in Milwaukee.

"What you need is to watch the tree line, we're coming up on the community and hopefully they don't shoot at us. Logan is gonna be pissed we crashed his F-150." Bridgette checks her watch compulsively. Although it stopped working years ago, it was the last thing her father gave her before he died. "All right, eyes up, the sentries should be just around the bend." Bridgette hates going out of the community, hates leaving Harper and her brother Logan, but they were the best at scavenging and they needed flu shots for the second-deadliest plague known to mankind.

The SUV takes the turn slowly, their haul rattling around in the trunk. The big sign saying “West Banner Funeral Home” swings in the early autumn wind. The community stretches about ten miles around the outskirts of town, encompassing a strip mall, church, the funeral home and a quarter mile of mid construction townhouses that serves as the hospital. All this is fenced in with barbed wire and spikes with only one road entrance via the funeral home. Normally, a pair of guards would intercept them at the gate, but today was not going to be normal.

“Where are they?” Bridgette mutters, already pulling out her Beretta 9mm.

Kelly looks around but only sees the forest. Clayton slows the car down to a crawl. He pulls out his nickel-finished .357 snub barrel from his leg holster.

“I told them to have two guards on the gate at all time. Goddamn slackers.” Bridgette grabs her hat and pulls it over her long red hair. “Kelly, you know what to do, right?”

“The go-bag is right next to me, I’ll wait in the car, lock the doors and only open them for you.” Kelly rolls her stone-grey eyes but obeys her guardian.

“Good girl. Clayton, you ready?” Bridgette switches off the safety and unlocks the passenger door.

“You think raiders or zombies?” Clayton stops the car next to the trio of sedans they keep around and lets the engine run for a minute.

“Zombies. But bring your Mossberg just in case.”

Clayton nods and turns off the car. Bridgette gets out and crosses the entire parking lot in three steps. Clayton looks back at Kelly and smiles, silently telling her to stay in the car. He pulls out his Mossberg 590 and follows his partner.

Kelly looks around at the woods but doesn’t see anyone, alive or dead. The red and yellow leaves begin to land on the hood covering it in their somber camouflage. After about twenty minutes, Clayton comes back hefting a duffel bag full of supplies. Kelly opens her door and Clayton slides the bag under her tiny feet.

“How bad?”

“Everyone’s dead.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah, looks like a couple of weeks ago.”

“Is there anything missing?”

“Not here, we haven’t checked the church yet.”

“Are Harper and Logan?”

“We haven’t found them yet. Bridgette is still looking, but I hope the poor girl doesn’t find anything.” Clayton puts his left hand on Kelly’s shoulder. His beard is beginning to turn salt and pepper. “I need you to come inside and watch my back while I move supplies.” Clayton holds up the large shotgun for her to take.

“Okay.” Kelly steps out of the car taking the twenty-inch-long shotgun. It had only been six months ago in April when they left, how could so much change? Heading inside, Kelly prepares for the worst. In the lobby, there is a lot of blood and empty bullet casings. Multiple corpses of unknown zombies litter the hall where people tried barricading themselves in the crematorium and viewing gallery.

“It looks like hell in here,” Kelly says, holding her breath. The smell of month-old rot and dead flesh attract over a thousand flies that buzz across the ground.

“Seems like it was a horde or something that stumbled across this place, could’ve been in the hundreds.” Clayton steps over the remains of the parts zombies don’t eat and leads Kelly out into the backyard. Here the earth is trampled and the grass crunched up into dirt, the camp and wood shelters the community built ransacked by the dead and littered with bodies. Kelly looks at the back of Clayton’s SWAT vest once she begins recognizing some of the corpses. She reads the letters P-O-L-I-C-E over and over again until they are inside the weapons shack. She got used to seeing dead bodies but never got comfortable seeing dead friends.

“Bridgette came through here, she left a radio.” Clayton lowers his hand cannon and picks up the small hand held device. The community only had two for about 30 people. “B, you read me?” The radio crackles with silence.

“Yeah, I read you. I just cleared the church, Logan and Harper aren’t here. Is Kelly with you?”

“Yep.”

“I took care of everyone inside. When you’re done in there, send her over here to collect some clothes and whatever.”

“Copy, keep safe.”

“I’m heading for the road and strip, looks like the dead broke down the fence on their way out. Probably find some MRE packs up there.”

Kelly grabs the radio from Clayton and holds down on the talk button.

“Bridgette...” The words don’t come to Kelly.

“I know, baby girl; I won’t be gone long.”

“I’m sure they’re safe.”

Bridgette doesn't respond but Kelly knows her friend is barely holding it together. Kelly and Clayton work for about an hour. They take all the ammo boxes of 5.56mm and .223 Rem for the AR-15s. Unfortunately, most of the 9mm pistol rounds were used up during the attack. Some of the buckshot survived, but they only take about a hundred shells since it isn't as useful.

"I'll collect any of the water from the rain collector, you should go to the church now, Kelly," Clayton says after an hour of silence. Kelly is seated, cleaning the blood and guts off of the two AR-15s they have.

"Okay, be safe." Kelly leaves the rifles and shotgun taking a Glock 17 police issue. Kelly takes the long route to the church, through the fields now trampled and useless.

After the short detour Kelly arrives at the church. It feels different to her without people. Normally, the kids would be playing in the small garden where Hannah tried growing flowers. Someone would always be trying to cook and the smell would drift out the front door. Now those doors were broken open and a pile of corpses lay over the flowerbeds. Inside, the bunkbeds are all pushed towards the doors, likely as a hastily made barricade. Kelly has to crawl over a bloody cot, her hands pressing into the soaking mattress and turning her palms a deep red.

"Oh fuck." Kelly turns away once she stands up, Hannah is dangling above the pastor's pulpit with a rope around her neck. Bridgette had gone through the trouble of taking care of her but her eyes are still locked onto Kelly.

"Jesus, I'm sorry, Hannah." Kelly rushes towards her cot and grabs her purple backpack. She stuffs her jacket, extra socks and underwear in and then looks around for Clayton's gear. Crossing the room, she steps over the broken glass of the large stained window of Judas and grabs a couple of shirts from an open suitcase.

"Kelly, you in here?," Bridgette calls out from the front door.

"Yeah." Kelly grabs her stuff and shoulders her backpack.

Bridgette used to tease her she looked "like Dora the Explorer with her purple school bag," but Kelly never watched that TV show. Kelly crawls back over the mattress and comes face to face with her older friend outside at the steps.

"You could have told me Hannah did that to herself."

"I wanted you to see. You needed to see."

"What, that suicide is okay?! That I should just off myself when there's no other choice?"

"I can't let you become one of them, baby girl. I don't think..."

Kelly now notices how defeated Bridgette looks; her jaw is quivering and she's making a fist. Kelly looks in her friend's amber-colored eyes, she's crying.

"I'm sorry, Bridgette." Kelly forgets her anger and hugs her big sister. Bridgette had saved her countless times, turned her into a survivor and a warrior. Now she was a vulnerable mess and Kelly was screaming at her.

"I should be apologizing, I shouldn't have—"

"No, it doesn't matter. We'll find Harper, alive. And I'm sure Logan is out in the woods right now, looking for a way to get to you."

Bridgette smiles. Kelly can always bring her back from the brink. Her fortitude is something the older girl admires.

Kelly holds them together for a while, trying to hug away the pain. Eventually, however, it becomes too awkward and they separate. Kelly, being a self-declared empath, is now the one crying. Bridgette has returned to her old broody self.

"We should get back, Clayton has probably loaded up all the guns and water," Kelly says, wiping away her tears.

"There's still some food in the strip mall. We can take the SUV back and then move out."

"Where are we gonna go?"

"I dunno, you ever been to Canada?"

"I hear Niagara Falls is beautiful."

Bridgette lets out a laugh.

"One thing at a time."

A twig snaps in the tree line behind them, alerting them to danger. Both of them draw their guns, and Bridgette places a hand on Kelly, moving the young girl behind her.

"Wait! We don't want any trouble!" Two pair of hands shoot out from behind a tree.

"Step out, now!" Bridgette trains her Beretta on the strangers.

Two teens—probably around 17 or 18—step out, followed by a young girl.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Jason, this is Cassandra and the girl's Samantha." The boy is older than the other two, none of them seem related.

"Please don't kill us." The older girl looks at them with frightened eyes. Her plaid shirt is muddy and her tank top is ripped. They were running in the underbrush.

"Why are you here?"

“We were trying to make our way west, but the bridge is out. We found a man out in the woods who told us to come here to scavenge for food.”

“What man? What’d he look like?” Bridgette steps closer to the boy, but keeps her gun trained on them. The small girl, Samantha, looks at Kelly with blank eyes, unfazed by the tense standoff.

“He was tall and had wavy hair. He kinda looked like you actually.” The boy lowers his hands slightly.

“Logan?! Was his name Logan?”

“I dunno, I didn’t ask. He just said he used to live here and we can take whatever we want.”

“How long ago was this?” Bridgette lowers her gun. Kelly steps closer to the young teens, also dropping her firearm. Although they are similar in age, Kelly can’t help but think how young the three look.

“Three days ago,” Cassandra says putting her arms around the little girl. “We met him back west where the highway splits off towards Canada.” Her voice is frail and cracked like she hasn’t had water in a while.

“Did he say anything else, like where he was going?” Kelly grows more frantic, her mix of excitement and dread burning through her eyes.

“South. He said he was going to head for Yellowstone, but we told him the FEMA site had been abandoned for years,” Samantha speaks in a small preadolescent squeak.

“It’s a slaver city,” Kelly remarks. She turns towards her friend. “Do you think he’s going to look for us?”

“Maybe, or maybe some others escaped and got captured.”

Bridgette looks back at Kelly her eyes revealing her terror. They both knew the slavers were a dangerous group. They had been working for a man down south, in Salt Lake City, and prowling the Native American reservations for a few years now.

“Do you think they would come this far north?”

“Times are getting hard with the nuclear winter. It’s already too cold to plant fresh crops, let alone transport them from Mexico.”

“But we’re the only community for a hundred miles in any direction. We had to go to Denver just to find medicine.”

“Well, maybe they don’t know that. I’m sure there are communities out there that we don’t know about.”

The three strangers shift, still uneasy. The young girl walks over towards a pile of trash and picks out a teddy bear with soot across its stomach.

“You think we could have some of your food? We’ve been walking for weeks,” the boy asks, rolling his sleeves above his elbows.

“Yeah sure, walk that way for about ten minutes and you’ll find our old community storage center. We’ve got about five months’ worth of food inside.”

“If you don’t mind, we’d like to go with you.” The girl steps forward. “We can also help you look for your friend.”

“Kass, why would you say that?” Her friend pulls her back away from Bridgette and Kelly.

“What, you think the three of us can just go back to wandering the countryside once they leave? Neither of us know how to take care of a kid. It’ll be winter in like, a month, this far north.”

“No can do; we don’t have enough room in our car for three more people,” Bridgette coldly responds before they can have a chance to decide.

“Bridgette?!” Kelly looks at her older companion. “They have a kid.”

“We’ll have to pack twice as much food.”

“We still have the keys to the patrol car. I can drive with them.”

“No, out of the question, I’m not leaving you alone with them.”

“What, I’ve got a gun. Plus, if they have that kid they wouldn’t try anything. Where’d you find her anyway?” Kelly asks, holstering her pistol. Jason and Cassandra noticeably relax.

“Tacoma, Washington. We passed through on a caravan from Portland, found her in a car garage off the freeway.”

A pair of gunshots ring out from back at the funeral home. Bridgette puts both hands on her Beretta.

“B, you read me?” Clayton calls over the radio.

“Yeah I copy, what the hell was that?” Bridgette grabs the radio from her back pocket.

“Got a bunch of zombies back here, maybe twenty on the road. I think the horde is coming back.”

“Shit, can you make it to the car?”

“Yeah, I just finished packing. We better go now, probably don’t have time to get any more food but I’ll swing around and pick you up.”

“Understood, we got three new people with us. Two teens and a little girl.”

“What? Where’d they come from...you know what, never mind. We can get acquainted in the car.” Clayton turns off and Bridgette puts the radio away.

“Okay, we’ve got undead coming up southeast. We can take you in for now, but if you do something I don’t like, I’m kicking you out.”

“Okay, ma’am, we won’t cause any problems.” Jason fidgets in place, nervously smiling.

“Where’s Samantha?” Cassandra looks around, not seeing the little girl.

“Sam?” Jason spins around frantically. Samantha is gone from the trash pile. The little girl could have gone anywhere in the past five minutes they’ve been talking.

“We have to look for her.”

Kelly and Bridgette nod, and the four split off searching the woods around the church. Bridgette heads around the back. Kelly heads towards the funeral home on the edge of the open field. Zombies begin to cross the trampled grain crops towards her, but she has time to move unhindered. She screams the little girl’s name and can hear the others behind her. Clayton pulls up on the dirt road through the forest, stopping for Kelly.

“What happened?”

“The little girl, Samantha, she wandered off.”

“We don’t have time for this. Get in, I’ll take us to the others. If she went back that way, I would have seen her.” Kelly jumps in as a group of zombies begin circling the SUV.

Clayton shifts into gear before Kelly can close the door. The large SUV barrels down the road and past the church, heading for the backroads.

“Clayton, you read?” Bridgette’s voice crackles over the radio. Kelly is soothed to hear her friend is relatively safe.

“Yep, loud and clear.”

“We found the girl. I’m taking them all down to the road by the runoff near the creek.”

“Okay, I’ve got Kelly. We will be there in 30 seconds.” Clayton puts the radio on the dashboard while Kelly loads a clean rifle magazine into her AR-15 and slaps the bolt release.

The car spins out onto the road and turns towards Beaver Creek a quarter mile down the road. A few zombies are mingling on the solid double yellow and Clayton swerves to avoid them. The car pulls up to the runoff. Zombies start to swarm across the two lanes encircling the SUV. Kelly opens the back door and starts firing her rifle at the closest zombies.

Bridgette runs, carrying Samantha in her arms. Cassandra and Jason follow behind her. Jason, however, trips and cuts his calf on a dented beam of metal. He screams in pain and Bridgette dumps Samantha into Cassandra’s lap, who scrambles into the car.

“Stay here!” Kelly shouts to her friend, handing her the carbine. Bridgette is about to respond, but Kelly takes off sprinting around the barrier and picks Jason up off the small incline behind it. She pushes him over the barrier with blood flowing out of his calf. She runs back as Clayton puts down the window and fires off several rounds of his .357 at the zombies amassing around the passenger side of the car.

“Kelly, get in!” Bridgette empties the mag and uses the buttstock as a hammer against a nearby zombie. Kelly lifts up Jason and practically drags him into the backseat where Kassandra hauls him inside. Kelly jumps over them and climbs into the front seat next to Clayton. Bridgette steps up on the footstep and Clayton drives forward as she sits down with her legs still outside.

“Strap in, I’m gonna have to run over a few of these.” Clayton tosses Kelly his revolver and she empties out the used casings and reloads it for him.

The SUV rumbles down the cracked broken road. Several of the zombies helplessly flail out as they are crushed by the large sport utility vehicle. Soon enough, they are at the tip of the horde; within moments they’ll be soaring down the interstate heading for the national forest.

“Wait!” Bridgette screams from the backseat.

Clayton swerves and misses the last zombie. It turns, following them, but collapses from exhaustion.

“That’s Harper!” Bridgette is out the door before Clayton can put it in park. Kelly hands him his gun and the two jump out after her, leaving the two teens and Samantha confused in the backseat.

“Harper?” Bridgette runs to her girlfriend and slides down next to her, lifting her in her arms. She scrapes her knees against the asphalt, tearing her jeans, but doesn’t care.

“Bridgette?” Harper almost whispers in a dehydrated haze.

“Oh my god...Clayton, get your ass over here and help me pick her up,” Bridgette yells as Kelly and Clayton rush over to them.

“Harper? Jesus.” Clayton is stunned at her appearance. Her red tank top and pale skin are coated in dirt and ash. Her denim jeans are so slick with mud and water that they don’t even look like clothing. Her matted hair clings to her back and face like ivy or moss. Clayton doesn’t say another word and picks her up, carrying the young woman to the car. Kelly runs around to the passenger seat as Bridgette gets in the back with Harper.

“Clayton, go!” Bridgette calls out, holding the love of her life in her lap.

Clayton presses the pedal to the floor. The SUV lurches to life, spinning forward just as the zombies reach the rear bumper. As they pull away, Kelly looks in the backseat. Bridgette is frantic, clutching Harper like a newborn. Harper is calmer now, relaxing in her girlfriend's arms, and eagerly accepts a bottle of water from Kelly. Samantha is sitting on top of Cassandra, who is in the middle seat, while Jason is sitting behind Kelly, clutching his bleeding leg.

"Are you okay, Harp?" Bridgette asks, stroking the woman's face. Harper takes a big gulp of water and melts into her girlfriend's embrace.

"Yeah...I mean, all things considering." Harper and Bridgette let out a laugh.

"Hey, take this, wrap it around the cut and tie it." Kelly hands Jason a packet of bandages. He smiles and leans over to patch himself up, grunting at every movement.

As Clayton takes Harrison to St. Marines, the car grows quiet. Harper drifts off to sleep, as do Jason and Samantha. Bridgette takes a towel and scrubs off most of the mud and dirt from Harper's face and arms, tenderly brushing her fingers through the sleeping woman's hair. Kelly begins to nod off herself, but Cassandra speaks up for the first time since they escaped danger.

"So where are we going?"

"South, towards Yellowstone," Bridgette responds, but doesn't take her attention off Harper.

"You said it was a slave city."

"Yeah, but we need to find Logan. You said you would help."

"I did, and I will, but I won't let anything happen to Sam."

"We'll keep her safe," Kelly interrupts, trying to keep things civil.

"Ladies, I hate to be a party pooper, but we are about to be running on fumes," Clayton mutters over the groan of the engine rumble.

"Think we can make it to Deary?" Kelly asks. She remembers a small national guard camp they occasionally scavenged for machinery parts.

"Maybe Emerald Creek, but there's nothing out there."

"Is Molly still living in that cabin by Willow Lake?"

"That's a half-mile trek through the woods. It's getting dark."

"We're in no condition to go anywhere without the car."

Kassandra shifts Samantha in her arms, growing concerned.

Harper murmurs in her sleep. She's beginning to run a fever.

"I can take Harper once she wakes up. You three can stay here with Samantha and Jason."

“Whoa B, you think I can just let you wander off in the dark with Harper? She’s probably exhausted.” Clayton looks in the rearview mirror at his partner of five years. The automatic lights flick on as the sun sets behind the mountains.

“She’s been bitten.” Bridgette lovingly holds Harper limp hand. In her sleep, Harper grabs it and holds Bridgette to her chest.

“What! Where?” Kassandra almost jumps but remembers Samantha is still sleeping.

“On her ribcage. She might not even know herself.”

“Oh god, Bridgette, I’m so sorry.” Kelly sits up, now wide awake.

“Just when I got her back.” Bridgette lets a tear fall down her face. It hits Harper in her thick net of brown hair. “I’ll take her and check if Molly is still around. She probably still hoards that gas from her dad’s old station.”

The car continues on for a few more miles. With about a half hour to spare, Clayton slows down and parks off to the side of the road. Kelly gently wakes up Harper and tells her the plan. Harper is still groggy but is happy to follow her girlfriend anywhere.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning. If I’m not, just keep walking till you...well, you know,” Bridgette quietly tells Kelly and the others. She turns and slams the car door, walking over to her waiting girlfriend. Harper, although confused, smiles at Bridgette and they walk off into the growing darkness with a pair of flashlights. Kassandra moves around in the backseat, letting Samantha sleep between her and Jason while she takes the seat behind the driver. Kelly remains silent, a pit forming in her stomach. Bridgette was always the one to make the hard decisions, but now she has really lost her humanity. Clayton keeps the cabin lights on for a few more minutes before killing the engine. Although the battery will last for another year, they don’t need to attract any attention.

Kelly looks at her watch, pressing the glow button to light up the small numbers. It’s been almost forty minutes—maybe Bridgette changed her mind, or they’re still looking for Molly. A gunshot echoes out in the darkness. Then another, then six. Bursts of rifle fire explode in the direction Kelly and Harper walked off towards.

“What the fuck?” Kelly, the only one awake, sits forward trying to look out into the darkness. Clayton shoots up holding his .357, and Jason kicks the backseat, then groans about his leg. “Stay down everyone.” Kelly jumps out of the car, turning the cabin light on automatically. Kelly pulls out her radio—if Bridgette still has hers, maybe she can hear her. “Bridgette, are you okay? What’s happening?” Static ripples across the

dead channel. “Harper? Molly?” The gunshots die down and the distinct noise of a helicopter passes overhead in the darkness.

“This is USAF ICBM Guardsmen Hotel Uniform November Kilo, who is this?”

MADISON RODAK

The Farmhouse

The farmhouse is empty again.
Third resident in twenty years, cursed like the rest of them.
The walls guard secrets I do not want to know.
The farmhouse has won again.

Third resident in twenty years, cursed like the rest of them.
A man from South Carolina, praying for a new start.
The farmhouse has won again.
Late at night, the boarded windows rattle with laughter.

A man from South Carolina, praying for a new start.
Lost everything. Lost his mind, like the owner before him.
Late at night, the boarded windows rattle with laughter.
I pity the next man to sign his name upon the deed.

Lost everything. Lost his mind, like the owner before him.
There are whispers of spirits there, caught in the trees.
I pity the next man to sign his name upon the deed.
He will not be an exception.

SYDNEY GONZALEZ

Houses

I have always had this strange feeling of nostalgia when I drive past beautiful houses. Not the huge, looming mansions that are carbon copies of the next neighborhood over. The unique, understated ones with a long history etched beneath the floorboards. You know the ones I'm talking about. The houses that sit quietly on winding back roads. The shy one's that hide behind rich, emerald trees dripping with yesterday's fog and today's new spider webs. The comforting ones with a porch built for an elderly couple to sit on and wait for their grandchildren to arrive. I'm not sure why. I think it's because every time I see a house bursting at the hinges with memories, I think of the family that must live there. A family that I don't know and nor will I ever—but seems to feel just as familiar as my own. Surely everyone with a house saturated with that much affection must have a family to match. I blame my grandparents. Their lake house has hugs stuffed in between every couch cushion and rolled up towel. It's like I never even had a chance to see houses as purely houses.

Nuclear Meltdown on Seedship C5B.6

If the nuclear reactor had already melted, then she was too late. If it hadn't, then she was probably too late. She realized the heavy dose of radiation would kill her. She realized that if she doesn't die here alone, she dies with the rest of the seedship. She realized the seedship was probably going to die.

She couldn't remember biology. What percent of seeds actually grow into trees? Was this just an inevitability? She thought about how the other ships had either successfully started colonies, or already been destroyed. She knew she would never know either way. The isolation was killing her.

50 meters from the reactor. It was a difficult climb, even in zero gravity. For physics beyond what she could understand, the reactor had to float at the center of the ship. Humans, on the periphery, were made comfortable by the artificial gravity provided by Mother's rotation. Was it a waste of energy or a necessary precaution? Would babies born in 0g ever learn to walk? Would they ever survive on land? It was a necessary precaution.

41 meters. What if the problem solves itself? What if she dies for nothing? What if there was no problem and she can go back to her bed? She can wake up the sleeping pilgrims and tell them everything is fine. She sleeps tonight in the arms of her beloved and dreams of nothing.

She threw up. Radiation poisoning. Repulsive to watch it drift and not fall. How could she decide to go deeper? How could she die for this? She typed the root password into the door, and she was issued a warning. She climbed into a space unseen since 2049; with a steel gripper she removed the searing core. Vomit. How can one object be this hot?

As the core touched sides of the ship it begins to melt into its walls. She had to open doors quickly and hold the fire with both hands as she made her way gently towards the air lock.

She saw space without a helmet for the first time. The water began to boil off her tongue; charged particles ionized in her retinas. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Was it worth it to go back? Would she die on the ship or would she float away into vastness?

Soon, the physicists would understand that there was a problem. In full radSuits they would come to investigate why the core had stopped. Perhaps they would calculate how the ship was only three minutes from

destruction before someone had saved them, once they had time later to sit down with pen and paper. They would take the time to find out which of the colonists was missing.

Perhaps they would do nothing. No need to alarm the citizens. She laughed as if she would be forgotten.

She sees C5B.6 from the outside. Home.

THEA PASTRAS

Flames

*“What matters most is how well you walk through the fire”
–Charles Bukowski*

Do not ask how we got here.
The house is already burning
and questions are not tsunamis;
they will not save you.

The fire doesn't care if you understand.

Tear your eyes away from
the flickering light,
from the flames like rip currents,
pulling and twirling and luring.

Straighten your matchstick spine.
Let the friction of vertebrae
grinding against each other
spark inside of you.

Burn red, orange, and then blue.
Place a blazing foot on the coals
and watch them disintegrate
into ash.

Set the other foot down
and walk.

LIAM WORCHECK

“You are Weak”

I wanted to cry.
You know the feeling,
When the stone rises through your throat,
You can't breathe.
You don't want to be weak,
You can't breathe.
Hold in pressure, hold back pain.
You can't breathe.

I let out a warning shot,
A single bullet in the dirt.
Saying, “I am not weak,”
That shot rung unheard.

He underestimated me.
He chose to ignore my colors,
My red warnings: “I am not weak.”
Actions speak louder than words.

I pushed him.

I pushed him.

I pushed until he hit the

wall.

It wasn't enough.

Slender fingers hugged a cruel neck like wet tears hug a cold face.
When I looked in those eyes,
Red.
They looked back,
Red.

DANIEL WALKER

PM Entertainment, or Action Beats

After THE ART OF DYING (Hauser, 1991)

I'm standing in the belly of a 747, smoking a thin cigarette and straddling a barrel of weapons-grade plutonium. Wings Hauser stands before me in a full-body camouflage onesie. He's sporting a black leather jacket over said onesie. This jacket is so un-scuffed and shiny that it looks damned close to neon. I'm wearing a mangled cop uniform and a pair of alligator shoes. It is 11:00 p.m. on the dot. Our very long day is winding to a close. I hear nothing but the muffled howl of the nighttime air. Wings Hauser looks back at me and grins, revealing a set of asymmetrical teeth. His gums gleam pink like old stucco. My feet drum out an anxious tattoo on the cold metal floor. He grabs me by the shoulders and tells me that soon, I will learn the Art of Dying. I embrace him, I clutch the lapels of his jacket, and as the floor drops out below us we freefall together into the smoky night.

The air around us is thick and rancid-tasting. It curls down into my throat like an aluminum playground slide. Grime shoots up from the smokestacks below and leaves a coat of black grease on the caps of my back teeth. I consider closing my mouth.

Things are fucked up in the neon city below. There's a culture war being fought in the cracked and peeling streets. This war is fought not with words or ideas, but with rusted pipes and sawed-off shotguns. There are people like me and Wings, at least—people who are off the fucking wall. Wings embodies the derangement of the institution and the derangement of the underground, all in one body. He is society incarnate, the cop messiah, the saint and the sinner. I've seen him pray, offering his blood to an altar where his own action figure sits supreme.

Wings and I touch down on the roof of some faceless skyscraper. We crouch down beside a hulking ventilator as Wings pulls a set of blueprints from inside his jacket. He unfurls it frantically, then jabs at it with a meaty finger. "This is the plan, sport. The Root of All Chaos is inside this building. It's in an office on the twenty-first floor, next to a rolled-up copy of People Magazine inside a desk drawer."

I nod. "I see."

The ventilator beside us groans on, and the stars above blink out and realign themselves in the night sky. Wings shifts his free hand into his coat pocket. "This is significant, sport. This thing has been fucking up the

city from time immemorial. We're going to kill it, and then everything will go back to normal. Justice will prevail. You want justice to prevail, don't you?"

"I don't know how we could destroy something like the Root of All Chaos. It sounds pretty powerful."

"You've got that .357 Magnum tucked into your pants, don't you?"

I pat myself down momentarily. "I do indeed."

"That'll do just fine."

Wings kicks in the maintenance door and we descend into a dimly lit stairwell. Stubby green walls surround us like an industrialized womb. The metal stairs beneath our feet creak with every step, as if the architecture is shifting to accommodate us. Wings kicks in a second set of doors, and we cross a mute and darkened hallway. We aren't five feet from the elevator when a shot rings out and Wings tumbles backwards. I see a crimson patch spreading across his chest, and then I see two Punks skulk around the corner. One's Mohawked, one's bald with a mustache that's halfway between a handlebar and a Fu Manchu, and both of them are holding mini-AKs. I should have known there'd be people who wanted to protect the Root. There are people all throughout the city whose livelihoods depend on chaos. I wasn't thinking, and they sniffed out my weakness and wounded my master.

They weren't supposed to notice us. He was wearing camouflage, for God's sake! Our stealth skills have never betrayed us like this. I suddenly notice what gave us away: the lapels of Wings' beloved jacket are stained with ten greasy fingerprints. The glare drew the Punks toward us like a nefarious beacon. They weren't there a minute ago, at least I don't think they were, but-

"This seems pretty inconvenient for you, *pig*," spits one of the Punks. He *spits* it, too. It sounds like he's been rehearsing it for the past few days. The other Punk runs a jagged tongue across his knife. The blade gleams in the dim fluorescent light. I feel for the gun in my waistband, then I flinch as the Punks shift towards me. They laugh mockingly as they give me and Wings the once-over, eyeing us like we were a pair of apples fresh off the fruit cart. I shoot Wings a worried look, but he says nothing. He rises to his feet, still clutching his wound, and stares the Punks down.

"I'll kill you, you dirty motherfuckers." He spits his words through gritted teeth. "You thrive off chaos and suffering. You believe in nothing."

The bald Punk offers a retort. "We don't believe in nothing, man. We believe in *nihilism*. That's something, ain't it?"

Wings pauses and idly scratches his head. "That may be ... but I believe in something, too."

“What’s that?” the mohawked Punk asks.

Wings unsheathes his .45 and blows the Punks away with a few clean, well-aimed shots. “I believe in preparation.” He shoots me a look—two eyes that gleam like black marble, that same asymmetrical grin. I rise and follow him down the now-quiet hallway. Steam rises up from somewhere.

It’s then that I notice Wings isn’t bleeding anymore. There’s a dry red stain right above his gut, but he’s not moving like a man in pain. I swear that when I look away and look back again, the stain shrinks and grows. The elevator arrives with a soft *ding*. Wings kicks in the door and strolls inside. I trail behind him, clutching the Magnum. A feeling of déjà vu starts to nag at me. I feel that whatever happens next is an inevitability. I know we’ll win, but it’s because we were fated to win. I want to tell Wings, but I don’t think he would understand. Suffering is beneath him – it’s like a bucking bull that he’s sat on long enough to fully tame.

We’re halfway to the twenty-first floor when something inside me snaps. The light above feels harsher now, penetrating my skull as it illuminates the elevator. A dreadful epiphany hits me: *It might not solve anything if we kill the Root. It might be like a neutron bomb, made to vaporize everything around it but the architecture.* Wings and I would be hailed as heroes, certainly. The city’s too big for two men to handle, though, and some evils lie outside our jurisdiction. I think of the monster beneath the city dump, that great skeletal pterodactyl with an arrhythmic pulse. They say if you stand by the landfill late at night you’ll hear its wings beating, the sound reverberating off of a thousand glass Coke bottles. I think of the outskirts of town, the yellow plains where dead-eyed vampires lurk behind tall-collared black cloaks. They stand stock-still behind the setting sun, sucking their victims as dry and lifeless as the brown weeds that encircle them. There are the Punks, always regenerating, and there are the wounds, always sprouting up anew. This town’s coated in so much grime, a million maids with a million hands each couldn’t clean all of it up.

We reach our floor at last, and the fog swirling around my head clears. Wings kicks the doors open again and I look back at him as his leg swings through the air. I take one look at the glint in his eye—the left one, then the right one all of a sudden—and the trickle of sweat rolling down his neck, and I know he’s thinking the same thing as me. I know he doesn’t care, too. This could happen again, twice more, three times—but we’ll always survive. There will always be an enemy, and there will always be a gun. There is an Art of Dying, and Wings is its Michelangelo, Wings is its Rembrandt, Wings is its Cindy Sherman. We emerge from the

harsh metallic womb of the elevator, guns akimbo, and ready ourselves for what's ahead of us. It could be another wave of Punks. It could be a mob of Furies, and there'd be seven instead of two. They could be throat-slashers, drug cookers, mad bombers, pigfuckers—it doesn't matter, because the moment you kill one, another takes its place. Someone is demanding this, and I don't know who. Wings cocks his gun. We lock eyes. He knows this won't be the end. He's the king, he's my master, and where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow.

ROBERT WILF

The Moons of Mars

Ben was the one who first convinced me to steal
My sister's Barbies,
But I asked to borrow her
Nail polish
All on my own.

Ben says he wants to go trick-or-treating with me,
But the Jack-o-Lanterns swallow their dying flames
Before he arrives.
Mrs. Ovsky calls, she says I'm making him gay.
Mom laughs and says he never needed my help for that before.

I drift between islands.
My map spins in dizzy circles.
I can't guide myself by a sky that's always changing
Shifting like the waves.
There are no stars,

Only jet plane
Constellations we long to shoot down,
Even as we use their light
To guide our aim.
Plastic planes can't drown in bathtubs.

"Are you headed towards Venus or
Mars?" The astronaut whispers to me,
"Mars, right?"
I could strand myself in the blackness between worlds
Where no one has gone before,

But that's not me,
Not really.

I'm right where I want to be
Here on the moons of Mars,
You'd almost think I was aiming
For the ugly

Red planet.

But my navigation was right,
It's only the stars that were wrong.

april

i am Five Years Old today and for my Birthday
my aunt gives me a baby doll but i dont like baby dolls
cuz im not ready to be a mom yet. my ballet teacher
yells at me cuz i have a run in my Tights
but its not my Fault why is it always my Fault

may

im in the backseat of your moms car
we are eating mcdonalds French Fries my polly Pocket is
missing an arm your Dog chewed it off and i am so angry. when i
am Older i am going to Marry Scooby Doo or maybe the pretty
girl on my moms soap Opera
you cant tell me what i Can and Cannot do, i want
my polly Pocket to get her Arm back it is not Fair that she
does not have an Arm i took Care of her and she still got hurt

june

i dont like wearing Dresses cuz i dont know how im supposed
to sit when i wear Them im Five Years Old and last week
i stole a Paintbrush from walmart i didnt mean to it just kind
of happened im Sorry im Sorry im Sorry god i didnt mean to i
didnt i didnt i didnt i didnt im not like those people steal im not bad
im not bad i am begging you please please see that i am Good

july

when i was Three Years Old i busted my lip at legoland
in san diego and everyone paid Attention to me and
i liked it so much i havent stopped Chasing that feeling.
my cats are gonna have babies i have a Girl Cat and a Boy Cat
so it works. my mom says They Cant Have Babies Cuz They Are Fixed that
makes no sense but i believe in god and he can make anything happen

august

sometimes i want to lie down in the Middle Of The Road
and have a car run over me but not kill me cuz when the car
runs over me ill be in the Sweet Spot where the tires do not touch you

i think about this a lot cuz i know if i do that then
Everyone Will Love Me and give me lots of attention and think
Wow She Survived That She Is Unstoppable She Is So Strong
and god and jesus will both be proud of me
and They will make Good Things Happen for me and my mom
and i will not let any more of my polly Pockets get Hurt

september

i dont like Kindergarten the bathrooms scare me everyone
is so much Bigger than me when i get home i am bashing my
Head off the wall and thinking About a world where i dont have
to eat Food or learn Cursive i draw a picture of a dog and taylor burns
tells me im bad at drawing i know hes just angry cuz he has no mom
so Thats why he wants to hurt me i dont have a pet Dog im not Allowed

october

for halloween i dress like a Devil i tell my mom I Wish I Was A Devil
cuz i wish i had horns and she says Please Dont Say That.
i think about the Bad Things and to tigger on the tv i say,
You Cant Hurt Me If I Hurt Myself First
I Will Pull My Hair Out Before You Can I
Will Never Let You Hurt Me Again

november

i dont think i Will ever like Boys. am i a boy whats the Difference
anyway my cousin has a Digital camera she records our aunts and
the cats and our grandpa Sleeping on the Couch i put his hearing
aids on but my Ears are too small
i say Videotape Me and she says No Youre Too Boring

december

i play an angel in the christmas Pageant they forgot to tell me
when go on stage so i never got to and i feel Abandoned my
wings are made from Foam but when you are a real angel they are not
made of Foam they are made of I Dont Even Know What
i ask god why he did that to me and he doesnt tell me
i think maybe he is busy with someone else
my mom says i did a good job anyway but i didnt i cried

january

i wish my hair was long i put a dishtowel on my head

and it goes past my shoulders
i say Pretend This Is My Hair
i say Pretend My Hair Is Long
the world is cruel but
the world is Cool.

february

i Dream my polly Pocket is Bigger than me
shes got only one Arm and she is sobbing
i am polly Pocket sized and she is holding me in her only hand
and saying How Could You How Could You Let Me Hurt

march

my mom says its time for me to take a Bath and
i dont want to i dont like the Water it doesnt make me
feel Clean it makes me feel Scared And Small
i never want to have Wet hair again please dont make me

april

i want a chocolate bar but no one will give me
one im only Five Years Old i only have Nickels
please god never make me Bad please let me stay Good.

CLARA BAKER

Offer Her a Seat

It all started at the very beginning of my life. I was very young, about 7 or 8, when I began to put on the weight. It was easy, it was simple. I liked the food; the way it tasted, the way it made me feel after I ate it. I was easily amused, easily contented, and I simply did what made me happy. This was before I was exposed to the slight dangers in life; the ones that take you by surprise, the ones that make you gasp a little and recheck your rearview mirrors. I was living in this little bubble of beautiful hopes and imaginative recesses until one day at school, when the other kids saw through me and decided to take advantage.

A lot of the bullying blurs together. I think that's how it goes for most victims. So many say, "oh yeah, I was bullied in elementary or middle or high school too," and the world goes silent for a moment while everyone quietly thinks how they had it worse and those who never experienced it feel awkward and uncomfortable and leap to change the subject so they can breathe again.

The bullies.

I was eight years old and in third grade when the bullying really started. Before this, it may have been a day or two, a memory, where a group of boys teased me. "Fat elephant" was thrown in my direction. Laughing and sneering in my face, but they did the same to themselves. Other boys. It was like I was one of them.

But nothing really hit home before the girls.

Girls know how other girls work. Girls will gather around, look you up and down, and instantly know your strengths, weaknesses, and what will destroy you. They know your past and present, but your future will puzzle them. They can't understand how someone like you, so different from them who looks like that and dresses that way, could possibly have a future. However, in the third grade, I doubt anyone can comprehend they have a future at all.

I remember having my own girlfriends too. They were the sweet, funny, kinda messy ones, a little more like me, who liked to use their imaginations. One got a ring pop the day after she kissed a boy's cheek on the playground. Another ran around and smeared dirt on her face and neck after playing kickball with the boys. And the third was me, who would beg them to play house and tag outside on the playground. We didn't know that other girls were watching us and we didn't really care, until they made us.

As for me, I have always been taught to expect the best of people and give them the benefit of the doubt. Why wouldn't all of these girls be my friends? Or at least, friendly? What could I have done to them?

The first instance I remember so vividly to this day was during one of those recesses. Actually, it was right after one of those recesses, because two girls made up an excuse to go in early. It must have been too hot for them.

That's what I thought, anyway.

When we all returned to our classroom, I started looking through my desk. Little pieces of paper started unfolding in my hands. It was my drawing, carefully torn up, and scattered throughout my desk. I had been working on that drawing that morning and had put it in my desk to return to it later. I don't even remember what the picture was, but I remember being so willing to hear an excuse, a reason why, or a sentence of misunderstanding.

All the girls did was look at each other and snicker, pink smiles tucked up all the way to their ears.

Their acts continued on like this, cruel, obvious, and flawless. What they were waiting for, I cannot recall. Everyone always tells you that the bullies will stop when you don't give them a reaction.

I don't remember giving them a reaction once.

I was not the confident, cool girl that you wish I was. The one who walked with her head high, giving them an obvious reason to be jealous. Or one that spit and hissed right back.

I was scared and timid and confused as to why they couldn't leave me alone. I was simply living my life, but for some reason, that was too much for them.

They would play on, touching my things, stealing the place where my friends and I played during recess, and calling us names. But I do know how they picked me as prey. I do now. It's because I was *too* easy. I probably looked in their direction with an uncomfortable grin, or with sweaty hands tucked in my pockets. *I* probably apologized to *them*.

I probably made their skin crawl with my niceness.

And they wanted to see me crack.

Of course, one cannot remember everything, and I believe that I strategically blocked a lot of this time in my life out of my memory. I remember fourth grade being better. I liked my teacher, my friends, and those girls were gone. Of course, they still went to my school, but they were gone, until the fifth grade, of course.

Now was when they picked up their antics and brought them to a level I had never seen. They learned a lot from their prey in the fourth grade.

They copied my stories, my writing, and they passed it off as their own. They made fun of the appliances cycling through my mouth. They mocked me for sitting quietly and looking out the window on the bus. They told other girls to stay away from me. They had more recruits by now, and I had lost mine. I was often alone on the playground, or tried to play with the boys.

My fifth grade teacher got wind of the whole situation, probably via my mother (or one of the other girls' mothers—they tried to spin it as if I were the bully), and she did her best to diffuse it. She sat down with all of us through a lunch and recess period and we tried to talk it out. Another instance that remains erased from my memory—I was most likely talked at.

Through all this time, my refuge was my sister, video games, and books. Especially the books. There *was* something about being able to escape to that different land that you so often hear about. There is something to be said about doing so, but no one really addresses the courage it takes to return to the real world after putting the book down.

I would pray to God asking for help making friends. I don't remember asking not to be bullied, or for blaming him for it. I just remember so silently, so hopefully, wishing for some friends to come help me.

Consequently, the friends came a little late. This was when I started to see the bullying happening to others over myself. I was no longer the target. Maybe they got bored. Or the school was too big and it wasn't worth finding me.

But it really hit home when it started happening to my best friend.

I could see our similar qualities, and why we were friends, Bella and me. We met on the bus. I really did like looking out the window, because talking in moving vehicles made me nauseous, so she and I would talk and share stories for little bouts at a time. She didn't mock me, or wonder why I was so quiet, because I had to really fine tune my hearing in order to hear her too. We were similar, both in love with books and our instruments (her with the viola, me with the trombone), and we liked learning about each other's families and interests. We did go to the same elementary school, but unfortunately we had spent our time in different classrooms.

And boy, was she a runner. I loved spending my time with Bella, but as soon as we started going to our "walk or run around the track"

program in the mornings before school, I quickly started developing some jealousy towards her. I started comparing our bodies, how thin and long she was compared to my chubby and lumpy body. The way she left me in the dust on the track left me wide-eyed, and I envied her for a long time.

It was middle school when the bullies found her, as far as I know. They crept up and attacked without me even noticing for a while. It wasn't until one afternoon when we went to the bathroom together during lunch when I watched it happen.

Two girls had followed us into the small, dingy pink girls' bathroom. Bella was in the stall, and they began pouring over themselves in the mirrors, checking their hair and fixing their makeup. I stood silently, leaning up against the wall, pretending not to notice their presence. It was then that they began carefully wetting paper towels, crumpling them up, and tossing them over the stall to where Bella was. They did this, one, two, three, I counted, four, times until they had their fun and snickered out the doorway. I'm sure Bella was done peeing and was waiting for them to stop before she exited the stall, just so she wouldn't have to confront them.

I could have, but I remember doing nothing.

I don't even remember talking to Bella about it.

It was an odd occurrence when Bella wasn't on the bus one afternoon and a different girl sat with me. She had long dark hair, was dressed a little differently, and I instantly let my guard down and began talking with her. She was sweet, and said that she had just moved here. She was intrigued with the keychains I had on my backpack, and I carefully told her about each one. She was especially entranced by one specifically, the one that had to do with our walking program in the morning. It was a cluster of colorful feet, charms that represented each week completed with the walking program. Both my mom and I were very proud of those charms—me for the special color coordination and selection, and my mom for the amount I had wrapped together on a silver chain which showed my dedication. I showed and explained all of this to the new girl right before her stop. I said farewell and wondered if I would see her again.

It wasn't until I got home that I realized my chain of colorful feet was gone.

The replacement my teacher gave me had all of the wrong colors.

Bella and I made it through middle school, doing our best to continue to dodge the bullies. I liked to believe I was a little more intimidating now with my big bones and round face and scared them away from Bella, despite our first encounter in the bathroom. Or they were just a little more clever, or meaner, than the elementary school bullies and didn't

like the reaction we gave them so they moved on. In any case, Bella and I became closer friends, and we both started pouring everything we had into our respective sports. She had running, and I had swimming. Until she joined that too.

At first, I was overjoyed that my best friend was joining the swim team. And she joined immediately after me, so it wasn't like I had anything to teach her. We were just in this together. I just wanted to be better.

This desire made me feel sick. The constant comparing I did of myself to her, my sister, my neighbor—it was torture, but it was so easy to look at pictures and wonder why I had a double chin when no one else did. I wanted so desperately to hide the stretch marks scattered along the inside of my thighs, making me embarrassed to be in my bathing suit. I wondered why I was so different, and whenever I wasn't good enough in the pool or Bella started beating me, it was easy to give up.

I just wasn't good enough.

The bullying had shifted. It went from coming from other girls to coming from myself.

I started telling myself I wasn't good enough, even though I was the only one saying it now. They had finally really ripped me open and gotten to me. The wounds I had licked closed were now finally showing their scars. Here I was, comparing myself to my best friend in the whole wide world, when I wasn't even strong enough to stand up for her.

It was my freshman year of high school, and it was one of those very first days of school that it happened to me for the first time.

I was surrounded by friends and acquaintances I had developed over the past three years of middle school. I even had a "boyfriend" by my side, one I hadn't spoken with all summer but I had still assumed we were dating. I was probably a little nervous with first week jitters and halfway through a cookie when I saw her.

Her name was Lindsay, and I recognized her. I was quickly brought back to when we had preschool together, but I didn't think I had seen her since. She was sitting all alone, at the end of one of those really long tables. A whole group was sitting as far away from her as they could at the other end. In the moment, I didn't realize what I was doing, or why. I didn't know I had seen myself in her. And that I wanted to save her from what was inevitably going to creep down the table and bite her.

"Hi, Lindsay," I said, as I approached her, with a smile on my face. "Do you remember me, by chance?"

She answered with a smile of her own. “Yes,” she said so matter-of-factly, and this was when I realized I hadn’t asked the rest of my table if I could do what I was about to do next, but I did it anyway.

“Would you like to sit with us?” I asked, suddenly aware of my posture and probably cookie breath, as I looked down at her sandwich and veggies cut into neat little squares.

“Sure. Thank you,” she replied, looking down.

“We’re just right over there,” I said, pointing to my circular table that was occupied all except for one seat. “Do you need help moving?”

“No, thanks,” she said as she made her belongings more manageable to be moved, “that’s okay.”

Lindsay sat with us all year. My boyfriend stayed with us for about another three weeks, which was when I realized I was not at all ready for a boyfriend or had any inkling of what to do with one, so I dumped him. I started learning all about my lunch friends then, without them kicking him under the table or motioning for him to take my hand.

I also watched Lindsay. She didn’t talk much, but after she was done eating her lunch everyday she would get out a special notepad and pencil and either sketch or write. My other friends at the table had accepted her easily, to my relief. We let her do her thing, as we assumed she didn’t want to be bothered while we talked about shoes and boys and the cute teachers. She didn’t often look up, but every day she returned to her seat next to me.

Flash forward a few years. I was a record holder for swimming. I had gone to nationals in my crew 8 boat. And I had even taken a few AP classes. I had it all figured out. I was going to Ursinus College, studying Health and Exercise Physiology, and I was swimming for them. Bella was going to run for Villanova and become a scientist. I hadn’t seen a bullying act in ages. I thought it was over. It turns out that it never really ends, does it? You hope and pray and wish that everyone grows up, and that’s what you think happens when you see adults working and living. That they have grown out of it. Turns out the bullies never really do.

I learned this when I went to college, and I could still see them. Hiding in wide, open spaces. The sly smiles and quick glances. Surrounded by girls that so desperately want to be their friends. Saying words without much meaning, to see who will fall for it. The bullies in college are a lot smarter. They take their time; become your friend first. You forget your first impression. They make you feel comfortable around them. They learn everything about you, everything they should be jealous of, and your vulnerabilities.

Then, they attack.

Sometimes, at first, you don't realize it's an attack. On you or your friend. Or maybe you can't register your teammates turning on one another while others stand by because it would singe your nerves. Derail you. You don't realize until it's midnight and you close your eyes and sob and wait until the rawness of it consumes you, until you run out of air and your pillow is damp with empathy for someone else.

You realize this is something you will never escape, something the world will never escape.

So, I seek out the bullied.

The different, the little sad, the people that wish life was kinder.

And I offer them a seat next to me.

SARAH DEFELICE

Rain Falling Up

Rain is a Revolution
In unity, raining up.

What is "up" to us
May be "down" to you
But the rain falls up
If you alter the view.

Water gaseous begins consolidating in clouds
Gathering shrouded in a silence loud.
Each raindrop is a prisoner earthen
Striving to break the heavens.

The mass recruits globular globs of the sea,
And the sweat of the indigenous in Peru and Chile,
Plus liquid off the backs of blacks in slavery,
Water from the rivers of tears and of the bloody streams hemmed in green,
Fluid from the swamps and from fountains pristine, Water from your
neighbor's pool and Jacuzzi.
It mobilizes, it collects in cups
Until the mist is so heavy it's cumulus.

Then expulsion sends the droplets high
Leaping unlimitedly into the sky!
Rain roars with the rage of the repressed
And hisses through the air in streamlets and jets.

We, with our bellies fully aqueous
Will saturate those intolerant of dampness.

Brown bodies disguised in lucid cones.
They do not see us; they think themselves alone
But we are here, silently gathering—
Frothing, rustling, and lathering!

Instead, when eyes tainted with bigotry
Look through our skyward trajectory

Only a reflection of themselves, they see
Across the surface of the raindrop where
They then prefer not to stare.

Be wary when it is humid, white knight.
Armies may descend bullets toward we water-bulbs in flight,
But tirelessly we rain up rain

MATT DWYER

Morally Upright

If good posture meant piety,
then thrones wouldn't be so
rigid.

They'd be stools inducing
hunchbacks, christened chairs
of the crooked,

coddled in to a coil,
each cheek cushioned
by corkscrews.

And yet,
those who persistently plunder
are plotted perpendicular,
with perfect spines and pretty
smiles.

SOPHIA DIBATTISTA

Cock Fight

What's the difference between you and a rooster? Nothing. I was weak back then, and you knew this. You knew you were my first boyfriend. You knew I had no experience with relationships beforehand. You knew that I thought we were a normal couple because of what people saw. From an outsider's perspective, we were perfect: senior-year high school sweethearts, your parents loved me, mine loved you, and your little sister was like my own even though I was, and still am, an only child. She looked up to me as a role model, and I felt honored. Looking back, I loved her more than you. I can't believe I'm even reminiscing about us. Thinking of you is like chewing gum; you never forget the dulled spearmint flavor even when you throw it out. Chalky and irritating, like that taste you gave me when we attended the cock fight two years ago.

Your parents dropped us off at a pizza place with your sister, thanks to the fact that you didn't bother getting your license. I was starving, but after hugging them goodbye, you looked at me and said, "We'll get food later. Right now, I want to show you something."

Your sister jumped. "Yay, an adventure!"

I asked, "But I'm really hungry. Can't we eat first then go?"

You replied, "Trust me, you won't want to eat pizza before this."

"Before what?"

"You'll see."

I wish your parents heard what you said. For being "helicopter parents," they had no clue as to what you had planned or who you really were. They were oblivious to everything: the decreasing liquor in their cabinets, the times you'd steal their car, and when you'd come back completely stoned after soccer practice. All they saw was an angelic, eighteen-year-old star athlete.

The shop was located in a desert-like place, minus the tumbleweeds, and the day was plagued with heat as if the world became a skillet that could fry an egg on the ground we walked upon, golden, dusty, barren. The clouds dissipated before the day began so there was no chance of having a reprieve. We walked for about three minutes before my showering sweat forced me to take note of your cool, oceanic T-shirt. You were so skinny that it laid on top of you like a bedsheet, and your face was one of a child in slumber: calm, smiling, and awaiting the next dream to appear. Scrolling my eyes downward, I glanced at a red bandana poking its way out of your pants pocket. It looked like a fresh wound with its

contrast to your black jeans. My gut was punching its way up my throat, and I asked, “What’s with the bandana?” There was a pause, not in your walk, but the whole atmosphere seemed to stagnate, so I chose to fall a bit behind in my strides, keeping away from the awkwardness. You never responded, so I remained in ambiguity.

How did I tolerate that? One would think that after nine months, a couple should at least be playfully spontaneous, not dragging each other out into a desert with no food or preparation. Plus, you had your ten-year-old sister with us. Why did you bring her into this, especially with how young she was? Actually, she probably wanted to come. She pictured you as a paragon, and any moment with you compared to meeting God. Anyway, my patience was dimming, and that red bandana kept prodding my vision. You continued trekking up the dirt road, head held high. I was keeping up, but with more difficulty, and your sister began kicking a rock she found along the path and scoffed when it rolled too far away. She was so cute: her hair was tied into a ponytail with a large, yellow bow. The rest of her outfit matched: a neon yellow shirt with orange shorts and bejeweled sneakers. She was a flame, no, more of a sparkler on the Fourth of July. One look at her could blind someone, but her laugh would tickle all senses, making the blindness enjoyable. She made me continue on, both with walking and with our relationship in general.

After about five or ten more minutes we could make out our destination’s exterior, and my veiled rage swelled up inside. You brought us to a dingy, tornado-battered barn. You turned to me with a smirk. “You ready for what’s next?” I drew the corner of my lip back and glanced to the left. All I could utter was a confused mumble. Your sister squealed and bounced around us. I couldn’t help but notice how adorable her fervor was, almost like a puppy receiving a chewy, new bone. I smiled to her. “Don’t work yourself up too much! It’s hot out here. Guess we better head inside before we get heat stroke or something.” She took my hand, and we ran towards the eerie shack. You followed close behind but eventually took off, bolting ahead of us and reaching the barn first. Squatting down and flexing your arms, you said, “Even when I start after your short advantage, I still win!” This was your typical routine whenever you beat me in something, which was a lot. You were a jock. I kept up, but wasn’t as impressive, probably because I chose to pursue mathletes instead. Usually when I lost a game between us, you’d hug me, kiss my nose, and then flex some more. I would laugh along, but this time was different. This time, you didn’t hug or kiss me after. An immediate chill sent my fingertips into an Ice Age. I knew I didn’t do anything wrong, but I

couldn't understand why you ignored me. I let you win again. Wasn't that enough?

Behind the door, there were various shouts and squawks, which bewildered my ears. You knocked on the splintered door, and a man with overalls and a red flannel shirt appeared. He had at least three teeth missing, and the rest looked like corn kernels dangling from his gums. He asked, "Here for the fight?" The teeth wiggled as he spoke, and his scraggly, white beard moved like an aged nutcracker. You nodded and handed him three five-dollar bills. We entered, finding the inside to be a farmhouse gladiator arena. Men circled around a small patch of sand and dirt where a bloody man laid. A rooster, with loose patches of human skin hanging on its beak, strutted on top of the body and stomped its right leg twice, plowing claws into the man's back. I was terrified, but you and your sister gazed in awe. Taking off your shirt, you yelled, "I'm ready!" I faced you, baffled.

"Ready? You're telling me you're fighting that thing?"

"What else would I be doing?"

"You're sick! You can't do this!"

You inched close to my face and told me that I was worried about nothing, that you were going to beat it. You told me to look at your sister and see how excited she was and that you were doing this for our entertainment. I set my vision on her for a moment and saw her enjoy the frenzy, which bothered me, but I didn't want to disturb her fun. Did she even know what was happening or did you desensitize her beforehand? She probably thought it was a silly game with a chicken. I glanced back at you and nodded. You continued, "See? Don't worry. You'll have fun, *just wait.*"

The farmer used a rusty cowbell to sound for the next duel. You stepped into the ring and began chasing the pompous rooster. The scene was straight out of a *Rocky* movie, but I stood trembling with terror while your sister became part of the vigorous atmosphere. She shouted your name, clapped her hands, and for a second, she looked like one of the farmers. Two of her teeth fell out a week before then, and her distorted face added to the grotesqueness of her appearance. Anger flared up within her, and she didn't look right. She transformed into something that I couldn't fathom or love anymore. She wasn't my sister; she was yours.

The fight wasn't even a real fight. It was an anticlimactic chase between a boy and a bird. All you did was run after it, not making any moves to attack, and after three minutes, the bell rang, causing the rooster to step aside for what seemed like a "water break." The farmers looked impatient. They wanted some action. I stood there with confusion, wondering what I just witnessed. My eyes landed onto you staring at me in

the fighting zone, and I felt a push on my back. It was your sister. She shoved me in, and as I fell, you laughed like a baby playing peek-a-boo.

Everyone was wild, and the barn became more of a zoo. Pouncing onto me, you grabbed that fiery bandana and tied my hands back. I was pinned to the ground, but when I showed signs of struggle to get up, you continued your child-like chuckles. My fury overflowed so I swept your legs from underneath, and you finally collapsed. I tried to kick, but you quickly grabbed my feet and hurled me across the ground. My eyes were greeted with a spitball from one of the expectorating farmers, and then everything around me blurred. All I could see was your fleshy silhouette and your sister's high beam clothing. I yelled, "Stop! You win, okay? You win!" I was admitting defeat. You knew I was beaten, but you proceeded to come towards me and wrap your hands around my ankles again. Before you could do anything else, I said the word "done," which caused you to cease your next attack. Did you really need that closure? Did you have to hear that I was "done" for fear of what? Me tricking you? Either way, you rose up in triumph, flexing and striking poses while the farmers cheered. They were on your side. Your sister ran forward and hugged you with pride while I remained on the ground and twisted my wrists to untie the bandana. No one asked if I was alright. Finally free, I stood up and recited prayers in my head because I was "done," not just with the situation but with you.

Stupefied from both the physical and mental blows, I couldn't look at you. You acted like a king, like everything was splendid. Then, you asked about returning to the pizza shop to get something to eat, and that was the moment I snapped. My verbal filter toppled down, and I said, "Go back? With you? And her? No, I'm done."

Your sister gasped, and I felt a surge of tears beginning to form behind her eyes, but I managed to avoid her look. With a raised eyebrow, you replied, "What do you mean you're 'done'?"

I replied, "I mean that I'm done with all of this. With you, her, with everything. I can't take it anymore! I am done."

"But what do I tell my-"

"Done."

"My-"

"Done."

"You can't just-"

"I AM DONE. I said it more than enough times."

You gaped, and I relished your reaction. I loved watching your arrogant face shift into one of astonishment. I continued, "This is the last time I'll say it: I'm done. It's *finally* over."

Your sister began crying, but I walked away before I allowed her emotions to affect me. I said everything on my mind without hesitation and freed myself. Along the way back, the air sent a cooling wind across my face, and in place of my dripping sweat were tears. I was done. I was liberated. I was *done*.

So, I'll ask this again. What's the difference between you and a rooster? Nothing.

You're both cocks.

RACHEL HAAS-GUTIN

Migration in Tandem

There's a butterfly on your
windowsill. Didn't you notice?
It's patiently waiting as the sun
shines its rays in waves. Pure blinding light
on its golden wings.
The wind picks up and lofts soft leaves
past the glass, mimicking a Monarch or Morpho.
Yet, that butterfly stays still,
firmly planted on the perch outside of your room.
Of all places it rests,
warmly on your windowsill,
looking in on us.
Please, let the butterfly in.
It must be tired of watching you
pace and ponder, in this ball of
cobalt blue. Constantly concerned.
Always asking, *what's next?*
Take a break,

honey. Try to share this space.
We've waited in the sun for so long. We
promise to prove that we understand your
worries about Millennial Mountain.
The one made of the same prickly paint chips
found in your amber gold hair.
The same summit that was too tall for
this butterfly's orange ancestors to scale, so
they fluttered and found a new way to
migrate.

This butterfly will not distract you
with its wafts of butterscotch around your bed.
It will only embrace your hand, sit gently
on your stiff shoulder, and offer a sappy
song when you want to listen. We will help
you move past this mountain together

so that one day it won't exist. Millennia will melt
into the ocean, becoming acrylic.

Here my dear, let me leave the window
ajar. It's almost twilight and the butterfly
would like to wish you a goodnight.

AMY LITOFSKY

Hidden Moments

Silence.

It drifts across the atmosphere
And wraps you in its chill,
Waiting to be broken
By a burst of colorful warmth.
You don't, though, instead relishing
In the rare quietness of life.

Except it is not quiet.
Not to me.

Piano keys,
Pressed with a supple delicacy
That matches that of
Hands clutching a newborn child,
Flutter in my heart.

Guitar strings,
Not plucked with softness,
But violently strummed as
They collide with one another,
Shake in my brain.

Drum beats,
Sometimes forgotten within
The mess of other sounds
But keeping everything unified,
Vibrate in my bones.

My eyes drift shut in bliss,
Mouth gently quirks upwards,
Hands fold loosely across my stomach,
And fingers tap along to the beat from
Ears overwhelmed with
Beautiful threads of sensations that
Beg to be shared with the world.

But I don't allow them to,
Trapped in cheap earbuds
Shrouded by long brown curls
And selfishness as
The atmosphere explodes in a burst
Of lilac, scarlet, and cerulean
In my heart, my brain, and my bones.

And still you can only hear the
Silence.

TOMMY ARMSTRONG

Keeps on Tripping

“You going to check that?” Ada asks.

“Check what?”

“Your phone. It just ding-ed.”

“Did it?” I search my dorm from my swivel chair and find my phone on my bed near the pillow.

Meeting with Dr. Thames. 15 minutes.

“False alarm,” I say. “Reminder for a meeting I have around this time on Friday.”

“Oh, good,” she says.

Cars whir by outside on the street that divides the dorms and the rest of the college. You can hear them extra clear with the AC off. Ada’s glowing. Her hair is shooting blonde around her head. Her shirt is fuzzing out black. I guess this stuff works faster than I thought.

“Carroll?” Ada says.

“Yeah?”

“Today’s Friday.”

Jesus Christ.

“Jesus Christ!” I say.

“Email them. Who is it, Thames? He’s a pansy. Say you can’t go.”

“I can’t *not* go,” I say.

“What’s the meeting for?”

“Uh. Advising. He’s my advisor. We’re talking classes for next semester. Because I’ve got to get his digital confirmation on my classes before they fill up and seniors pick classes...”

“Reschedule,” Ada says.

“Tonight,” I say. “Seniors pick classes tonight.”

“Just seniors,” she says. “Your classes aren’t going to fill up.”

“Psychopathology will. I need to take it.”

“Psychopathology...how many people are going to take *Psychopathology?*”

“It’s got like 10 seats available and everyone hops on when it’s offered,” I say.

“Why?”

“People love psychopaths!”

“So what if it fills up?” Ada says. “Stay here. You can’t go. He’s going to know.”

“Listen,” I say. “I need one more Pysch 300 class to graduate. I’ve taken 302 and 301. All that’s left next semester is Pysch 305.”

“Which is—”

“Psychopathology.”

She looks at her light-blue Crocs. She’s sitting on the futon, twirling her hair with a finger. “He’ll know,” she says. “If you stay, I’ll give you a super cool gift.”

“You still owe me 10 bucks,” I say.

“What?”

“You said you’d give me 10 bucks if I cut my hair!”

“You got a trim,” she says. “Plus, this is different.”

“How?”

“Gift’s right here.” She sorts through her Goodwill leopard print drug purse and takes out something she hides in her hand.

“What is it?”

She opens up her hand. It’s a bronze-coated pocket watch.

“Holy shit,” I say.

“Look,” she says. She rubs her thumb on some design in front of clock’s face. “It’s a cutout of the Prague Astronomical Clock. I got it during study abroad.”

I take the watch in my hand and click it open. “Yeah, you let me have it for an hour and then you take it back,” I say.

“No, you fucking moron. I got it for you. To go with your old-man pipe. I was going to give it to you when we were tripping.”

“Oh my god,” I say. She’s looking at me kind of awkwardly. I never seen her face all contorted and nervous like this. I said the wrong thing. *Oh my god*. She’s not religious or anything. It’s probably the drugs. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well. Now you hear that ticking?” Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

“That’s a countdown,” she says. “You don’t have much time ‘til you lose your mind.”

“I’m not even feeling anything yet,” I say.

“Any second now. They’re called firecrackers ‘cause they got a fuse.”

“I’ll get in, talk to him for five minutes, and get out,” I say. “I just need the digital signature.”

“Plus the edible’s not even what I’m worried about.”

“Don’t freak me out about that. It was your idea,” I say. “Oh fuck.” I spit the tab out into my hand. It’s been under my tongue. I rub my hand on a stray napkin.

“I’m seriously not letting you leave,” she says, standing up.
“I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“You’ve done this before.”

“I never had an edible *and* a tab,” she says as she throws the pocket watch at me. “We’re time-bombs, boy.”

“What!” I stand up and my mouth dries up around where the little piece of paper was.

“That’s right. Sit down.”

“Come with me,” I say.

“What!”

“There’s chairs outside his office. You can sit there,” I say.
“You gotta come.”

“I’ve got just as much time ‘til it hits as you do.”

“You’re worried about me. So, come with me,” I say. I put the pocket watch in my desk drawer, real gentle.

“Last time I get you high,” she says, and walks past me to the door.
“Well let’s cross the fucking street while you can still walk.”

I keep my eye out for anything out of the ordinary on our walk there. We’ve made it to the newly paved path that passes the library and I can count seven or eight squirrels playing or posing a real threat to one another. The sky is public-pool blue and I pray to God the sun keeps the clouds pinned to the sky. My steps are a little stuttered but I’m going to say I’m just nervous now. I’ve just got to breathe. Breathe.

I’ve got so much breath in me I’m going to float into the sky. I want to grab Ada’s hand so she’d keep me to the ground. Or maybe she’d just float up with me.

“Stay with me, Carroll,” Ada says.

“What?”

“You look like you’re freaking out. Calm the whirly-bird down.”

Dr. Thames’ office is in the basement of the science building. The elevator dings open (I didn’t want to take any chances with the stairs) and we step out into a bunch of grey coated in florescent lighting.

“Where’s the office?” Ada asks.

I point down the hall. “With the weird Victorian chair outside of it.”

We walk down and stop. Ada whispers something.

“What?”

She repeats herself quieter than before.

“What?”

“Forget it,” she says.

“No, tell me.”

She knocks on Dr. Thames’ door and runs to the bathroom.

“Carroll?” I hear.

Breathe. I turn into his office and see him looking under his glasses at his computer.

“Come in. Have a seat.”

The only visible hair he has is on his old, spotted knuckles. It’s white and it’s been there since he was three. He’s bald. So bald. If Dad came into the garage and I was standing there with Dr. Thames, a tin of car wax and a buffing cloth, Dad’d say, “Damn, Carroll. Good work.”

Dr. Thames is making laser sounds with his mouth as he tries to remember why I’m here.

Chuh-chuh-chuh-choo. Chuh-chuh-chuh-choo.

“Let’s get started,” he says. “What classes do you want to take next semester, Carroll?”

“Psychopathic Studies.”

“Organic Chemistry would probably be good,” he says. He cracks his knuckles.

“I need Psychopathological Studies to finish my major since I’ve only got two psych classes.”

“Yes. Definitely. I’m teaching Organic Chemistry next semester, so we’ll put you in mine. That’s...chuh-chuh-chuh-choo...noon-1:15, Tuesday, Thursday.”

“Sounds good, but does that conflict with Psychopathological Methods in Study?” I ask.

“I’ll look at that, but Carroll...” His eyes fall on me. He’s sad for me. For something I did. He scratches his bald head and then puts his fist under his chin to pin his elbow to his desk and his desk to the floor.

“Now,” he starts. “You know what I’m going to say.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Thames.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m your advisor. It’s my fault too. But at some point, you just can’t get away with it.”

How’d he know? Am I that obvious? What was Ada whispering to me before I came in here? “So,” I say. “What happens now?”

“Looks like French 251’s available next semester. That’s literature. Think you can handle that?”

“What?”

“I would highly suggest not putting off the second class of that language requirement any longer,” he says. “Some universities require consecutive classes, for good reason. It’s gonna be very difficult to finish

if you lose the French you've already got."

"French literature," I say. "That sounds good."

"That's...chuh-chuh-chuh-choo...Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 3-4:15. Sound good?"

« *Oui. Merci.* »

"What?" *il dit.*

« *Merde.* »

"Ah, yes. French," *il dit.* "I went dumb for a hot second."

C'est impossible. Qu'est-ce que le pouvoir de...je peut seulement parler...penser, en français. Mais je ne peux pas...je ne sais...je ne sais pas beaucoup de français! Mais je dois prendre les Etudes Psychopathologiques.

"So that brings us to two out of four. You're doing pretty well with core requirements. How about any electives?"

"Yes!" Ah! It was a head-game.

"So what electives are we looking at?"

Weird question. Is *he* high? "Who's running?" I ask.

"What's that?"

"I'm democrat."

"I don't follow," he says.

"Oh, jeez, I'm sorry," I say. "I'm *democratic.*"

"You're going right over my head now, Carroll," Dr. Thames says.

I look down. Take a breath, gather your thoughts. Okay. Ready?

Okay. Look up.

Fuck fuck fuck *fuck* fuck fuck *fuck* fuck fuck fuck fuck how uh fuck oh uh okay uh how do normal people act well not *normal* I know people aren't *normal* I watched *Pleasantville* with my *mom* on her *birthday* I just mean oh I know what I mean how do people act normally with the -ly at the end like adverbs Dr. Lewis *hates* adverbs.

What's the orange in here like someone with orange breath took a fart or gave mouth to doorway CPR? See. Pee. Are. See stands for... sugar. Pee stands for person. And are stands for American. No no no that doesn't make sense all together that spells

uh

that spells

"its no big STRESS!!!" dr thames says like dad. "CAROL, are YOU oKAY?"

"it's CARROLL," I tell that guy

"what"

"you said CAROL!!!"

"thats what u said"

“theres two AREs and two ELLs”

“i know, carol”

“you said it again!!!”

“HAHuhuh”

if i were dad i'd say whats so goddamn funny but im not OLD enough yet so I say: “i'm sorry dr thames its hard to hear you over all the orange in here”

there he go looking down below his glasses like he cant see thru them if you cant see thru em why you wear em!!

“who are you?” a voice ask

“what?” i say

“what?” dr thames say

“who are you.” voice come from thames face but not thames. its from eyes. it glasses!

“nothing” i say dr thames to be normal

“carrol,” glasses say. i dont correct them. dr thames would think i was craze. “carrol i'm mr thames”

shake head. no. he mr thames glasses.

“i can hear your thoughts and i dont care how your name spelled,” say glasses. “im mr thames dad. i raised him strong and bald.”

what are you doing here

“i died long time ago when thames stil had dreams and wasnt gonna lay down and talk to shit kids like you”

not nice.

“yeah well, is that what you want do?”

guess not.

“what you want do?”

just wanna take psychopathological advanced methods of ingrained and pertinent literature.

“you just wanna take a class”

just wanna graduate

“and after”

...

“carrol, what about after graduation”

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

“respond to me when i talk to you goddamn it!”
mayb play videogame an make omlets with ADA!

“you seem a little tired,” dr thames say from under his dad.
 “keerul. you tired krl?”
 “yeah are you”
 mr thames dad sigh. “course, career talkin to shit kids”
 dr thames say, “shur yea howabowt i clik here and that means you
 can pik yur glasses on your time before redji strey shun opins tonight”
 “i dont need glasses”
 “you need two more to be on trak to gra jew ate, three two B
 fulltime student”
 TIME, the time “i have to go! i need the time!”
 “its four third E nine”
 “not that time!”
 KNOCK, on mr thames door. door shoots thirty degrees open,
 ADA head pop through.
 “heya,” ADA say. “carroll, dr mathis needs to talk to you right
 now.”
 thames look at her real calm. glasses smirkin all smug like he
 know somethin.
 “what?” I ask ADA. “whos that?”
 “your hm, yeah your family doctor.”
 “AM I IN TROUBLE?”
 “you just got a runny nose and she can’t tell if it’s the cold or the
 flu”
 mr thames laugh. hahaha. he underestimates gravity of situation.
 “well, uh,” I say, “what does he want to know?” “well, uh,” she
 say. “pee smell?”
 “you mind if we wrap this up real quick, and then we can get krl
 out to you...i’m sorry what’s your name?”
 “carroll,” I say.
 “no I meant—”
 “my name carroll,” ADA say.
 “you mind if we wrap up in here, carroll?” he ask. so now he gets
 it right. does he not like me? what am i doing wrong?
 “shure thing, doctor,” she say. “just keep an eye on him and call
 the emergency services if he pass out.” ADA leave. shut door quiet.
 “should you head out of here, krl?” thames ask.
 “uh can i go i think i’m in trouble”
 standing up!!!
 “thats allrite,” he say. “you got AKsess now, jus pik by to nite”
 going to doorway twist PLANT roots down in air so hard no way
 can i make to ele va ter

“you feelig okay krl?”
 oh no “low blud preshure like mom!”
 “ah, ha pens to me to.”
 in doorway will be in doorway forever jus me in mistr thames
 doorway hey can i help you hes not takin a point ments now hes home in
 bed with wife and kids no not in bed with kids i can leav a message i cant
 do this all my LIFE!
 “do you need some water” thames say
 “needs some direction, goddamn it” thames dad say
 ADA swing by grab carry my body whil legs run! fly!
 “hey baybee boy i waz owt here an was like wow SO
 fuCKED carroll must bee LIVING”
 “thank yu for allwaze sayin my name right
 ADA!” ADA prss elevator buttn.
 “hahahahha shur” ADA say.
 oh no “oh no” i say
 “what”
 “elevator to hell, stairway heaven”
 “huh”
 “we ALL DIE,” i say “BETter take stairs!”
 “you craze carroll”
 “come with me, he ded on the towr for our sins”
 “you mean he ded on CROSS for sins” “on the
 tower in yurup”
 stairs to heaven fee lik hell
 “careful”
 who.
 “who said that” i say
 “who sed what”
 “careful who sed it was me or yu”
 “nowun”
 “oh no” gon loz it lik gramp
 up stair out door run lik hell to heaven ovr green an the pub lic
 pool ovr my head run for my LIFE to get there get time
 “slo down stop carroll!”
 HONNNNNK EYYYYYYYYYSCCCRRRR
 “sorry mssus! ADA yu ok?” “goddam B
 care full carroll”
 “sorry ADA didmt mean!!!”

she cross street and i take her hand and run to house run on side walk run dont look in car windows they can see yu BETter thn yu can see em.

“you ok carroll?” ADA say

“yea but U gotta tell me.”

“tell what?”

ope hous door run stair run oh stair oh SO ah mine FINELY, my door.

“wat di dyou wisper?” i ask

“nothin” she say

“tell me”

“nothin!”

“Y domt U say?” i ask.

she says nothin

“say!” i say.

“cant rmember!”

“thats what you sed?”

“that Y camt say.”

i ope my drawr, ope my watch and finely time an the clock in prague wher jeez ded for sin an i hold it to my ear and it goes DUCK DUCK DUCK DUCK and i hold to her ear and it goes tick tick tick tick and i say “you domt got say, fyu domt want”

she says “lts tk eana pwhi lwetri padcu lmdo wmfu mth uhhighalid lebt, Carroll”

“lSiN!” :

TPKTICTPKoTTOPKOTICTKIcKTIckITkCIKtikticticktick tiCk ickt tcik tIck Tick

tic tek tike tick tick tick tek tick tick tick tick tkei tick tick tick tick tick tick tkei tick tik ick tick tick tick itek tick tick tic tick tick tik tikc tick tick tkei tick tick tick ck tick tick tik tk

tick tick tick tek tick tick tick tike tick tick tick tike tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick

tick tick.

“Ada?”

“Yeah?”

“What time is it?”

“Go back to sleep.” She’s lying down next to me. We’d shared my bed.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“It’s... 12:30. Let’s sleep until 4.”

“Yeah.” I say. I inch closer so our hips are touching. We both sleep like mummies, on our backs with our arms crossed over our chests. I stare at the ceiling, see if I can make out any movements or colors or vibrations. I see strike of orange. I look down and see it’s just a line of sun hitting Ada’s leopard print drug bag. “Ada?”

“What, Carroll?”

“What were you going to say, yesterday?”

“Your socks didn’t match.”

I lift the sheets up. I’m wearing a long navy dress sock and an ankle high Adidas white sock.

Ada’s gone back to sleep. I wait for five minutes then reach for the sharpie on my end table and write “Pansy” on her forehead.

I never slept next to her like this, and I don’t know if I ever will again. I don’t even want to sleep. I want to say something to her real quiet and when she says *what*, say *nothing*. And drive her crazy until she begs me to tell her and then say, “You’ve got something in your teeth.” And see the look on her face—if she’s disappointed, if she had anything in mind.

I want to take that thumbtack out of the wall and stick it in my wall ward buttock to make the time pass slower. But that’s stupid so I just listen to the silence until I hear the ticking again.

I don’t know how pocket watches work but I close my eyes and pray to Jesus who died for our sins on the Prague Astronomical Clock. I pray, Jesus, kill the watch at 3:59.

A.J. CUTRUFELLO

Stress Judgment

We ALL worry.
Each of us has fears.
Somehow,
We ALL still manage to judge
the anxieties of others.
Attempts are made at
validating
the tremble,
the sweat
on one's brow,
in one's palm,
 or down
 one's back.
The perspiration pours,
Saturating skin undoubtedly.
See,
nobody remains dry.

LOLA HOLCOMB

Spun Out

There was a knock on my bedroom door. “Time to go! You don’t want to be late for your appointment with Cristina!” my mother yelled joyfully, which felt ironic. She always talked about my therapy with such approval, such cheer. I didn’t know if she was faking this affect to make me feel better about myself, or she genuinely thought I enjoyed spouting my innermost terrible feelings of self-degradation and worthlessness to a stranger once a week.

Perhaps she believed I had to go to these sessions because of my upbringing, because of her. Maybe she felt guilty about scolding me, saying I could’ve done better, after I got a B+ on a seventh-grade algebra exam. Or about the passive-aggressive conversation about how if I cleaned up my diet, I’d be the fastest freshman on the high school cross country team. She may have felt ashamed for genuinely believing that no amount of pressure would ever break me. So, her optimism in my “get well journey” was her way of apologizing without words.

I hope that all of that is nothing more than a wild speculation I imagined to explain my mother’s out-of-place joy. I am only capable of knowing that I genuinely believed no amount of pressure I put upon myself would break me. Her gentle hand was merely a guide to learn how to be a decent human being. It never would’ve beaten me down or led me astray. Sometimes we just do that to ourselves.

Her cheer bothered me when I first began sessions, but after a year or two, I realized that her being pleasant about the whole situation was certainly preferable to her being ashamed of me or being snippy about the money we had to pay every week for a malady that was largely unobservable.

I pretended not to hear the urgently whispered conversations between my parents when they were downstairs. Listening to them stressfully trying to figure out how to pay for my college tuition, my sessions, various bills and taxes I didn’t even know existed, and food for us to eat made me feel guilty about being a money pit. Cristina said that kind of thinking is warped, and that the love a parent has for a child trumps any expense. However, my parents made a check out to her weekly, so she was probably supposed to say that.

I came down the stairs to find my mother talking to herself and fumbling through her purses trying to find the keys that were dangling between her teeth. “Mom, what are you doing? I’ll drive by myself,” I

proclaimed proudly; I had just gotten my license. She snapped her neck around and gave me a look as if I had just proposed throwing myself off a bridge.

“Are you KIDDING me? There is SNOW all over the roads!” We argued for all of thirty seconds before I was sitting in the passenger’s seat with my arms crossed over my chest.

This winter storm was an anomaly. It came with great force and left the afflicted area with several inches of dense, compact snow, which was atypical for February in Southeast Pennsylvania. Usually, the snow ended in January.

For some reason, my father took the SUV with heated seats and four-wheel drive to work with him today, and he had not yet gotten home, so my sister, mother, and I were all squished up in the smaller, less heated, less four-wheel driven, and less automatic of the two cars.

The cramped car was not doing my sore legs any favor. I had just finished an easy shakeout run immediately prior to leaving for the appointment and had not had enough time to stretch or cool-down. Completing my post-run stretching routine was at the forefront of my mind while getting into the car. I had a post-season championship qualifying race for indoor track the very next day, and I was seeded to win. I was especially instilled with confidence after this run; running in precipitation always made me feel like a hardcore athlete. Also, the snowfall was just beautiful to experience.

Sometimes, running was the only thing that made me feel alive. It gave me the feeling of being free but having complete control at the same time. I was the only one who could control how fast to go, how long to go, how much pain to put myself through. The more pain I felt, the more free I felt. My body filled with fiery lactic acid and my lungs seized up and every muscle cramped one by one and all of my emotional evils fled from my head. The grade anxieties, the body dysmorphias, the friendship dramas, the heartbreaks over boys who didn’t even know my name, the soul-igniting need to be a better runner. All gone. This was euphoria.

But Cristina says inflicting pain upon myself isn’t a healthy way to cope with depression. So that’s why I go to her now.

The snowflakes were small, but more than abundant. They tore through the air on a diagonal path, stinging my exposed rosy cheeks with each gust of wind, but barely reaching the ground for the first half of my afternoon run. On the return half, a fragile layer of ice topped with sparse flakes began coating the pavement. The snowflakes had nearly doubled in size, but there seemed to be just as many falling. Now, they were falling straight down the ground, with what looked like great urgency.

“Mom,” I began. “Can we hurry there? I’m really sore and want to stretch.”

“The roads don’t look too good, so don’t get your hopes up.” We pattered along on the snowy roads with relative ease until we reached a single lane road. It was all uphill, riddled with turns and bends, in the middle of a forest, and Cristina’s office was at the top of the hill.

About halfway up the hill, the car stalled because we were going so slowly. My mother’s shaking hand restarted the car and we continued up the hill for about twenty more seconds but it stalled again and would not restart and we were stuck just before the crest of the final hill on the final bend of the road and the snow was falling harder now.

“Mom, let me out of the car and I’ll run up to the office and call for help,” I suggested. “It’ll take thirty seconds.”

“No. You’ll get hit.”

“I’ll go into the woods, off the road.”

After muttering something under her breath, my mother put the car into neutral and it slowly began to drift backwards, and she steered towards the nearest driveway. I turned my head around to look out in front of the car while she was still backing down the hill. A truck was barreling down the road, uncontrollably. I closed my eyes as tightly as I could.

She should’ve let me drive by myself.

When I began sessions with Cristina, she requested to speak with my parents after about three meetings. There was a brief moment when the waiting room music stopped to change to a new song when I overheard her say from the office, “obsessive and compulsive control issues accompanied with severe depression.” Hearing this string of words was no surprise to me. I knew I was a perfectionist, I knew I hated change, I knew I was always desperately and frantically searching for ways to control everything in my life, but now other people knew, too. That was something over which I had lost control.

The accident took a number of things out of my control, too. I did what I could to try and manage the chaos, but shock began to settle in. Sounds droned in and out for quite some time, while I was just sitting in the passenger’s seat. My sister, screaming. The car horn, blaring. The crash sound, echoing. Moving nothing but my right arm, I removed my cell phone from my pocket and called 911. My voice was shaking; I couldn’t get it to stop no matter how hard I tried.

I had to stay home and in bed for several days after the accident. I had a terrible concussion, and extensive bruising on my arms and legs. Some cuts too, but luckily, no broken bones. I missed assignments for

school, and my big race. Seemingly everything I had worked so hard for just vanished. There was nothing I could do to get it back.

She should've let me drive by myself. Neither Mom nor Minnie would've gotten hurt if she just let me go by myself. This is my fault. We wouldn't have even been on that road if it wasn't for me and my bullshit therapy.

Ironically, it took many sessions to train my brain to think this was not my fault. I had no way of knowing this was going to happen. I had no part in making it happen. I had no control over the situation.

“Therapy, or getting better in general, doesn't just happen,” Cristina professed cheerfully at my session a week before the car accident. “Some try to climb up the hill of self-acceptance for years. And they just keep sliding back down. Others, well, they have to hit rock bottom, or rock bottom has to hit them, before they can even think about getting better.”

“That's corny,” I mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

But it was true. A week after she told me this, I literally slid down the hill and got beaten to rock bottom. After years of therapy, something catastrophic enough had finally happened to change my perspective: I feared dying from a car collision. I feared dying from something out of my control. I had always imagined my death would be my own fault. I wasn't scared of it; I embraced it. Until the accident. I didn't want to die. Not yet. Who knows, maybe therapy is good for something.

JULIA STERN

Sun-Kissed

Her hands are cold, thin-skinned, filled with blue—
fisherman hands she likes to call them,
noticing her own protruding bones and blotches of brown.
Spots kissed by the sun.

Spots that would be removed, leaving marks
like a backgammon table on back, arms,
legs, belly, cheek.

“Your poppy had these hands, hands of an old fart.”
His were more stained with purple.

I fiddle with her two middle toes, twisted and webbed,
tracing the white line that runs between them, down
the length of her creased calf.

My mother has been
open and closed up again
like soaked soil after rainstorms.

KIM CORONA

Mango de la hora

They stemmed from her *abuelita's jardín*.
Rounds of soft, pulpy stones,
The tanginess that touched her tongue,
Tacky fingers covered in its juice.

Rounds of soft, pulpy stones,
Yellow like a summer's golden hour.
Tacky fingers covered in its juice.
Coated in *Tajín y limón*

Yellow like a summer's golden hour,
Consumed only on humid days.
Mamá sliced them up for her.
Pulp hugged in between her teeth.
Consumed only on humid days.
She's reminded of her youth.
Pulp hugged in between her teeth.
A process she never enjoyed.

She's reminded of her youth.
The tree planted by her *abuelo*,
A process she never enjoyed.
Her love for them started with him.
The tree planted by her *abuelo*,
Nectar trickled down her parched throat.
Her love for them started with him.
His presence was kept in the roots.

Nectar trickled down her parched throat.
Rejoiced her fulfillment with the stone of gold.
His presence was kept in the roots.
They reached the surface of earth to meet her.

They continued to sprout each year.
They stemmed from her *abuelita's jardín*.
When her lips would meet the pit,
The tanginess that touched her tongue.

SAMUEL ERNST

The Lake George Mafia

July 10, 2017. A creaky house outside Lake George, New York. Lights dimmed. Sam Brown lights his new maple scented candle, sets it in the middle of our circle, and hands out the cards. The Stranger Things theme plays on Sharkey's speaker, accompanied by the distant whispers of guitar from upstairs.

"Villagers, go to sleep," Sam narrates.

Mafia

Mafia was a card game originally created by a psychology student in the Soviet Union. In the version we play, every player is assigned a card in secret. The player who has a certain card becomes the mafia. At the beginning of each round, night falls, and the villagers close their eyes. The mafia chooses one villager to kill. Then day comes, and everybody votes on a suspect to execute: the villagers win by killing the mafia. The mafia wins by killing all the villagers.

The First Morning: 7 players remain

I open my eyes. Across from me, Maddie swishes her straight black hair, and tosses her card onto the wooden floor. Face-up. Queen of Hearts.

"Maddie was watching Riverdale with Sharkey and Claud," Sam narrates, "when she went downstairs for some brown-sugar cinnamon pop-tarts, fell down these noisy-ass steps, and died."

"So, the mafia didn't kill her?" Sharkey says.

Sam curses. "Uhh, the mafia pushed her."

"I think Claud's the mafia," Michael says. "I heard her breathing very close to me."

"How would you know that's me?" Claudia says.

"I just have this feeling," Michael says, hands on his Flyers cap.

"I vote Mike," Sharkey says. "He's trying way too hard for the first round."

"All in favor of Mike?" Sam says.

"Maybe it's Sam," Margaret says, running her hands through her blonde curls.

"Hun," Sam Brown puts his hands on his hips. "I'm narrating,"

"No," she looks at me. "Sam Ernst."

"It's definitely Claudia then," Michael says.

“He kind of has a point,” I say, “maybe Claudia killed Maddie to draw suspicion away from her.”

“Claud wouldn’t kill Maddie,” Sharkey says, pressing his fingertips to his forehead. “Maddie’s a guaranteed vote against executing Claudia. So why would she-”

“That’s exactly what she wants you to think,” Michael says, eyes ablaze with the candle’s reflection.

“Who’s all voting Michael?”

Vote: 5 for Michael, 1 for Evan, and 1 for Claudia.

Michael jumps up. “I told you. It’s not me. It’s Claud. She’s the mafia. She’s the one who drowned Margaret.”

The Second Morning: 5 players remain

“Oh no,” Claudia says, looking at her card, face-up.

“I’m spoooped,” Evan says.

“Claudia Rosado was swimming late at night,” Sam Brown narrates. “Past the Chestertown pool curfew.”

“I still think it’s Claud,” Michael says.

“Shut up, you’re dead.” Sam says. “She succumbed to the acidic water and died. Uhm, and the mafia was happy because that’s who they wanted to kill anyway.”

“Look at Sam Ernst,” Sharkey says. “He’s grinning maniacally”.

“But I always look like that,” I say. “I think it’s Thomas.”

“I think Sam’s the mafia,” Thomas says, adjusting his glasses. “He wants us to think it’s too obvious that it’s him, so we don’t vote him out like Michael.”

“I think it’s you,” I say.

“Thomas would think of that whole Claudia-Maddie strategy,” Evan says.

“Why would that have to be me?” Thomas says.

“Thomas is good at being the mafia,” Sharkey says. “If we eliminate him, we at least eliminate the possibility.”

“That doesn’t make any sense though,” Thomas says. “It’s kind of dumb to pick me when you don’t even have any evidence.”

“All in favor of Thomas?”

“It’s not me, guys.”

Vote: 4 for Thomas, and 1 for Sam.

“Told you,” Thomas says, revealing his Jack of Spades.

The Third Morning: 3 players remain

Evan opens his eyes.

“I think it’s Margaret,” I say.

“You’re like Christina Cochrane,” Margaret says. “Whenever I played this with the tennis team she would be convinced it’s me every single game.”

“Sam’s definitely playing some weird mind games with us right now,” Evan says.

The Second Night: 6 players remain

Margaret opens her eyes. Reaches across the circle. Leans over the flickering candle and smells the hot, syrupy wax. She flips over Claudia’s card. The flame wavers in Michael’s eye, dancing to the ominous synths. He’s on Twitter, convinced the shape in the corner of his eye is Claudia. Maddie looks to Sam Brown in surprise.

“Mafia,” Sam says, “Go back to sleep.”

The First Morning of the Next Game: 7 players remain

“Claudia was watching Riverdale,” Maddie narrates, “and the killer got her.”

“Is the Riverdale killer the mafia?” Sam Brown says.

“The mafia was going to kill Claudia anyway,” Maddie says.

Sharkey sits back against the couch “If they killed Claud, we know it’s probably Michael.”

Vote: 7 for Michael, and 1 for Sharkey

“This is not fair,” Michael says, revealing his Ace of Spades mafia card.

XICHANG WU

The Young Monk's Begging Bowl

Pulling me from a pile of begging bowls,
I'm being given to a monk at his ordination.
The young man holds me upright
Shivering palm attaches sweats on my spine

In the night he places me on a red cushion near the windowsill
Moonlight touches my aged wooden skin.

Emptiness.

My last user who calmly died at fifty-two
Rattooed that word on my skin with a passage from Prajnaparamita sutras.

Relic!

The young monk will start his first alm tomorrow morning,
As if the year never passed by.
He will fold me into his new robe,
Begging and blessing.
Hopefully, the shape of my empty belly will offer
This young monk a fulfilled soul.

JENIFER JOSEPH

Hospital Bed

My back is a hospital bed and
I'm too full of sick. There's
stretchmarks on the walls and
scabs on the floor and
spider veins in the halls and
the ceiling is an itch I
can't reach. When I scratch, I
become undone. My fingers are
the orderlies, who sterilize
my mortar, then bid me lie
on the cot of my struggling
frame, until my passages catch
air. I beg my bones for respite
but I'm still here.
I can't give into despair.

CONTRIBUTORS

KILEY ADDIS: I am a member of the Class of 2020. I'm double majoring in English and Philosophy with a minor in Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies. Along with writing, my free time is spent reading and being the President of Feminists in Action, a member of Ursinus Women's Rugby, and the Recording Secretary of Tau Sigma Gamma Sorority.

TOMMY ARMSTRONG is 8 years old and would like to write for television one day.

CLARA BAKER is a senior Health and Exercise Physiology major who also recently landed a Creative Writing minor (score)! She particularly likes bodies of water, butterflying through bodies of water, and drinking water.

ALEXA BEACHAM is a senior with double majors in Biology and Applied Ethics. She's passionate about photography and health equity. Alexa is killing the Amazon Echo industry one ex-boyfriend at a time.

GRIFFIN BANKS is a sophomore at Ursinus College. He is a Media and Communications major with a minor in Creative Writing. In addition to his schoolwork, Griffin is a proud member of the Alpha Phi Epsilon fraternity.

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KRISTEN COONEY is an artist, violinist, and a member of the Class of 2022. She finds inspiration in traveling, nature, and those around her.

KIM CORONA is a junior who enjoys being accompanied by large rats on her way home at night in New York City. Her body is solely fueled by bubble tea and buffalo sauce.

EMILY COUNTS: as a senior, I am able to look back at all of my hard work from these past few years. Ursinus has set me up for success and I could not be more pleased. My life has changed in all areas and I could not have had this experience if it were not for the hard-working people here. I hope to continue a regular painting practice after school and explore other great opportunities out there.

A.J. CUTRUFELLO began writing poetry and composing short stories around Kindergarten or before. Son of Anthony and Dawn Cutrufello. Brother of Julia, Leah, and Melissa Cutrufello. Four-year member of the Ursinus Wrestling team.

TAAHIRA DAVIS is a Theater major and is ecstatic to be included, once again, in the Lantern! Her interests include singing, dancing, acting, songwriting, and being an altogether quirky person.

SARAH DEFELICE: I could tell you what I do, but that doesn't tell you who I am. Who are any of us?

KIERAN DEMELFI is a senior Computer Science and Mathematics double major. He can often be found lurking in the shadows of Lower Wismer, clutching his vape in one hand and an energy drink in the other, or prowling the halls of Pfahler at 3 AM. He hopes you enjoy this edition of the Lantern as much as he enjoyed contributing to it.

SOPHIA DIBATTISTA is a sophomore English and Theater double major with a Creative Writing minor. She thanks all staff members for their dedication to the Lantern and the readers of this book. Enjoy the entertainment!

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MATT DWYER will miss the joy of the Lantern. He would like to thank and congratulate all who have made the Lantern special during his time at Ursinus.

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VALERIE EICHLER is a sophomore English, Education, and Music major from Harrisburg, PA. They are overjoyed to be published in the Lantern! In their spare time, you can find them procrastinating on the first floor of Myrin or buying spicy ramen from the C-store.

SAMUEL ERNST is an English major with minors in Creative Writing and Computer Science. His Smash Ultimate mains are R.O.B. and Mr. Game and Watch.

SOPHIE GIOFFRE is an English and Educational Studies double major in the Class of 2019. When not neck deep in Dickinson and Dewey, she enjoys taking long walks in the forest and making collages out of paper scraps in her many, unfinished journals. She's not quite sure what comes next, but she plans to live with love, smiles, and intention.

SYDNEY GONZALEZ is a senior pursuing a Media and Communications Studies major with a Creative Writing concentration. She is stoked to have been included in the Lantern, since it is her first time being published.

RACHEL HAAS-GUTIN a.k.a. Red: My writing is just me overthinking on paper, perpetually. Live terribly, not terrified.

LOLA HOLCOMB is studying Health and Exercise Physiology and Biology. Fields of study and writing aside, things she enjoys are as follows (but not limited to): running, dogs, coffee, dolphins, cats, plants, and whistling. Save the bees!

SARAH HOWELL is a senior English and Education double major. She is a student teacher at Spring-Ford high school and enjoys creative writing in her sparse free time.

JENIFER JOSEPH is a junior Neuroscience major at Ursinus and is a member of the Class of 2020. She is President of the Ursinus Literary Society, Treasurer for the Gay Straight Alliance, and has previously been published in an online literary journal *The Write Launch*. She is thankful for having the opportunity to contribute to the Lantern, which she has enjoyed reading since her freshman year.

MICHAEL KIBBLEHOUSE: I'm Mike, I'm a Media and Communications major and I like movies and comic books. Especially movies about comic books.

MELANIE LEE is a senior with a Biology major and an Art minor.

KEVIN LEÓN follows @books, @harvard, and @nasa on Instagram.

AMY LITOFSKY loves writing, the color blue, and nothing else.

LILLY MCQUEEN is a rather large, spherical chemoorganoheterotroph that is able to survive ionizing radiation, ultraviolet light, desiccation, and oxidizing and electrophilic agents. She can be found in environments rich in organic materials, such as the District of Columbia, Pfahler, or Thomas, where she dabbles in Lomography and the occasional science experiment.

THEA PASTRAS is a sophomore English and Education double major who finds it much easier to write a poem than to write a few sentences describing herself. She spent so long trying to come up with a creative bio that she almost missed the deadline (which is actually a fairly accurate description of who she is) and will now simply thank the Lantern.

MADDIE RESSLER: I am an Art major and Creative Writing minor. This is my first year in college and my first time really diving into writing. I hope everyone enjoys my piece!

MADISON RODAK is an English major, with minors in creative writing and media and communications studies. She likes to spend her time writing, reading, and petting her dog Max.

JULIA STERN: Class of 2019. I am an English major with a minor in History. I am from Providence, Rhode Island and am one of three sisters.

REN TOSCANO wished for world peace on her last five birthdays.

ROBERT VARNEY is a junior majoring in Studio Art with a minor in Media Communications. After graduating from Ursinus College, he hopes to begin a career in photojournalism.

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DANIEL WALKER is a junior and English major from Moorestown, New Jersey. Likes: Italian hoagies, the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a new shirt at the men's store and a good catnap in his office chair. Dislikes: That thing you like.

ROBERT WILF (also known as “Shadow”) is a junior at Ursinus College, neonate of witchcraft, and master level fake goth. When not studying long dead religions or drawing his Dungeons & Dragons party, he can be found practicing alongside the other members of Ursinus's own Bearly Funny Improvisational Comedy team. He is very thankful for the chance to make his Lantern debut.

TAYLOR WILSON is a senior Psychology major with minors in Studio Art and French. She mainly works with 35mm film photography but also enjoys drawing and painting. Her favorite subjects to photograph are her Ursinus friends.

LIAM WORCHECK: I'm a freshman here at Ursinus, hoping to double major in English and Philosophy with minors in Film Studies and Music. I like to play guitar, write, and make films.