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Spring 2019

SAGA Vol. 82 / 2018-2019

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SAGA ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 82 / 2018-2019

SAGA

Art & Literary Magazine

Volume 82

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A magazine of this magnitude requires the effort of multiple organizations and individuals to reach publication. The editors-in-chief cannot thank the Augustana English Department and Student

Government Association enough for their contributions and support to SAGA Art & Literary Magazine. SAGA's publication would not be possible without their generosity and commitment to the furthering of art and creativity in this community.

To SAGA's advisors Rebecca Wee, Kelly Daniels, and Kelvin Mason, we thank you for your constant support and advice. Any successful organization requires its pillars of strength to fall back on from time to time.

Without Christina Sanders-Ring, the English Department secretary, SAGA would likely be a floundering fish in a sea of chaos. We thank her for the numerous emails sent on behalf of the magazine, answering all of the many questions we sent her way, and for performing a host of other administrative tasks. Thank you also to Meg Gillette for helping us with our financial needs.

We would like to thank our award judges for this year's volume: Ryan Collins, Kai Carlson-Wee, Melissa Mohr, and Beth Roberts. They all kindly took the time to thoroughly read and review the poetry, prose, and art selections for the magazine.

Last but certainly not least, we want to give an enormous thanks to Jack Ottinger and the staff at Allegra Print & Imaging in Elgin, Illinois for printing our magazine. Without them, this volume would not currently rest in your hands.

Thank you.

ABOUT SAGA

SAGA is Augustana College's art and literary magazine, which has been published by students since 1937. While SAGA traditionally published two magazines per academic school year, one in winter and one in spring, it has been published as a single, larger issue since 2014.

The goal of SAGA Magazine and its staff members is to spread and showcase student art and writing around Augustana's campus and to increase the prevalence of creative spaces and outlets around the place students call home. Those of any major, interest, or background are encouraged to submit, uninhibited and uncensored.

Submissions are open exclusively to currently enrolled Augustana students. All submissions are sent anonymously to student boards who have selected the pieces published in this issue. This year, we received over 200 total submissions of poetry, art, and prose. We are proud to present this year's selected pieces.

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LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

I met Saga's 2015-16 editors my freshman year at the Activity Fair. It was the last table I stopped at and I, a freshman with arms full of cheap Augie-branded pens and canvas bags, met Alyssa. Alyssa spoke of the ways Saga Magazine gives students an outlet to be creative and share their passions and amazing talent with other people. We talked about books and poetry and how she liked being able to provide other students with a thriving place to publish their work. After that conversation, I knew that Saga was going to be a big part of my life.

I joined the poetry board that year, and I have been constantly grateful for that decision. Writing has always been a focal point in my life, so being able to create opportunities and an accessible platform for other students to engage in was a dream come true. Being a part of Saga these past four years has brought me to some of the most meaningful moments of my time at Augustana. From poetry readings to community projects, Saga has been a beacon of creativity and light for me.

I can't say thank you enough to all of the amazing artists and writers who contributed to this issue. I'm honored to see my work alongside yours! It's such a privilege to be able to come together as a community with you incredibly talented people. You—the artists and creators—are the heart of this magazine. Thanks to all of you and our incredible staff this year—we ended up putting together something amazing. Thanks to Madison for dumping so much time and energy into formatting the pages, Laura and Elodie, our editors, for making it happen, and our board members for being decisive. You're the peanut butter AND jelly to this Saga Sandwich. We couldn't have done this thing without all of your effort. Thanks to Saga for existing and Augustana for giving us this platform of expression.

Mostly, thank YOU for reading and taking the time to get to know us. Thank you for picking up this magazine and reading the contributor's notes. Thank you for loving art the way we do and allowing us to keep sharing these radical acts of vulnerability. The readers and the artists who make every issue of Saga happen have captured my heart, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Signing off after 4 beautiful years,
Melissa Conway

LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

This was my first year as an Editor-in-Chief and it was an amazing experience. Thank you to everyone who made this year so memorable, and thank you to all of our contributors, judges, advisers, and printers. This couldn't have happened without all of you!

-Stephanie Tillman

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES AND

Austin Allbert 98

I hated poetry before I came to college. It was foreign and difficult and cheesy. But it has grown a lot on me. I love poetry and now see how useful and powerful it can be. That is why I chose to continue writing it. It's some of my favorite classes in the Creative Writing major. And although I don't consider myself to be a poet, I hope that maybe someday I can get published for just one of my works. Poetry helps me think through my emotions, and it helps me learn to accept things in life. I hope to write poetry that can change the world someday or maybe just simply make someone feel accepted and understood. It's my biggest dream in life. I hope I can achieve it someday.

Laura Beuseling 64, 70

Laura is an English major and Creative Writing minor. She has always had a love of art and imaginative storytelling. When she's not entertaining the many stories in her head, she spends her time reading, listening to music, enjoying nature, laughing at stupid jokes, and fantasizing about a career as a writer.

Elodie Bouwens 86

I am an aspiring copyeditor and a Roman Catholic. I enjoy writing, reading, doing mission work, traveling, and walking/hiking long distances. My goal is to thru-hike major trails in the United States and abroad.

Ethan Conley-Keck 85, 91

I spent a lot of my life convincing myself not to make art. Even though I loved it, I told myself it was frivolous, or nonproductive, sometimes I felt indulgent. Only recently have I come around and allowed myself to be honest with myself—art is fun. It's something worth doing every day. I hope with my work, I can give other people a moment of laughter, reflection, or inspiration. If not, well, I certainly had fun making it.

Melissa Conway 33, 43, 44, 60

Melissa is a Creative Writing major and Graphic Design minor. Her family hails from small town Ottawa, Illinois, where the sun sets over miles of cornfields and barnyards. Melissa spends her free time writing, designing, and wishing she appreciated nap time more in Kindergarten. She has been twice-published in The Best Emerging Poets Series, although most of her work can be found in the half-filled journals stacked around her room.

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Braxton Crawford 12, 18, 66

I've been writing since I was in 5th grade as an escape from the things around me and the community I was brought up in. I've learned to use writing as a tool for bringing attention to the "other" and reflect a world not too many people I've run into are acquainted with. I try to be the voice for those who have been silenced and don't have a seat at the table. I'm normally a pretty enclosed and introverted person, but I'm hoping that I can summon my voice through writing.

Maria Do 43, 77, 103

Just a broke college student trying to survive. Ready to travel the world. I'm an amateur photographer who likes to capture different cultures, nature, architecture, people, and sports – so pretty much everything.

Jack Harris 61, 89, 108

Jack is a Creative Writing and Graphic Design double major, a level 7 Starving Artist, and plays Wii Fit Trainer on Super Smash Bros., so that basically tells you everything you need to know about him. In place of a link to his portfolio or resume, he'll dispense a piece of free advice: all Ramen bricks are packaged as two servings, NOT one, so please adjust your calculations accordingly.

Alexandria Hart 45

Over anything else, I think people should be aware of my eccentric ways of creating art, as a musician, writer, and visual artist. Art is a way of discoursing in introspection with myself. I often feel as if the "me" that is perceivable exists in contradictory dualistic states. My way of venting intense emotion is to create art that, despite being somewhat niche or odd, is meant to be provocative for the sake of proliferating thought and discourse. I want to raise other people to the point of conflict, bring them to that position within themselves, so they can learn how I gained knowledge of myself and use that for their own self-improvement.

Jaclyn Hernandez 10, 14, 20, 34

I am an English and Creative Writing double major who hopes to become a full-fledged book editor and a published author. I have always loved reading and writing, and I'm glad that I get to dedicate my life to both of these passions.

Megan Hoppe 28, 30, 55

I find interest in the small, forgotten details and the small, forgotten people. Here's to the nobodies who hope to be somebodies, may history treat you well.

Tajania Jenkins 88

Instead of wallowing over your problems and feelings, draw or write about them...make them come to life. It's your pain, and it demands to be felt.

Adarios Jones 87

My name is Adarios Jones, and my writing is inspired a lot by the adversity I've come through in my life and how it's made me stronger. I also contribute a lot of my writing to my fiance, Rene Powers, who's been incredibly motivating in my Spoken Words and who is a true inspiration. As well as Rebecca Wee, professor here at Augustana who has pushed me to step out of my comfort zone.

Mikaylo Kelly 29, 78, 107

Mikaylo Tairiku Kelly enjoys celebrating the mystery of life. Catch them at your local function smiling so hard their cheeks hurt, chanting so loud border walls break down, silently observing the sensations in their body, or any of the other infinite options.

Allison Kestler 62

Alli Kestler is triple majoring in Creative Writing, French, and Political Science. She is also a member of the Augustana Women's Soccer team, Treasurer of French Club, and one of the Prose Board Editors. She loves coffee and pretending she has free time, and she's grateful to be part of SAGA for a second year and hopes that you all enjoy this year's publication!

Briana Lee 40

I'm just some fat Biology/Pre-Veterinary Medicine major who decided to defy what a professor told me about fat people not being able to write. To that professor, thank you for your derogatory remark and for lighting a metaphorical fire under my ass to prove you wrong. Perhaps someday you will learn to treat your students with some respect and common courtesy. Now, is my writing any good? Beats me; that's for you to decide.

Muriel Melgoza 13, 39, 81

Muriel is very excited to have her work published in this year's Saga! She has always admired people's work in past Saga editions, so to be amongst them now brings her such joy and the inspiration to create more. In addition to being in the Augustana Choir, the Spring Musical, and working at The Brew, being in Saga is the cherry on top of her senior year. Thank you.

Ian Murrin 17, 32, 54, 65, 72, 73, 94, 95

Ian Murrin is a photographer whose journey through the lens has led him to explore the emotion of light and shadow.

Hoping to take up a career in photography after college, Ian focuses on portraiture and long exposure scenes that capture the feeling and emotion of his subjects, creating stories and themes for the viewer to experience.

In the belief that the viewer is the ultimate judge of an art piece, Ian's works carry a sense of ambiguity to them so that they can be taken into any context the viewer sees them.

In his spare time between studies, work, and photography, Ian continues his artistic endeavors by creating drawings focusing on mythos and skeletal designs as well as doodling in his class notes.

Brenna Parson 80

Brenna Parson enjoys writing vampire stories, listening to alt rock and Kpop, and rewatching the same three TV shows on Netflix. One day, she will conquer the world in knee-high pastel socks.

Rene Powers 90, 92, 96

I spent most of my creative writing career up to now as a prose writer, but upon taking poetry for the first time in the fall of 2018, I found a special and new kind of love. Poetry forced me to be more concise, raw, and ready to open and heal my biggest wounds. I sincerely hope you enjoy what I have written.

Jonathan Quigley 27, 79, 97

The best flavor of Pop-Tart is unfrosted brown sugar cinnamon. Also, I own 16 pairs of pants.

Lalini Shanela Ranaraja 48, 56, 82, 84

Lalini Shanela Ranaraja is an international student from Katugastota, Sri Lanka. She is also a writer, a painter, and a fierce cynic. In her free time, which is nonexistent, she writes mournful poetry, picks up languages, and holds long conversations with the sky. She is studying anthropology, multimedia journalism, and creative writing and hopes that one of these paths will enable her not to starve to death before the age of 27.

Bethany Schorr 19, 69, 76, 101

Bethany Schorr is a first- year student at Augustana College, studying environmental studies but also capturing the aesthetics of the world. Bethany absolutely loves photography and being able to create works of art. She is currently beginning to explore her new favorite: film photography. You can find more of her work @_bethany_photography_ on Instagram.

David Snubb 74, 104

Dave Snubb is a writer.

Emma Wiegmann 102

I'm a big fan of hot chocolate, and sometimes winter is my favorite season.

William Bailey 106

I am very passionate about digital photography, and my work gets more and more crisp with every photograph I take. Landscape photography is by far my favorite because it allows my creativity to really shine. While photographing, I look at landscapes at a different angle by incorporating an inanimate object and bringing it to life. Lastly, I enjoy all aspects of digital image editing due to the fact that the options are endless.

AWARDS

POETRY AWARDS

Judged by: Kai Carlson-Wee

Kai Carlson-Wee is the author of *RAIL*, forthcoming from BOA Editions. He has received fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and his work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Best New Poets*, *TriQuarterly*, *Blackbird*, *Crazyhorse*, and *The Missouri Review*, which selected his poems for their 2013 Editor's Prize. With his brother Anders, he has co-authored two chapbooks, *Mercy Songs* (Diode Editions) and *Two-Headed Boy* (Organic Weapon Arts), winner of the 2015 Blair Prize. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow, he lives in San Francisco and teaches poetry at Stanford University.

First Place

November Melissa Conway

"November" is a tour-de-force of a poem. Inventive and lyrical, rich in suggestive descriptions, it is a poem propelled by the emotional clarity of the speaker and the urgency of disorientation. I was blown away by the way it captured a sense of American crisis and personal identity. "I write without purpose / I am cheeto-fingers / branded and unrecognizable." There are allusions to politics, religion, consumerism, and the absurdity of constructing an identity in the era of #selfcare. "I am Lush Bath Bomb residue behind the knees." Partly an *Ars Poetica*, "November" is a poem that overflows with urgency and speaks to a culture in desperate need of growth in the "community garden."

Second Place

I Hold The Door Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

Full of quiet intensity and crystalline detail, "I Hold The Door" is an intimate portrait of two strangers meeting and attempting to navigate a path toward empathy. Written with a clear eye for emotional depth and complexity of character, this poem allows us to eavesdrop on a first date, watching through the speaker's eyes as the two of them attempt to connect and communicate, "You speak of my languages." The revelations here happen slowly and the poem maps a rich emotional landscape by the end. "There are too many songs in my blood to sing / and this would be enough, to say goodbye / and live again." Lines like these are so memorable and precise, they allow this awkward meeting a kind of grace, even transcendence.

Third Place

Steadying Breaths Megan Hoppe

Sometimes a poem's genius is found in compression, in the clarity of its images and turns. "Steadying Breaths" is a lush and lyrical poem that builds a whole landscape in a few sweet lines. "In the distance, a red light flashes" "I am surrounded by peace." There are two separate forces at play here, but they are not opposed. The blinking light and falling snow seem in concert with each other, creating peace within the warning. The poem makes an incredible turn toward the end, "Nature knows no peace, but / it often creates / beauty." Those lines feel so true, and will remain with me for a long time after reading this poem.

Honorable Mention

I Was Melissa Conway

Voice-driven and imaginative, "I Was" creates a persona that is at once strange and entertaining, unreliable and entirely convincing. "I used to be vertical. / My hair fell down from the top of me / passed my shoulders." As funny and peculiar as the speaker is, they are also narrating a tragic shift, away from the linear plot of a life. There's something very lovely and intuitive about lines like, "I used to have a dog / when I was vertical / her name was Horizon, / or maybe Hazel but her eyes / were not." The way the name 'Horizon' forces us to look outward, while simultaneously implying the domesticity of a dog is very compelling. Perhaps a life has fallen down, collapsed, but this is still a character I would like to meet and could definitely learn something from.

AWARDS

PROSE AWARDS

Judged by: Ryan Collins

Ryan Collins is the author of several chapbooks, most recently “Where the Wind Bends Backwards” (with Erin M. Bertram, 918studio press). His poems have appeared in “American Letters & Commentary,” “PEN Poetry Series,” “Forklift,” and many other journals. He is executive director of the Midwest Writing Center and curates the SPECTRA Poetry Reading Series in Rock Island, where he lives.

First Place

Internationals Lalini Shanella Ranaraja

From the first sentence of this piece, we’re met with a voice that moves and is moving. We are given angles to see through windows of different shapes—some looking into smaller rooms, others as large as shopping malls—and we’re brought in to a visitor’s perspective navigating an American interior and all that comes with it. This allows us the reader to experience the same sense of “unbelonging” the narrator deftly renders, and in so doing creates an opportunity for a shared understanding between people from different places, a shared sight of different perspectives—these are some of the best things we can hope for from literature.

Second Place

What a Fat Girl Wants Briana Lee

The strength of the narrator here is compelling—from the sharp critique of societal expectations, to the documenting of torment, to the insistence that things can and should be better. The relation of such feelings and experiences does not always require strong prose to be effective, given the difficult nature of this kind of witnessing, but here we have a terrific example of what such work gains when the language is given the same care and attention as the subject matter.

Third Place

Aththi Lalini Shanella Ranaraja

The collapsing of distance and time, the working through of memory and history at work in this piece are striking. Full of vivid detail and big-hearted care, there is much traveling through time, space, and feeling to be enjoyed here—an enormous life and love captured in a small package.

Honorable Mention

More Than the Grass and Stars Jaclyn Hernandez

Here we enter to a serene moment at a day’s end that concludes by bringing in a sinister connotation to the phrase “terror twilight”—an excellent turn arrived at with surprising speed and brevity.

AWARDS

ART AWARDS

Judged by: Melissa Mohr

Melissa Mohr has worked at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa for over nine years where she is currently the Director of Education. She graduated from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois with a major in Classics and a minor in Art History before getting her MA in Art History from the University of Iowa. We are so excited to have her involved with Saga this year!

First Place

Wondershock Ethan Conley-Keck

Artist's Note: A representation of the conflicting forces within the world. I want to emphasize the joy in discovery, while also highlighting the fear of the deep, dark unknown. Inspiration strikes like lightning, creating form out of nothingness, but anxiety in the back of our head risks dousing the fires of curiosity.

Second Place

Of Red in the Snowy Day Ian Murrin

Artist's Note: My model brought a cape to our shoot. I don't know why. But I loved it all the same and had her wear it, hoping the red would stand out among the black wall. Being made of velvet, the cape was brilliant in shaping the light, catching it on every fold, scrambling it up, and then sending it out in a mottled array of shades and shadow. As it began to snow, the flakes created an atmosphere of magic and speckles around the model, making her seem to be in another dimension of sorts, floating among the specks. Her bangs covering her face, she remains mysterious, even inside the one area not covered by the cape.

Third Place

Les étoiles Muriel Melgoza

Artist's Note: The title means "the Stars" in French, referring to the shadows of these flowers littering the sidewalk along Old Main.

Honorable Mention

Deep Quack Jonathan Quigley

Artist's Note: All of my photos were taken in various locations throughout the city of Chicago, Illinois. They were all taken on my tiny, red, crap-ass, Kodak EasyShare M340 10.2 MP Compact Digital Camera.

AWARDS

THE BARBARA ANDERSON MILLER AWARD

Judged by: Beth Roberts

Beth Roberts is the author of *Brief Moral History in Blue* (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2001). She has published poems in many journals, most recently *The Volta*; *Forklift*, Ohio; *Diagram* and *Love's Executive Order*. A second manuscript, "When We Break for the Spires and Tall Grass Together," currently is short-listed for the Christopher Smart Prize from London-based *Eyewear Editions*, and has been a finalist or semi-finalist for prizes from the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, *Rescue Press* and University of Akron Press. A graduate of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Roberts is the editorial director in the Office of Communication and Marketing at Augustana College.

About the award: In 1982, Dr. James E. Miller endowed SAGA in memory of his wife, Barbara Anderson Miller, who graduated from Augustana in 1943. While attending Augustana, she edited and wrote for SAGA. The award is given to the submission that is most competently crafted and most promising in imaginative power. This is SAGA's most prestigious award.

Winner

Aththi Lalini Shanella Ranaraja

Aththi is a beautiful portrait of the author's relationship with her paternal grandfather. In the piece, we absorb a sense of place through a focus on the character of a person who inhabits that place. The author accomplishes this through an intimate personal connection with the grandfather and with language itself. The storytelling is lush, even when the pieces in it are not, from the drab landscape of a Hobby Lobby parking lot in Rock Island, to the final stark recognition of the mind's avoidance of a truth.

Aththi concludes with what seems like a new idea: even with our most intensely beloved relation, not knowing makes space for a possible rich future of more knowing, with much history left to be discovered. It is a gorgeous memoir.

More Than the Grass and Stars

The cool breeze made the long stalks of grass whistle. Their lean bodies bent to the will of the wind. The sun seemed to dip into the green blades as it sank lower into the horizon. The soft, dewy yellow light bled into the purple and pinks of the coming night. Once it became dark, only the stars and Gracie would be left outside. She knew her mom didn't like her sitting outside, all alone in the fields. But what other choice did she have?

All that surrounded her beaten-down, splintering house were infinite miles of tall grass. It took thirty minutes by car to get to the nearest house where one of her friends lived and another thirty minutes added onto that just to reach the edge of town. Eleven-year-old Gracie only had the company of flimsy plants and faraway stars to entertain her. So, there she laid, flat on her back, as the world became darker and all that was left were the bright dots of the night.

Gracie sighed. She knew her mom wouldn't want her out in the dark. She'd want her in the house, where the decaying front and back doors creaked under the weight of five different locks. Gracie was always afraid that her mom would splinter the door with how forcefully she slammed those locks shut, once Gracie came in for the night. Gracie chalked it up to parent paranoia.

With one final glance at the stars, Gracie got up and dusted off her overalls. She also tried to ruffle all the dirt out of her hair. Her mom always complained about how much filth was hiding in her long blonde locks. Once she determined that she was sufficiently clean, Gracie walked towards her house.

Halfway there, the wind stopped. The air was still and the grass stood up. Besides the stars, it was almost pitch-black outside. Gracie could barely see the silhouette of her house looming off in the distance. If she strolled, she would get there in ten minutes. If she ran, she could maybe do five. As the hairs rose on the back of her neck, Gracie hoped that she had the lung strength to run all the way there.

The only sound in her ears was the harsh rasp of her breathing. Each grass blade seemed to tug at her body as she ran by, trying to hold her back. Her long hair whipped in the wind, and the dirt her shoes kicked up scooped up her overalls again, but she didn't care. She just knew that she needed to be home. Safe behind those ridiculous locks. Which maybe weren't so ridiculous once Gracie noticed something running beside her.

It was maybe ten feet away from her, matching her speed. But through the darkness Gracie couldn't see what it was. She could only tell something was there by the shift in the grass blades and the sound of harsh panting that was not her own. She made her strides longer, pumped her arms harder. Her eyes started to water from the wind made by her running, but the tear that slid across her cheek was from the snarls Gracie heard from the thing that was following her. It gradually edged its way closer.

Her legs were going to fall off. Her lungs were going to give out. Gracie felt like one of these two things was going to happen before she reached her home. But finally, the light from the kitchen window came into view as Gracie yanked open the door and flew inside.

A Walk in the Park

White Air Force ones, summer's heat from the sun
 Windows cracked open, but never too much
 just enough to watch smoke trail from a lit Dutch
 And disintegrate, like the dreams of grieving fiends
 Potholes in the road, and the fountains dispense alcohol
 hope in the form of basketball and adderall
 kids rolling down the slide, no smiles there to watch them

Two strangers brought together for the first time
 Children of God gathered under the pretense of crime
 Nickels and dimes, poverty's expense is racking up
 Mix it, pour it, serve it, redemption's found at the bottom of the
 cup
 The woman waits by the bench, her son's cries muffled from
 inside the car
 She's come to the park to play, pleasure at the site of another
 needle scar
 Ghetto Capitalism, supply and demand, the return is bittersweet
 Welcome to the park, ghetto Wall Street.

A Kitten in Aw[e]ning



Photography

Salvation

“Fiona!”

The sound of splashing mud covered my mother’s yell. Her voice became an echo as I retreated further and further from my cottage.

Wet blades of grass stuck to my boots as I sprinted through the never-ending pastures. They felt like cold, slimy hands trying to stop my pumping legs. In response, I swung my arms harder and didn’t look back.

The sun was rising over the Irish hillside. Green covered every inch of land for miles like a newborn’s blanket. Cottages peppered the meadow, while a long strip of dirt acted as the only means of travel into the nearest village.

My breath started coming out in short bursts as my lungs burned for mouthfuls of air. But I ignored the fire inside of me in favor of watching the sun rise over my destination.

All I had brought with me was a worn-out wool sack that held a day’s worth of clothes. I knew I would be forced to wear my brown dress and farming boots for a majority of the journey, but I didn’t care. Even if my stink caused all of the crew members to pitch themselves overboard, I would grab the main wheel and sail myself all the way to America.

My knapsack hit my back with every step I took, but it was a welcome reminder to not let my weak legs give out. If I fell, I took my freedom down along with me.

Mama and Papa thought that a marriage was the best way to “straighten me out.” To successfully turn me into the “good lass” they always dreamed about when my freckled face came out of the womb.

They never imagined that their brown-eyed, red-haired wild child would have no intention of living life through their rules. Wanting a job beyond harvesting cabbage and potatoes was considered blasphemy to their lord-loving ears. They would have none of it. A young girl doesn’t need any of that. She shouldn’t even fill her brain with idle drivel such as a “journalist” or whatever those lying-telling heathens called themselves nowadays. No, to be a good lass you must have a stable husband.

No mention of love or happiness, just seventeen-year-old Henry Cooney who was the heir to his father’s successful dairy farm. Who also happened to be in the market for a young bride.

As soon as my parents announced the engagement, I started to plan my escape. My friend Nelly told me of a place where there’s jobs for everyone and dreams run wild. Even some women could get jobs! I was only sixteen years old, but I knew that if I stayed in Ireland I wouldn’t have much of a future left.

So I woke up before dawn with my bag already packed, and I ran out the door without as much as an “I’m sorry” to my mama.

I saw the village approaching. All of the wooden buildings could be seen hiding under the rising sun. And beyond them were the docks; a merchant ship making a special delivery to America would soon become my salvation.

I was forced to stop running because of my worn-out lungs. My knees gave out and I collapsed to the ground. My breathing was so ragged it made the smallest blades of grass quiver against my face. Strands of my hair stuck to my forehead, and I felt that my body was coated in sweat.

All I wanted to do was lay my head on the dewy ground and dream all of this away. But I knew that I couldn’t let my body sink into the earth; it would all get better once my boots touched wooden planks floating away to another world.

Even though the village was fast approaching, I knew that I would never make it to the docks on foot. So I bargained for a ride on the back of a hay cart with an elderly farmer and his two large horses.

The cart smelled of unwashed animals and raw earth, but I still pulled a pile of hay over my body. I couldn’t risk anyone discovering me.

The entire ride there was silent, and not one person passed by. Once we reached the mouth of the village, I paid the man for the ride and thanked him kindly. I looked back at the endless green meadows, and all was calm. No human nor animal disturbed its serenity.

My parents were nowhere in sight.

I took this to mean that maybe they thought letting me go was less work than trying to reform me. Maybe I was the heavy burden finally being lifted off.

I couldn't dwell on it. No matter what my heart said, it didn't matter. This land would no longer be my home.

I ignored all of the people I passed by as I made my way to the docks. The sun was fully set in the sky, towering over the quaint village. I passed by sellers in the market, children playing with stick-figures, and older wives doing the chorley shopping.

I finally stood in front of the boat that would take me to America; it was almost as long as the village, and it was astounding how it managed to stay afloat on the water.

The captain recognized me when I approached him by the entrance of the boat. I had already paid him in advance with dowry money I stole out of my papa's drawer. It was going to go to waste anyway.

He tipped his blue captain's hat at me and I nodded in return. I stood on the deck as the boat pulled away from the dock. The golden sun burned my eyes, and I had to put my arm out to shield my face from its harmful glare.

I looked back at the town as the boat started to move into the vast ocean. In the middle of town, I could just make out two figures frantically talking to merchants. I squinted my eyes, and with a gasp, I realized it was my parents.

I wanted to hide my face, but I knew that it didn't matter now; I was already a ghost to them.

They were getting smaller and smaller as the boat sailed away. But I could just make out my papa talking to a local seller, his arms gesturing wildly, and my mama standing next to him looking out at the docks.

She was so small by this point that I couldn't tell, but it seemed as if she saw me sailing far, far away and just stared at me as long as she could. When the ship was so far gone that only ocean surrounded me, I thought back on the last glimpse of my mama and came to a heart-pounding conclusion.

She never turned to tell my papa that she saw me.

Enticing evils can root flowery footholds in creative souls and minds



Photography

Children of the Pavement

We are children of the pavement,
Black as asphalt burning in the desert sun,
Guided by street signs that tell us to yield,
For what's not seen but yet to come.

We didn't go in when the lights came on,
The white pickets fenced us out,
And left us in the streets to play.
Mistaking neglect for freedom, kisses for love,

Holes in our socks damage the heels we use to run,
Not faster than a speeding bullet,
but rather away from one.
'Cuz there's 6 shots in a glock mag, and I counted 5.

destination ahead



Photography

Clouds

My back is leaning against the wall in the hallway, and my knees are slowly drooping downwards as all of the energy bleeds out of me.

It's over.

I can feel tears start to trickle down my face. I use the sleeves of my hoodie to wipe them away, and then I just press them against my eyelids.

I had no choice in the matter. Someone else dealt the cards that decided my fate.

No one else is in the hallway. Fluorescent lights shine above me and illuminate the dull gray of the tile floor. All up and down the hallway are the residents' rooms. I can hear the soft static of a baseball game coming from the room across from me. Next to the doorway is the number 102 with a torn, yellow smiley face sticker plastered by it. The man inside the room doesn't seem to be doing much smiling as his glazed-over eyes stare at the TV.

Coming to this place every Saturday left me feeling as hollow as all of the elderly people here who lifelessly lay in their beds every day. But coming back to this room again without her in it felt like a mistake. The minute I stepped into that room with its cracked sunflower tint, I felt like 10-year-old me gazing into that cell for the first time. I can still remember how hard my heart dropped when I saw how numb this room looked. With its drained colored walls mocking the cheery atmosphere my parents tried to create by pinning pictures of smiling faces to the bulletin board. They placed pink roses in a vase by the smudge-stained windows that looked out into the nursing home parking lot. A thick TV about twenty years old stood on a table in front of the bed.

"Bed." It was more like the raft that was keeping my aunt afloat. Or the morgue slab that now keeps her shackled down.

But I still remember being 10 years old and feeling so excited to see her as my parents and I walked down the halls of the nursing home for the first time. I hadn't been able to see her for weeks, and I longed to have a reminder of sunshine beating down on green grass as the wind blew through my hair. I didn't see my parents' forlorn expressions until I ran to her room at the end of the hallway.

"Ann, wait!" my father yelled. But my senses were too clouded by adrenaline for me to care.

I yanked open the door and there she was—my aunt Diana. My child-like eyes gazed upon her with confusion. The creature in front of me was not the vibrancy of my aunt—no, there laid a small, helpless person whose skin mirrored that of a worn tablecloth that was once white but now only has a dull shade. Her hair was a lifeless brownish gray that laid across her head in oily waves.

Wires stuck out of her from a hundred different directions. They were all connected to bags and machines that worked like clocks by giving the false sense that there was going to be something to look forward to.

But at the time, all I understood was that auntie was sick, and the only way she could get better was by living in this commune of old people and no longer in her little house on Audrey Lane.

Now, at 15, I couldn't stand in that room without remembering a version of my aunt I never wanted to see.

When I stepped over the threshold, my breathing started to become labored, and my body was slightly swaying back and forth. I heard my parents come in with the cardboard boxes, but I ran out of the room before they could even say a word.

Now I'm here, standing in the hallway of this old folks' home, probably mimicking a scene that the nurses and receptionist have seen so many times before.

They don't even look at me. The young 20-something-year-old lady with auburn hair glances at me for a second, but then she turns back to her computer screen.

I'm no longer alone. The second shift of nurses and CNAs enter the hallways as the first shift leave the residents' rooms to take their lunch breaks. Neither group spares me a glance. The nurses walk around me as they attend to their assigned rooms. I just see the blur of their green scrubs fly by as each one enters a room, then leaves. Enters, then leaves. Enters, then leaves. It's a tedious pattern. It gives off a sense of life, but it's not anymore real than my shadow standing behind me.

I put my arms to my side. I start walking down the corridor to my right, just following the shadows dancing across the walls. I'm not exactly looking for a specific location. I just move my legs lifelessly while I'm occasionally brushed to the side by a bustling nurse.

I stop by a water cooler that's in the lobby of the front entrance. It's the one area that suggests this place has any money. It's adorned with crimson wallpaper and sitting chairs fancy enough for a ballroom.

This place...this place...

I grab a paper cup and fill it with water.

For all its promises, it's nothing but a hollow husk.

I take a sip.

Knowing that my aunt spent the last five years of her life here makes my heart twist.

She used to be happy. She was more vibrant than most newborn babies. Always wearing her big, floppy sunflower hat and lounging around in her backyard. I can still remember how she would look when my parents dropped me off at her house almost every weekend of every summer.

I wouldn't even bother going up to the front door of her little cottage-like house. I would run straight to the white fence that opened up to her backyard, and that's where she would be, lying down on a lounge chair with a necklace of teal beads around her neck, dressed in jeans, flip-flops, and a white blouse.

I would run over to the lounge chair seated right next to hers, and we would both stare up at the sky.

"Now, what world does that cloud come from?" Aunt Diane would ask me as she pointed up at the clouds. We would always play this game where we would pretend each cloud was some sort of magical creature that came into our world by mistake, and we had to describe how it got here. Now that I look back on it, I suppose it was a strange game, but that didn't make it any less ours.

I would always smile so big as I rambled about the hardships these creatures had to face. Being torn apart from their families, getting lost, constantly looking for guidance from strangers, but I would always describe how lonely they are the most.

My aunt would turn her grayish eyes towards me in confusion. "Why are you smiling, Ann? That sounds like a sad story."

"No it's not," I would reply. "It's perfect."

My aunt propped her chin on her hand and tilted her head to the side, making the sun shine against the back of her head.

"Oh?"

I smiled and proclaimed, "The creature gets to go home at the end! So it's like all the bad stuff that happened doesn't really matter!"

My aunt would tilt her head to the sky and laugh, and that laugh left me with a more full feeling than anything else in my real life.

I'm knocked out of my daydream when I see my parents walking towards me, both of them carrying boxes filled with the puzzle pieces that held stories beyond their reach.

I crush the paper cup still in my hand and turn to face them. Aunt Diane was my mom's sister, and ever since my aunt got hit by the car that permanently trapped her in this nursing home, my mom always seemed more...twitchy.

Anytime the phone would ring she would stand up like a shot and snatch it off of the receiver. Anytime we were about to cross the street, my mom would clutch my hand to hers in a vice-like grip, pulling me along with her. She still does it now, even though I'm fifteen.

It seemed like the day my mom got the call from the hospital that Aunt Diane was hit by a car while walking home, her body filled with so many nerves that they would constantly fall out of her, and it seemed like none of us could catch them in time.

My parents now stood in front of me, both not saying anything. My mom had hair to her shoulders, shorter than my aunt's, and since she was ten years younger than her, her hair was still solid brown with only a few gray strands starting to appear. She and Aunt Diane shared the same hazel eyes, except my mother's always had a glint to them that showed she was on edge. Now, her eyelids always seemed to droop so much that I would forget what her eyes even looked like. This is the new version of my mom: reserved.

It's like now every anxiety in her body disappeared, and she would trade anything in the world to get them back.

My dad, on the other hand, always had a look on his face that made it seem like everything that happened was expected. Life could never surprise him, the same way nothing he did could ever be looked at as devil-may-care. He never had any siblings growing up, so Aunt Diane was the closest thing he had to a sister. Even with his balding head and black-framed glasses perched on his nose, people could tell just by looking at the pair that they shared a familiar bond.

When the news broke about Aunt Diane's death, my dad simply stared at my mother who was on the phone with the doctor and walked out of the kitchen.

I'd never seen my dad cry, never imagined that he could, but when he entered the kitchen again about an hour later, the only difference I could see in him was his pink, puffy eyes. It didn't go with his regular calm expression, but neither me nor my mom made any comment on it.

Now, he stood in front of me in this crimson lobby with the same no-surprises expression and the eyes he wore in the kitchen that night two weeks ago.

"I know this is hard," my dad said with a voice as steady as gentle waves lapping on a beach, "but you can take as much time as you need. This won't just go away, and it shouldn't."

I stared at the ground.

"Think of it this way," he continued. "She's in a better place."

My mom and I both flinch.

A better place!? My mind screams. *There is no better place than right here! With us! With me! How can you say she's better off dead? HOW?*

It's true that after the accident my aunt's leg never properly worked again. I had to come with my mom to the hospital every day as she helped my aunt with her physical therapy. It was like watching an infant learn how to crawl. She'd be held between two bars with my mom coaching her on, but her legs would shake with every step.

I would always hold my breath, waiting for the moment when her foot would miss the ground.

Eventually, having to fight a battle every day she knew she would never win caused her to lose the twinkle in her eyes. Combining that with all of the drugs pumping through her veins, it was no wonder her body started to deteriorate. Her immune system began to weaken, and because this place is a powerhouse for germs, she was hit by pneumonia and her lungs drowned.

But she was still here. No matter how shriveled, she was my aunt and she was here. I won't insult her by thinking she's better off dead.

I look up and I'm about to say something when I see my mom's face. I can properly see her eyes and they look shattered. But her posture is held firm, as if trying so hard not to let her emotions betray her.

Shame fills me, and I back down. Instead, I turn and sprint out the lobby's automatic doors.

"Ann!" My mother cries after me. But I don't look back.

I keep running until I get to our blue SUV in the parking lot. I lean my head against the driver's side window.

What's wrong with me? I'm not the only one suffering.

But then again, I didn't get a choice in that did I?

There is no magical world for me to return to. Everything that's happened I'll have to stuff in my pockets and carry with me.

No. No choices for me.

~~~~~

It was a beautiful day for a funeral. My family and I were standing on top of this small, grassy hill at our local cemetery. There were trees peppered alongside the headstones, and it overall felt like an outside church.

I could barely stomach it.

A priest was standing in front of my aunt's coffin, and next to him was the spot where her own slab of rock would stand. Dozens of friends of my aunt stood around the grave in black, and most of them stared at my family with pity. I tried to ignore them and focus on the priest, but his words were all about "love" and "letting go" and how "God welcomes her with open arms" or something.

Meaningless words tied with a meaningless practice. Before this nightmare began, I fully believed in God; now, I can't tell if the Bible is anymore true than the stories about my cloud creatures.

The priest ends his sermon, and the box my aunt lies in slowly descends towards the earth.

But before it can sink any further, my mom steps forward, and tosses something on top of the coffin.

My heart thumps at the same time the object hits the box.

Aunt Diane's teal bead necklace.

I start to shake.

She wore it all the time, every day. She told me a long time ago that she made it when she was sixteen.

"You kept it for that long?" I asked her one day.

"Of course I did," she said with that vibrant smile. She played with the beads around her neck and looked far off into her own world. "Why waste something that isn't ruined?"

I'm back at the grave site, and I wrap my arms around myself. I look at my mom and see that she's already staring back at me. Her face is stoic, but her eyes are more lucid than they have been for the past five years.

My eyes only widen as I give her a nod.

Just like those beads, I'm not ruined; just broken.

I feel the tiniest wisp of a smile.

"*Why are you smiling, Ann?*" My aunt's words echo throughout the trees of the cemetery.

"*That sounds like a sad story.*"

No. It's not.

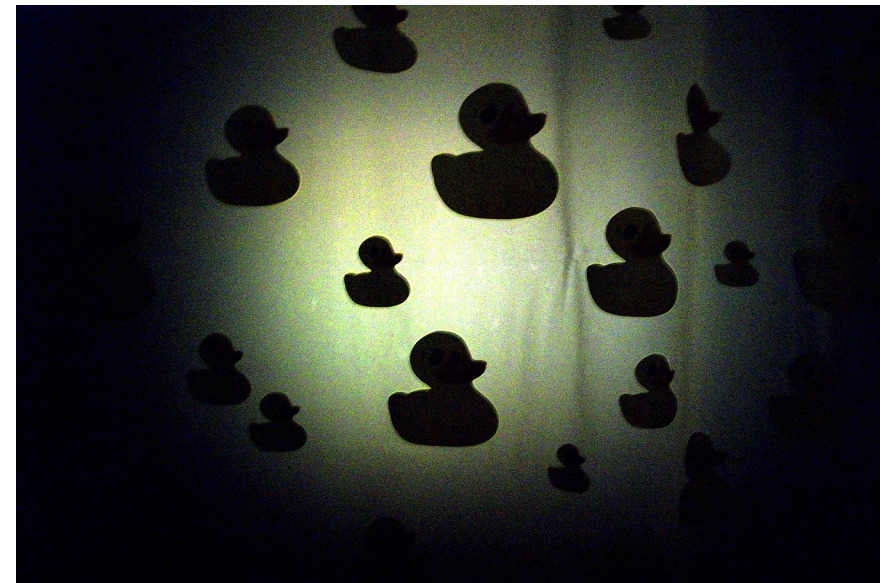
*It's perfect.*

Breaking my mom's gaze, I crouch down and scoop up a pile of dirt in my hand and throw it on top of my aunt's coffin.

I have to be me. I can't stay lost in this world for so long that I forget my way home. Or else I'll just be a waste and not a teal necklace.

I stand back up with the wind in my hair, dirt in my hands, and my face tilted towards the clouds.

## Deep Quack



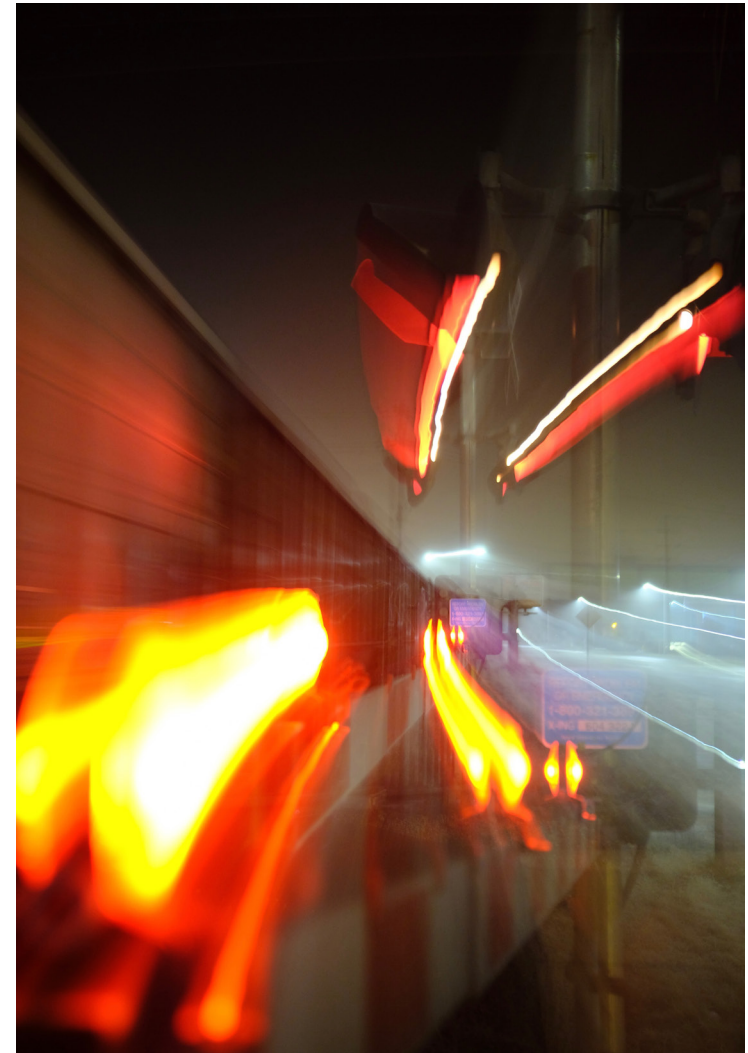
Photography

## Steadying Breaths

In the distance, a red light flashes; its slow pulsing a calm beacon. I am surrounded by peace. A low snoring; sleeping bodies. There is an innocence about rest, the red light knows.

It continues to slowly flash on and off through the night, a warning and a watchful eye. We are safe here as the snow falls and the wind howls. Nature knows no peace, but it often creates beauty. Its fierceness pulls at the landscape as we slowly close our eyes. The red light blinks, too, as the world turns white.

lit:pivot:nflow



Photography



## Thank You

I've started saying, "Thank You" to buildings:  
 I know they can't hear me  
 But I like to appreciate the foundation for supporting all the  
     growing-up I did there.

I've started saying, "Thank You" to buildings:  
 I hope somewhere, something can hear me  
 And knows I appreciate what the inanimate do to keep us alive.

I have grown up in these walls  
 I have changed and evolved more than a building can understand  
     and yet

I thank them for standing  
 All the times I couldn't or didn't or was learning how to walk or...

I've started saying, "Thank you" to buildings:  
 For housing my memories  
 Their skeletons reforming to seal in the dreams I imagined and the  
     secrets I whispered.  
 Proof

*I lived there,  
 I was alive.*

When I am gone,  
 Only these buildings  
 These marbled and brick and wooden mansions will remain.

The walls with old wallpaper peeling;  
 The floors coated in heel-dug divots;  
 The stiff chairs in the hallow basement.

They will remember me  
*(A building cannot remember)*  
 But somehow these will.

I will disappear  
 And these buildings will again become home to a frightened soul,  
 With wide eyes and too much yet to learn.

But if I thank them enough,  
 Maybe someone, somewhere will hear me,  
 And remember that

I exist.



## Companionship #1



Photography

## November

It is November and  
 I am sloppy with my words now  
 I am sloppy with my words  
 I write without purpose now  
 My hands have unlearned creation  
 I write without purpose  
 I am cheeto-fingers  
 branded and unrecognizable  
 I am red cans full of pepsi  
 branded and unrecognizable  
 I think of this body's relationship to itself now  
 I'm unlearning to inhale now  
 I am Lush Bath Bomb residue behind the knees  
 branded and unrecognizable  
 My body is stuffed grape leaves  
 I've been eating cotton and marbled wallpaper  
 My body is eating cotton candy and marbles  
 I am almost-empty starbucks cups left in locked cars  
 branded and unrecognizable  
 I am snow that melted before it stuck now  
 I am neon mountain dew spilled on stranger's sheets  
 branded and unrecognizable  
 My hands have unlearned creation  
 I am licking at the thawed mud of our community garden  
 I am thawing the mud of our community garden  
 I am swallowing hasta leaves and small bones now  
 a carved copper sign reads *Adam grows here*  
 underneath the Tiger Lillies  
 I am screaming through poison oak  
 a sign reads-  
 I am screaming through poison oak now  
*Eve dies here*  
 It is November  
 I am the last last last knife to rust over in the kitchen set  
 I am chewed up Spaghettios and bile in the sink now  
 branded and undeniable.

## The Bridging of a Rainbow

“Alright Nicki, I’ll be back to pick you up when school ends. You’ll have a good first day, right?”

I stared up at my mom through the bangs she tried to pin back with two Hello Kitty clips and wondered how hard I would have to fall on my face in order to go home.

We stood on the steps of Lincoln Elementary School on a cold fall day. I was on the top step while my mom was bent over me, trying to salvage my hair. Kids stared at us as they walked into the building. I felt my cheeks go warm when I saw that none of them had their moms walk them to the door.

My mom clipped the last piece of hair back and smoothed it out.

She smiled as the glow of the sun hit her back. “There, all better.”

I instantly felt bad as I looked at her relieved smile, and then glanced down at the bruises that dotted her arms.

She would always wear something with long-sleeves in order to hide them, but they were always the first things I saw when I looked at her. I didn’t really understand where she got them from. Ever since my dad lost his job, new bruises would appear on her arms every week. It was possible that she had some sort of disease, and she didn’t want to go to the doctor because it would cost too much money. That would probably just upset dad more.

There were no more kids walking up the steps. All of the cars were gone, and it was only me and my mom. She looked down at me one more time before she squeezed me to her chest.

My arms hung at my sides at first because this wasn’t a usual occurrence.

“Have fun today, Nicki. Just...can you do that for me?” she whispered into my hair.

I blinked a couple of times and buried my head into her chest. Having fun shouldn’t be such a difficult task. I know I can do it.

She pulled away from me and, with one last smile, walked to her car. I stayed standing on the top step of the school as I watched her drive away.

I took a deep breath and entered the building. This shouldn’t have felt so daunting; it was just the first day of fifth grade. But now that my parents aren’t as happy as usual, everything felt different.

I walked down the hallways lined with lockers and headed to my classroom. Inside, there were a bunch of desks pushed together to make little groups. There were colorful posters covering the walls, and one wall had a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf brimming with books. All around me were kids either sitting at desks or standing talking to each other. The teacher, Ms. Berry, was seated at her desk in the corner.

I clutched my backpack straps with both hands and went looking for my name on one of the desks. I looked around and eventually found Nicki Dean printed in neat cursive letters in a cluster of five desks.

I sat down and put my backpack between my feet. I was about to open my desk when a blonde girl plopped down in the desk beside me.

“What’s with your clothes?” she asked as her nose scrunched up.

It was Kelly, a girl I’ve had in my class every year. She always blurted out what she wanted to say, but it never really bothered me before. But as I looked down at my big gray t-shirt and baggy cargo pants, her words stung.

Dad losing his job meant that I lost the back-to-school shopping trip mom takes me on every year. The only new thing I got was my purple backpack. I had to use hand-me-downs from my older brother, and they made me look like a potato sack. The Hello Kitty clips were used to try to make me look somewhat decent.

I didn’t answer Kelly as my eyes started to water.

“Are you butch now, or something?” She pestered.

I looked away and crossed my arms.

I just wanted to go home.

“Helloooo? Hello? Why won’t you answer me?” Kelly started to poke my arm.

I looked towards the door and saw that it was wide open. I checked on Ms. Berry but she was busy talking to another boy about how to *not* eat paper.

Maybe I could just...go. No one's looking; no one would care.

*No!* my mind yelled, *Mom would care! She told you to have fun!*

I squeezed my eyes shut and felt a couple of tears fall out.

*What do I do?*

"Kelly, can you stop poking her? I don't think she likes it."

I blinked. I turned my head back towards Kelly and saw a girl with shoulder length brown hair standing behind her.

Kelly rolled her eyes and got up.

"Fine, whatever."

She walked away, and I was left with a girl I'd never seen before.

"You ok?" she asked.

I looked at her and she smiled. The lights above her made her hair shine.

I smiled too.

She sat down to the left of me and said, "Hi, I'm Bonnie."

"I'm Nicki."

She started pulling out glittery pencils out of her backpack. My eyes widened when I saw that she had one for every color in the rainbow.

*How can someone own so many colors?*

After she placed each pencil in a neat row on the right corner of her desk, she turned her head towards me.

I looked away. But my eyes slid back to those pretty glittery pencils. I didn't have anything pretty to show off on my desk. Mom had to look all over the house to find enough pencils I could take to school with me. Some of them looked fine, but others were sharpened down to stubs. The yellow paint had started to turn brittle, and every time I picked one up I was afraid it would snap in half.

Bonnie didn't seem to have this problem. Everything she had with her seemed...shiny. Like it was straight out of a factory.

For some reason, that thought made me not like her as much anymore.

"Do you want one?"

I looked back up at her. Her eyes were so intent on mine that I almost flinched.

"What?" I asked.

"Do you want one of my pencils? I can give one to you." She grinned, and I shifted in my seat.

"Well, I mean...you don't have to. I wouldn't want to ruin... the, uh...rainbow you made."

*Now you sound stupid!*

"No, it's fine," She gestured towards the pencils. "I have more at home."

At her words a sour knot formed in my stomach. I decided I didn't want to make myself look any dumber and chose a sparkly blue pencil.

I placed it on the right corner of my desk and began to smile. But when I compared it to Bonnie's row of colors, my pencil seemed out of place on the empty desk.

I was going to push it back on Bonnie's desk when Ms. Berry clapped her hands and announced that class was starting.

I sat forward and listened to Ms. Berry introduce herself and hope that everyone had "a wonderful summer!"

*I guess spending less time with my dad could be considered wonderful.*

Ms. Berry finished her speech and told everyone to introduce themselves to their tables.

I didn't know the boy drawing a Pokémon on his desk to my right, so I decided to start with Bonnie.

She held out her hand the way adults introduce each other and proudly stated, "Hello, I'm Bonnie Hummel and I just moved here from Oakville, Massachusetts. Since you're the only one I know here so far, will you be my best friend?"

I stared at her outstretched hand. She continued to show her full-set of white teeth to me as I sat there speechless.

I've never had somebody ask me to be their best friend before. I mean, there are kids that I play with during recess, and we talk to each other during class, but...the title "best friend" never seemed to fit them.

*What do you do with a best friend? Are the rules different? Do I only play with her at recess? Do I have to buy her presents?*

I looked back at the pencil she gave me, and I hated how lonely it looked separated from all of its friends. Fidgeting, I touched the clip in my hair. I yanked it out and let the wispy strands fall onto my face.

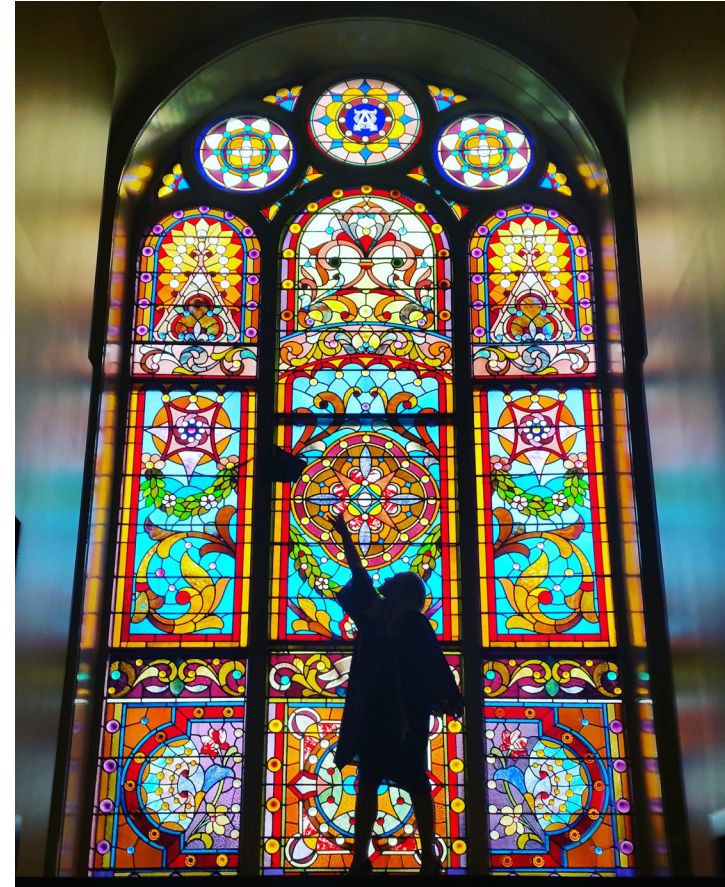
Bonnie's arm started to shake from exhaustion, so I grabbed her hand and shook it jerkily.

"Sure. I've never had a best friend. You can be my first."

Bonnie beamed and let go of my hand. Ms. Berry started talking again, and we both sat forward.

As Ms. Berry continued her speech on classroom rules, Bonnie slid a yellow glittery pencil onto my desk.

## Graduated Character



Photography



## What a Fat Girl Wants

What this fat girl wants is to not be constantly reminded of her weight. Yes, I am aware that I am obese and I should not be this large for my stature. I know how it feels to be pressured from every corner to do something about it already. I am aware of the constant drag of having every conversation with a doctor revolve around my weight. I know all too well how it feels to have someone gaze at my face for a few seconds before staring at my wide and chubby thighs. My body is constantly depicted as an “epidemic,” and people don’t want to be associated with this plague. I am defined by a number derived from a scale, and people tend to see that number excessively all over my body before getting to know me.

What this fat girl wants is to not have people in restaurants and cafeterias constantly stare at her dinner plate. They do not need to spectate each forkful I put in my mouth or the portion sizes. I do not have a huge sweet tooth; I cannot stand the taste of chocolate and several other types of candy, nor the carbonation in soda. Never mind a severe tree nut allergy that prevents me from going to bakeries, ice cream shops, and various restaurants. So I don’t eat out much. I love almost all fruits and vegetables, but it’s strange for the spectators to be bewildered by a fat person eating a salad instead of a greasy slice of pizza.

What this fat girl wants is to feel comfortable in a clothing store. I’m tired of having to constantly go through rack after rack of clothes, only to find that each top is only available in a size extra small, small, and medium. The general scenario for trying on clothes seems to be that it’s too tight, or the color brings more emphasis to my body fat, or my body type can’t pull it off. Plus, looking at myself in the fitting room mirror further mocks me. I can only pull so much off in terms of styles, while girls who are not obese have infinitely more options.

What this fat girl wants is to forget painful moments of her past. I never wanted to get beaten up with a baseball bat by a group of guys in middle school for being a “fat-ass.” They wanted to beat the fat out of me so badly, only for bruises with hues of blue and black to swell all over. I started to struggle with my weight when I was in elementary school. I developed large hips and curves, then gained more weight over the years. I was constantly harassed and bullied for my weight, and those memories are being frequently repressed into the back of my mind. People find me to be an easy target to shoot at, especially when I’m a large one.

What this fat girl wants is to not be underestimated. When a professor informed me that fat people are incapable of writing and I do not have potential as a fat person in this society, it was something that I internalized deeply. But it also added more fuel to the fire, and that remark drove me to prove them wrong. Hey, who knew that a fat girl like me was capable of writing and being literate?

What this fat girl wants is to never see advertisements in the media about the ideal body type. I’m confused by the encouraging ads you see on TV about loving who you are for your own shape and size. They show thin women, hinting that there is something wrong about having short legs, stomach rolls, or a large chest. I do not need society telling me something that I am already aware of, and I do not wish to have to compare myself to those beauty standards that I have internalized all my life.

What this fat girl wants is to not feel so insecure and angry with herself. I find myself even less attractive physically, and at this rate, my self-esteem is shot. It’s hard not to feel inferior to those who are skinnier or have less weight to deal with. I can’t even smile when I get a glimpse of myself in the mirror anymore because I know that I’m fat, and I cannot completely conceal it with make-up or shapewear. I hate being the fat elephant in the room and taking up so much unneeded space. I hate having to still fight the mirror. The scale. The bitch of a voice inside my head that creeps in and tells me that I am not good enough, that I’m not beautiful. The anger I have for myself is for not being obsessed with going to the gym or eating salads, but also for ever expecting anything different to change about my body when I wake up in the morning.

Will this fat girl ever be able to get what she wants? Not a chance. I will always have insecurities about my body. There will be people who stare and mock my body. There will still be times where tears stream down my face as my reflection shows in front of the mirror. There will still be advertisements of photoshopped models popping up on the cover of magazines and on the T.V. screen.

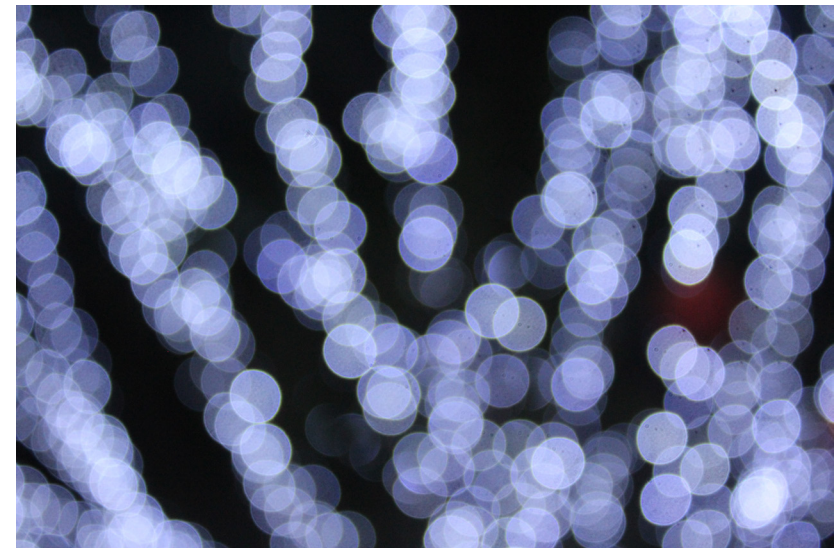


## FOCUS I

To the countless young girls and women who feel insecure about their body type or beauty, you are beautiful! I have walked in your shoes and have endured your pain. It will come to an end at some point, but you need to be proud of who you are and let the world know what YOU want. Do not change yourself because of what society wants you to be. Do not change yourself because society tells you that a size 16 dress is too large to wear. Do not change yourself because society tells you that a flat chest is not pretty enough. Do not change yourself because society tells you that chubby thighs should be covered at all times. Do not change yourself because society tells you that starving yourself is the only resort to losing weight and keeping it off. Love yourself regardless of your body type and regardless of what the scale tells you.

To my peers who bullied me in the past or still bully me to this day, I just want to thank you. You gave this fat girl something to cry about, something to think about, and something to write about. It is because of your ignorance and belittlement that I'm willing to share my story and that I'm still standing, all 176 pounds of me!

The only hope is that with increased awareness, medical advancements, and human empathy, people will learn to understand the pain that countless girls endure with body shaming. But for me, the damage has been done. I will likely stay uncomfortable in my own skin, even though I know that it's just a number derived from a scale.



Photography

## Nicotine

I'll spend my life whispering I love you until you fall asleep  
 Candles smell better burning in afternoon thunder  
 Windows half-cracked splashing on your rain-speckled cheeks  
 You say you know me through half-tilted half-smiling lips

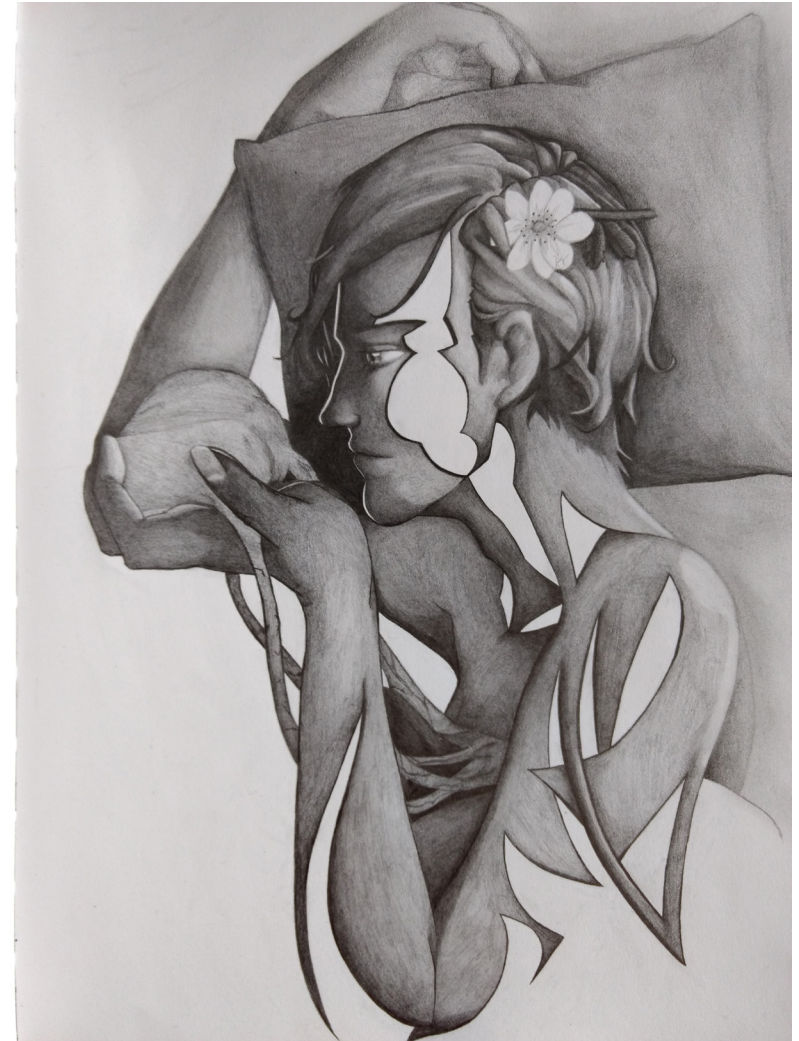
Candles smell better burning while it's evening and raining  
 You always come home covered in a cloud of jasmine  
 You say you know me through half-cracked half-smiling lips  
 I keep meaning to switch from nicotine to green tea

You always smell like jasmine and coffee and threshold  
 Happiness finds a home between the curves of your hips  
 I keep meaning to switch from nicotine to honey  
 I trace the hills of your ribs kissing every freckle every dimple

Happiness finds a home between the curves of your lips  
 I mark your heart with lilacs and muddy fingers  
 I trace the hills of your shoulders kissing every freckle every dimple  
 Everything you touch tastes like brown sugar blessings

I mark your heart with mourning  
 Windows half-cracked splashing on your freckled cheeks  
 Every rainwater drip of your body tastes like lost continents  
 I'll spend my life whispering I love you until you fall asleep

## I - Mortality



Graphite Pencil

## The Curtains

I am the lavender-tipped nails of the girl I love  
 she traces the patterns of my palms  
 she tells me you're worth more than this  
 I open my mouth  
 I tell her you're wrong

I am boiled in a big pot with daisies and dandelions  
 my skin is burning pollen and bitter  
 petal by petal dip me into your coffee  
 rip me apart between your teeth  
 gentle gentle until I am soft enough  
 to swallow I'll golden your skin  
 let you shine like the sun

I am the lushness of lilac bubble bath  
 I am the wet dripping of morning dew  
 on blades of grass  
 I am the press of the sun in those moments  
 when the sky is orange fire  
 and the heat comes from underneath  
 your summer skin

I am the marigold hair of my childhood friend  
 that hung low over his eyes until the night  
 he died

I am the velvet petals of absinthe roses  
 I am the prick of a green thorn coming out from  
 deep under your skin

I am the foxgloves  
 you mistook for lamb's ears  
 and swallowed whole  
 I am the Lily of the Valley tattooed  
 onto my arm for my mother  
 permanent black inked-out-edges

I am the way you flew through the garden as a kid  
 holding neighbor-kid hands ring-around-the-rosy-ing  
 and didn't understand what it means to snap a stem

I am the floral patterned curtains that hung  
 in my grandmother's living room until the day  
 she died  
 my brothers and I watched from the couch  
 as our grandfather took them down  
 and put them in the linen closet  
 that always smelled like potpourri  
 I don't think those curtains ever saw the sun again  
 but I can still remember the bright petals dancing  
 in the light  
 like they understood that they can be  
 beautiful again someday

## Aththi

I am standing in a Hobby Lobby parking lot, thinking of Aththi. The sky is an enormous blue, cross-stitched with jet trails from planes so high that I have no chance of hearing them. The light, though, is the same gold that gilds Aththi when he walks down the drive to close the gate for the evening. Time zone math insists that this event has already happened eleven hours ago, eighteen thousand kilometers away, but let me now imagine him, standing at the gate. In the clutches of a Rock Island winter I am swathed in a heavy jacket and heeled boots; in the heat of a tropical evening, he is wearing a light short-sleeved shirt with navy stripes around the chest, and a sea-blue sarong shot through with amber. If it is a good day, he will have remembered to wear flip flops. I am waiting for an Uber so I can get back to campus before nightfall; he is waiting for time to pass. He does this by watching the road. In fourteen hours, when I am hitting snooze on the alarm at 6am, he will do this all over again.

Aththi is a Sri Lankan kinship term. It is a variation of Aththa. It is the equivalent of Grandpa, or Pops, or Gramps, and it is what I call my father's father. My father's father is Rahula Ranaraja, and there is a difference between this man and the one I know as Aththi.

The Germans invaded Poland when Rahula Ranaraja was four months shy of fifteen, growing up in a village called Yatiwawale in the town of Kandy, Ceylon, which was then part of the British Empire. During the single Japanese air attack on Ceylon, he was not yet eighteen. By the time the Axis forces surrendered, he was almost old enough to drink.

Rahula was thirty-eight during the Cuban Missile crisis and had fathered the first of three children in Kandy, which by now had become Sri Lanka. When the Black July riots ignited in the capital of Colombo in 1983, kicking off a bloody civil war, he was fifty-nine; when that civil war ended, he was eighty-five.

In between that time, he would welcome four of five grandchildren, survive a bout of dengue fever, and watch news footage of a tsunami strike his homeland's coasts four days after his eightieth birthday.

When burglars invaded Rahula's home on the night of March 2nd, 2013, he was eighty-nine. As he stumbled out of sleep and came bellowing out onto the upstairs landing, one of them held a sword aloft. My grandmother Sita, then seventy-seven, stepped between them, fragile as a bird and steel-eyed. They survived.

When his eldest son lost his battle with cancer and died in the dawn of January 3rd, 2017, Rahula was ninety-three, Sita eighty-one. They survived.

The Uber driver who picks me up is a twenty-eight-year-old soldier named Larry. He doesn't know where Sri Lanka is, but he asks if I'm going home for Christmas. "Hell yes," I say. "It's my granddad's birthday." I don't know why I use "granddad." Grandfather is too formal; I don't want to sound like a snob. Pops would mark me out as a fraud. Larry buys it, because he doesn't know about Aththi. He swings on the highway and asks, "Yeah? How old's he gonna be?"

"Ninety-four," I say.

Larry whistles. "Damn. He must have seen some things."

People have suggested on multiple occasions that I should interview Dr. Rahula Ranaraja. These people have included my mother, the gaggle of aunts who belong to every Sri Lankan family, and my grandfather's surviving siblings. Their main argument is, "He has so many stories to tell." I do not doubt this. As a teenager, I devoured Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Living To Tell The Tale and One Hundred Years of Solitude* and envied the way he spun stories from the memories of his illustrious family.



Certainly my grandfather's life holds more than enough material to fill a couple of tomes. The problem, however, is that I do not know Rahula Ranaraja, who was seventy-three when I was born. The person I do know is Aththi, who has been there since the beginning.

The family tier to which I belong is predominantly female. Rahula Ranaraja has four granddaughters; the eldest two are my cousins, who have never lived more than a week in our town. The youngest, my sister, is ten, barely a person yet. My brother is *the* grandson, *the* male heir—and yet, he never has been. I never wanted him to be, because I wanted the role of Aththi's protector, right hand, heir.

There is something very naive about a ten year old girl trying to protect an eighty-three-year-old patriarch who has seen civil war, disease, and death. But there I was, wearing my grandfather's gumboots and his green gardening hat, glaring fiercely at the villagers who sloped up to the house to ask him for favours on Sundays after temple.

The older we both got, the more real these protections became. Aththi liked to drink a glass of whiskey every day at lunch, accompanied with a cream cracker or some wild boar; at family gatherings, he matched the younger men drink for drink. There was a time between him becoming unable to hold his liquor and my father forbidding him from drinking when he would sneak an extra two glasses, then leave the table before dessert was served and weave his way from our house to his. I would be dispatched in his wake by any number of aunts to make sure that he made it safely to bed. I was the one who served him a plate of food when he lost interest in picking out curries for himself, who kept him company at birthday parties where all the other invitees were young parents who called him "Dr. Ranaraja," who trailed him on those walks to the gate. Maybe it wasn't my job; certainly the idea of doing such things for boyfriends or husbands repulses me. But Aththi never asked me to do any of it, and this makes all the difference.

And there were times when it was possible to not take care of him. When he still read newspapers, he would sit in a wicker chair on the red clay verandah with the paper held up to his face. I would delight in sneaking up on him and punching the paper in. I would jump around corners at him, holding my fists up in front of me, yelling "En guard!" I would dance in front of the television during the last over of a T20 cricket match, waving my arms. To be frank, I was a hooligan. Yet Aththi met these attacks with a guffaw, a "You're a big bully," and a "Go away, will you?" and his tone never changed—it was never exasperated or angry or unkind.

He was unfazeable. He was the one I'd yell for when my rootlings in the overgrown garden unearthed silvery, sharp-snouted vipers or cobras who shot their heads up over the bushes like black ladles. The cobras could be persuaded to slither away with some decently-aimed kerosene oil, but when vipers were concerned Aththi fetched the axe. I would always shriek as the first blow fell, imagining that deadly snout darting at his bare feet in their rubber slipper, but Aththi did not miss.

It was this ability to see animals as animals, as creatures and nothing more, which permitted him to let his purebred German Shepherd starve to death when I was fourteen. Tracy was a gentle, skittish dog who craved affection and protein but was fed instead on the leftovers from my grandparents' meals, which consisted mostly of rice and vegetables. Starving, she scavenged in nearby garbage dumps with the village mongrels, where she ingested enough plastic to infiltrate her intestines. For three months she drooled everywhere, pleading with soft amber eyes for affection, but my brother and I refused to pet her, scared by our grandmother's warnings of all the diseases she could have. Then she died.

Of course this sounds inhumane. But in a country where people starve to death the exact same way every day, animal rights are a tertiary concern. My father refused to intervene in his father's household over a dog of all things, and that was that.



I was six years older than Tracy. I picked her out of her litter when my parents decided to give Aththi a puppy, and narrowly avoided being mauled by Tracy's ferocious mother. And yet I do not resent Aththi for her perfectly avoidable death, which to many onlookers, my mother included, was cruel, callous behaviour from a retired doctor. I'm sure I was shattered at the time, especially since I didn't yet have a dog "of my own." But then, it's hard to resent a man who's had to cremate his first-born son.

When my uncle died, my mother stopped the hired van five minutes before we reached his former home in the capital to tell Aththi why we were really going there. When they brought the body in, in a swirl of chanting and incense and weeping and white lilies, I latched onto Aththi's arm, ready for him to collapse. Instead he took my hand and placed it on my dead uncle's forehead.

Two years later, the memory brings no grief, only rising bile. I am numb at funerals, detached from the dead and the grieving alike, which is not ideal at three-day Buddhist mourning ceremonies, where tears flow like a devalued currency. Taking care of Aththi gave me something to do that was far easier than comforting my grieving cousins or my shattered aunt. I bullied Aththi into eating plates of food and slept in the same guest room bed so I could stumble after him when he inevitably forgot where he was and who had died. When it was decided to send him back home on the second day of mourning and keep him away till the cremation, I leapt at the chance to accompany him, and everyone agreed that I would be most useful "managing Aththi." He was how I proved that I was doing my duty by the family.

Aththi's memory loss worsened after my uncle died. There had been signs before—he couldn't remember the date, or when he'd last seen us, or if he'd eaten—but after that January, it sped up. He stopped watching the cricket matches and the news. His feet blackened because he stopped showering. He stopped smelling of the garden he tended, of manure and mud and the jungle, and began smelling of sour milk and musty sheets, of old age.

When I went off to college in August 2017, he didn't stop asking where I'd gone until November. My maternal grandfather died in April 2018, but Aththi has yet to stop asking when he's going to stop by and visit.

I have not spoken to Aththi since August. He doesn't write letters. He doesn't understand what the Internet is. He doesn't have a mobile phone. My father and I have planned occasionally to set up a FaceTime call with him, but these plans have thus far fallen through. Even to me, this sounds weak. How can I not be doing more to connect with him, beyond telling Uber drivers like Larry that I am going home to see him? How can I not be rushing to catalogue these fleeting months with Rahula Ranaraja, which for all we know may be the last ones he has? How can I not be asking for the perspective of a man who has lived nearly a century on problems unique to my time—the political crisis in Sri Lanka, global warming, Donald Trump?

The truth is that I'm terrified. The truth is that no man has lived through precisely what Rahula Ranaraja has been through and yet what I know about him are only the barest bones of facts. The truth is that Aththi has always been there, helping me track hog deer through the garden and needing to be helped up the stairs after that third glass of arrack. The truth is that without him, I cease to be certain things. Caretaker, hooligan, favourite granddaughter of the family patriarch.

The truth is that without him I have one less reason to go back home, and I'm not brave enough to face anything that reminds me that he may not be around much longer. So I wait for a flight book months in advance, imagining the day at the end of three days on one of those planes in the enormous blue. I will march into the old house on the hill, bellowing, "O *grandfather!*" and Aththi will be there, in his wicker armchair in front of the silent TV, guffawing and asking me where I came from this time.

## Momento Madame



Photography

## i saw a cardinal today and it made me think of you

memories are born from the mundane/*a song comes on the radio*: you stood onstage, the music carrying you somewhere else/*the street lamps flicker*: you spent twilight on the driveway, the chalk-drawing dust coating your palms // but those chalk sketches disappeared with rain and so did you/ melting away  
with each

additional hospital visit/*rain drips down the windowpane*: you were curled on the bathroom floor and allowing tears to fall/*a yellow rosebud begins to wilt on its stem*: you lead the funeral procession, there was no trying to escape reality/you were gone // you are gone/if i search, i sometimes catch glimpses of you/i put on my pointe shoes: i remember your first pirouette/i smile: i almost look like you // **almost** is the closest we will ever be: the cardinal has flown away.

## Internationals

The fire alarm makes me cry. It's seven minutes past two, a Thursday morning deep in winter. We stagger from bed, shove our feet into boots unsocked, shrug on coats and zip pockets over our passports. The dorm probably won't burn down today, but better safe than sorry. We stand in the wind long enough for our clothes to turn damp; by the time they turn off the alarms and clear us to go back inside, my fingers are frozen to the stiff maroon paper in my pocket, the embossed gold letters pricking my skin like electricity. We traipse back up the stairs, mumbling curses and goodnights. All I want is to collapse back into bed, but first I have to put my passport back in the lockbox that my roommate and my best friend know to open only in case of emergency. It's just another fire alarm in the winter, but being an international means I'm just a little more likely to ask, as I finally crawl under the comforter, "What am I even doing here?"

\*

'Internationals' encompasses dozens of countries and students, and I am no way professing to speak for all of us. That way lies madness. I have no statistics; what I do have is an arsenal of experiences. For example, I've been inside a lot of international dorm rooms. More often than not, our walls are papered with postcards and posters, not heavy fabric tapestries and chunky Greek letters. They serve the same purpose—to make these walls look less like a public airport lounge—but transporting them doesn't cost us precious extra pounds. For the same reason, the clothes in our closets are either minimal or cheap. You can only fit so much into two suitcases and three storage boxes, and that struggle between donating five hundred garbage bags of clothes at the end of the year or paying a hundred dollars for extra checked luggage is always painful. These rooms are not short on photos though, and there is usually a flag.

I've sat through enough in-class ice breakers and peer group meetings to know that not everyone understands why what we have on our walls matters. Why "international" is something we both cling to and shrink from. A surefire sign of this misunderstanding is how domestic students always hone in on is International Orientation. Time and again I've heard the question, "How can we form connections with internationals when they get here a week before us?" Ostensibly, by the time domestic students get here, we internationals have already formed our own impenetrable cliques and groups; some of us are even so familiar with campus that we're not interested in the orientation activities designed to force these bonds. Apparently, domestic-international connections can only happen if the two groups survive the chaos of Orientation and Welcome Week *simultaneously*.

What those who decry separate orientations don't understand is that International Orientation is a life line. It's what we cling to when we're thrown into the rest of our graduating class and realize that being outnumbered by something like eight to one doesn't really guarantee you a lot of help. Among the other internationals, though, we're not alone. We trawl Walmart, Target and South Park Mall together, finding safety in numbers from the suspicion that inevitably comes our way. We learn the strange ways of the dining hall and how to navigate the bus system. We make connections with people who *get it*. Of course the American friendships come, albeit a little later, and we cherish them, share bits of ourselves and our histories and our homelands. But sometimes the only way to get through a situation is with people who feel the exact same kind of unbelonging that you do.

During my freshman year, the internationals of the class of 2021 took over an entire table in the dining hall. The same way the track team sits along the bench seats overlooking the stairs, we sat in the L-shaped booth in front of Wild Thymes. No matter what hour of the day it was, you could always count on the internationals eating there, killing time there, sleeping there. Around a single table we could be Sri Lankan, South African, Dutch and Ethiopian all at once. Of course we had other haunts, before and since, but that was our common ground. Over those tables I have made colorful threats, had scintillating conversations, given bad advice, shared sorrow and made confessions of love. Most of this is only possible because of how many of us there are.

\*

There are people who listen to our narratives and tell us that we're lucky to be over here. These are parents, old school friends who didn't make it out, counselors and other internationals. In a heartbeat, we list the wars, famines, natural disasters, rising inflation rates, falling exchange rates, stifling social norms, dead-end jobs and worthless qualifications that justified our leaving. We know we made a choice to come here. But for every disaster we bring to the dinner table we have fifty other things that it killed us to leave behind. Architecture that preceded the colonizers. Ancient, intricate languages. Temples that have stood for millenia. Streets bright with bicycles and cafes filled with conversation. Game reserves stretching towards the sun. Ancestors. Blue oceans and ripe jungles and perpetual summer. Behind our eyes entire other worlds are locked away, because looking back on them would hurt too much, make this harder than it is already.

Of course we cling. We haul familiar food over the borders—strange dried fruit, local biscuits, cinnamon and honey and fragrant tea. We cook clumsily, setting off fire alarms, filling the dorms with scents of seafood and dough. Every one of our closets has a traditional outfit, sequins and silks tucked among the jackets, and every phone has numbers that we can't call, but keep anyway. We reach instinctively for the salt shaker and retreat to our dorms to eat Chinese takeout with our hands. We reach back for our past. All the time. But we also know that right now, we have to live in America. In this place of strange blue winters and roads without sidewalks and moments of unbelonging, where we have a few solid allies, but also a motley, fractious community of people so very like and unlike us.

\*

If we have books on our shelves, they are whittled down to favourites, beloveds it would gut us to lose. All the rest have been jettisoned. And if we have chosen people to love, they are like that too. We don't have time for many, so we keep only those for whom we would cross oceans. This is the measure of our love. We've already done the impossible—crossed the continents, braved the immigration lines, set our lives back half a day and yet sped them up until every minute counts—and so if we are willing to do this for you, again and again, then you must mean very much.

For the most part, though, the people we love get it, because they are like us. They recite suitcase dimensions when they go shopping and keep their passports in lockboxes. They understand that we can't really settle down in this little town, because our passports are stamped with an expiration date, and someday soon we'll have to catch a flight out, and leave.





## Hellish Work

I'm not kidding when I say that my newest job is a nightmare. It all started when I showed up here, and they hired me on the spot. Literally, I showed up the first day, and within minutes they said, are you Lila? And I said, yep, that's me. Didn't even know I was reporting in for a job at that point. They didn't care about that, though. They just gave me a rusted metal name tag with the name Lisa and told me to follow this young man – Jason, I think? Or maybe Jared? I don't know, I haven't seen him since. There are so many people here and you lose track after a while. Most get here by that rickety deathtrap they call a boat, and that brings in more people to crowd the place. Point is, I don't remember his name, but I know he didn't look very happy. Then again, most aren't happy at first, but you get used to it. Eventually.

Anyway, we went out the back door, and he handed me an apron, boots, and a pair of gloves. Don't lose those gloves, he said. He also handed me a shovel that had seen better days, caked in dried, reddish muck. Once I got the gear on, we wandered into that massive field out back, the one that seems to go on forever. I've never seen any boundary lines, so it might not have an end. Wouldn't surprise me. That first day wasn't that bad at the start though because the sky was a more beautiful red than any other after -- more of a soft red-pink than the usual bloody crimson. That day looked like a sunset. Too bad we don't have those down here; they'd liven up the place for sure.

But the smell, though, is just awful. It's worse than the smell of it back home before we showed up in this god-forsaken place. It comes from those giant troughs, and our jobs are to spread the shit all over the field – I'm sure you know how manure works. Usually they use equipment, but they don't make it easy on you here. And we work nonstop since we don't need sleep or food here. I mean, we do need to eat and whatnot, but it's not like we can. You know how the Greeks had that Tantalus guy, standing in the river all day, unable to drink or eat even though there was low-hanging fruit over his head.

That's us, except the Underworld is probably worse, or so they say; nobody's standing in water forever or pushing a boulder uphill here at least, and if you go there, you've got no chance of coming back supposedly. I doubt that's any consolation, but you take what you can get. But yeah, scooping manure in Hell is the shittiest job I've ever had, living or dead, and now I'm stuck with it forever. At least I've got company.

## Lock of Hair

this lock of hair on  
 my head curls and  
 waves over my  
 shoulder strokes  
 it like a tender  
 lover springs  
 with a turn  
 of the head  
 lock of hair  
 the color of  
 a dying leaf  
 honeycomb  
 70s cabinets  
 4pm sun  
 a penny  
 glints  
 and  
 crimps  
 rises  
 and  
 falls  
 a chest  
 asleep  
 catches  
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## Of red in the snowy day



Photography

## The Neighbor

I must have been 7 or 8 at the time. It was a typical crisp fall day in the Midwest, with the changing leaves and long sleeve sweaters. We had just been dismissed from school, and after one bus transfer and an hour-long ride around the city, it was our turn. We were the last stop.

We trudged off of the bus, and after a short walk through the lobby we were steps away from home. The hallway stretched in front of us, illuminated by various lights propped up by the ceiling. Our home was at the end of the ground floor, so we proceeded passed the other doors, each with its own alloy number assigned to it, until we came to a stop at number "7." When I turned the knob to the door it wouldn't budge. I knocked as loud as I could, in hopes there was someone inside who would hear me. After a few moments of silence, I rummaged through my backpack for the key I had been entrusted with for times like this, but quickly found my efforts were in vain. I was always disorganized. My younger sister and I stood for a few minutes in confusion, as fear festered inside us like a bad case of the stomach flu. She scolded me for forgetting the key, I retorted she should have reminded me, but it ceased to change the result. We were locked outside of our home, and the brisk temperatures from outside had somehow seeped into the hallway we were standing in, causing our discomfort to grow. Luckily after a few minutes, our neighbor who had been approaching from the hall saw us, and asked us what was wrong. I didn't know her, yet I felt compelled to answer. What else was I to do? She was young, probably in her mid- to late- twenties, with long brunette hair, and a tattoo that coiled around her upper left arm. She didn't appear to be an immediate risk. She told us her name, and I know it started with an A. Andrea? Or was it Angela? Either way, I informed her about our predicament, and she pondered to herself for a moment, probably debating on whether taking in the two children from apartment 7 was a good idea. I'm sure she had heard of us before. Everyone in the complex seemed to. It wasn't large, only expanding three stories and the walls were paper thin. She asked when our parents were coming home, and I told her I wasn't sure.

Finally, after a few seconds of internal monologue, the neighbor decided to let us enter her apartment, just until one of our parents got home. I agreed to the terms and gestured for my sister to follow. We entered our neighbor's apartment and she instructed us to sit on the couch and watch TV. We immediately took notice that she had cable, as she cycled through the vast list of channels on the screen, "What channel would you like to watch?" she asked in a gentle tone.

At first I was a little confused about being posed such a question. Choices were a luxury, and in some paradoxical way created a dilemma. There was no indecision involved in selecting PBS and watching the regularly scheduled program like we did everyday after school. Now she was asking me to choose, putting me on the spot. I eyed my sister nervously in an attempt to solicit an answer from her but her lips remained sealed. Finally after a few excruciating seconds passed, I broke the silence by blurting out the word "cartoons."

The neighbor seemed pleased to finally receive a response. Her fingers began dancing on the surface of the remote until she arrived at the kids section on the menu. "There's Disney, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon," she read aloud as she scrolled. Her attention returned solely to me, as clearly I was the one designated to be making these decisions. The gears turned in my brain for a few brief moments. "Cartoon Network," I said in almost too eager a manner. It was the only channel I knew about from my days back at the babysitter. After she selected the channel, she asked if we were hungry or thirsty and I declined. Although I hadn't ate since lunch earlier in the day, I never did like eating other people's food.

"Are you sure?" was her response.

For the first time she looked at my sister. "Are you?"

She shook her head.

## supernatural

The neighbor, who seemed almost baffled and unconvinced by this, sank into her recliner, and began watching the screen. “Okay, well let me know if you change your mind.”

As we were sitting on the couch I began to wonder how much this neighbor knew about us. She was only a door away, so surely she had exclusive insight to apartment 7. On the outside, the neighbor was composed, and watched us like our babysitters had in the past. But who knows what was going on inside her brain. Maybe she did it because she felt sorry for us. I’m sure she had heard the nightly rumblings from apartment 7. Or maybe she did it simply because it was the right thing to do. Who knows? Does it even matter?



Photography

# Re:Wild

Hello Wild,

Sorry I continue to ignore  
your attempts  
at contact.

Sorry,  
I will  
continue to do so.

I am human,  
not animal.

I am  
animal,  
because

I am human.

Instinct bred  
into me.  
Instinct beaten  
out of me,

by my own doing,  
or by the world,  
because it tells  
me what to do,  
because humans  
should not

snarl,  
cower,  
bite,  
lash out.

but humans can

scream,  
cry,  
snip,  
lash out.

Sorry Wild.  
you try to pull me  
in  
every  
second  
of my life.

but I must  
restrain that wild  
refrain.

Please stop  
dragging the  
snarl,  
cower,  
and bite  
out of me,

or I  
will

lash  
out,

like a human,

because  
I am.

Not wild.



## Second Seal: King



Ink and Water Color

## Second Seal: Queen



Ink and Water Color

## Llena Cabeza

Cuando no vas  
adonde te gusta  
cuando te gusta;  
Cuando sueñas  
más rápido  
que logras;  
Cuando no eres  
quien quieres;

Qué pena  
para mi  
llena cabeza.

Cuando deseas  
lo que no debes  
desear;;  
Cuando pecados  
no pueden  
reconciliarse;;  
Cuando amas  
y no le dices;;

Qué pena  
para mi  
llena cabeza..

Sueño de gritos  
sueño de susurros,  
me llamas con las  
mismas palabras,  
las que no puedo recordar  
en día.

Dolor de la piedra  
dolor de la mente,  
me rompes con las  
mismas palabras,  
las que sólo escapo  
por noche.

Qué circunstancia  
inexorable.  
Qué sueños  
amigables..

Qué pena  
para mi  
llena cabeza...



# light of shame



Photography

# GLORY II



Photography

# Just Cycling Through/the Spinning Earths and Their Seasons/the Twirling Moon Tween the Tree Limbs

Please tell me now/will you  
travel through/river valleys  
with an eye/for the night hawk  
and an ear/for the frog talk, that is, the rain

and sing, sing “love,  
come to me,” sing “love, I am here”  
sing “love, have you too risen with the rain?”  
and “where have you come to be?”

Flee  
all you imposters of longing  
have you sung L. Sylvaticus’s song?  
have you heard the  
exasperated  
breath of the trees and worms?  
been months since their last drink  
I hear them sing to the clouds  
calling in the rain  
to come  
down  
like  
spores  
from mushroom  
cap clouds this world  
is never quiet with  
its rain pounds  
thunder cracks/and claps you on the back  
rattles your rusting and split/screen door  
pounds and pounds of water/falls  
sounds of stone/breaking  
and it’s over.  
water rises swirling in Lithobates’ and Katydid’s moonlit song

# Bong Flower



Photography

## Pulmonary Fibrosis for Dad

Air. Smoke. Gunpowder.  
We take for granted the way  
oxygen graces our lungs. There is a  
portal into space  
for the lonely man with three kids;  
lonely not in the sense of  
alone but in lack of oxygen  
streamlined into his blood.

— literally “scarring of the lungs” — a respiratory disease —  
Blood. Clots. Death.

His cousin died younger from  
the same problem, but the disease  
was not named. Only by riverbeds  
did it grow; veins of dark brown when they  
should have been red.

— in which scars are formed in the lung tissues —  
Living. Breathing. Panic.

How can she stand there and act  
like every moment does not rip her apart?  
Her father sits in a chair while his hands  
creep with red tendrils and purple lines, jagged  
and swarming like a firestorm beneath his skin.

— leading to serious breathing problems.

Love. Lack. End.  
I don't want him to die.

## Les étoiles



Photography



## I Hold The Door

Vance Joy on the radio. My hands ceramic-warm.  
 Hearts floating in foam.  
 Across the dark wood your fingers won't stop  
 tapping. You eye the window,  
 I eye you.  
 Slowly speak. I confess  
 it takes a minute to see  
 your luminescence.  
 The world unfolds in a Rock Island coffee shop.  
 Maroc, France, Deutschland, Italia.  
 You make December pilgrimages to your mother's country.  
 I eye your charcoal curls and the length of your lashes  
 as you talk of Rajasthan and traversing the Ganges.  
 You speak of my languages. *Hindi* and *Tamil* drop from your  
 tongue  
 like autumn plums into my hands.  
 When I ask you, *Si je te parlais en Français,*  
*tu me comprendrais?*  
 You smile,  
 say *Oui*.  
 For a moment we are equal.  
 I ask you to walk. You acquiesce.  
 I hold the door and you follow behind  
 as I cut between low trees and turn in time  
 to see you duck.  
 Unraveling Game of Thrones,  
 unplotting from memory the last fifteen books you read,  
 telling me you've heard of Stephen Hawking -  
 it loosens your voice,  
 roughens your vowels,  
 makes careless your verbs.  
 You sound Dutch. You don't sound like him.  
 It is the first time the trees are bare.  
 Yellow woods call to me.  
 Where it meets the sky the air is crystalline, like rings tinkling  
 from champagne flutes.  
 I take you to the track and you tell me what it's like

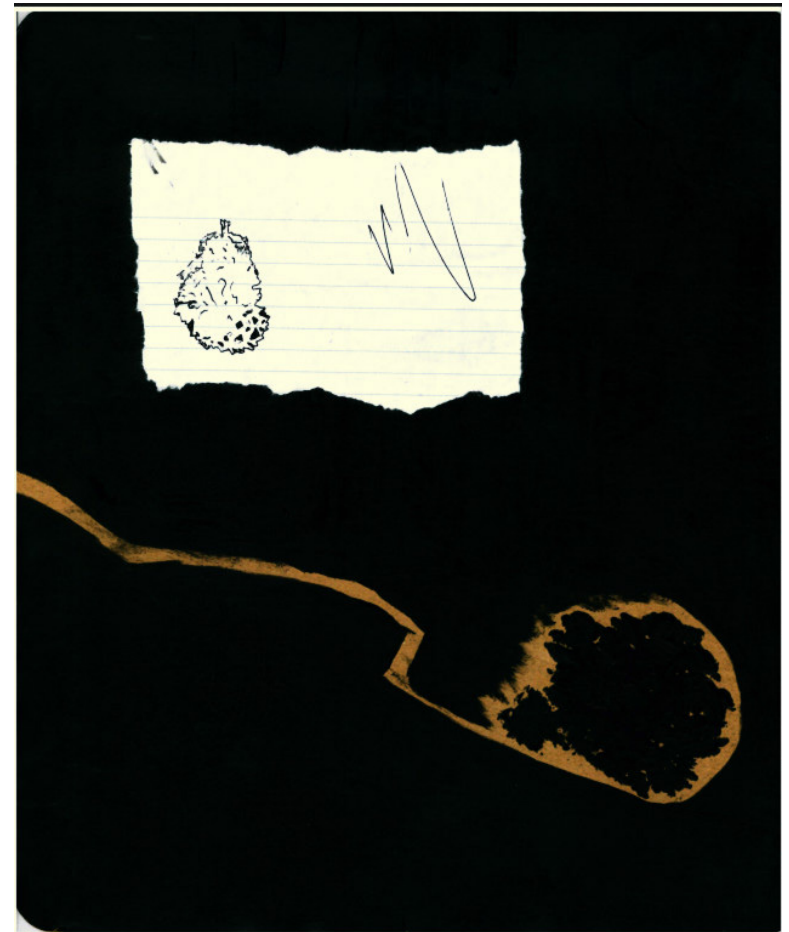
to row the Mississippi, and it's strange  
 how calm you are when landless,  
 how fragile.  
 You leave me abruptly, and I sit with the sky  
 long after my hands have disappeared.  
 There are too many songs in my blood to sing.  
 and this would be enough, to say goodbye  
 and live again.  
 Then I open another door and you are there  
 and this is the next verse,  
 or maybe it's no different,  
 but for the first time you speak without prompting,  
 and I breathe out stardust  
 and take the lead. Maybe this time  
 I write the song.

# Reincarnation



Painting

# Wondershock



Mixed Media  
Acrylic, pen, cardboard, notebook paper

## In Parting We Come Together

The mountains rise up to meet us—  
 I never thought we'd get this far.  
 I stand on the edge of this precipice  
 between the old life and the new—  
 I'd die before we'd part.  
 But we've arrived at the end of the line now—  
 to let go is to love.

The dust has settled; a new day has dawned.  
 The morning sun kisses my shoulders.  
 There's no wind at my back.  
 Between a cliff and the sea, I stand—  
 trees grow from rocks beneath my feet,  
 the cloudless sky, like ocean, opened up above—  
 to let go is to love.

The trail is now over,  
 but our journey's just begun.  
 My friend, I can't say enough of you—  
 ten years and four thousand miles behind us—  
 the parting we never had time for is here.  
 A peace I never felt, I feel—I do—  
 to let go is to love.

Your ashes scatter in the salt breeze and drift down  
 to meet the crashing waves as they rise.  
 A spirit immortalized, forever alongside me—  
 to let go is to love.

## Before You//Hazel Eyes

*Before You,*  
 I am a sad, broken, hopeless romantic.  
 And I refuse to believe that  
 somehow, we were destined to meet.

I know, I have my priorities straight because  
 Me.  
 Is more important than  
 You.

You were the girl in my dreams.  
 All lies.  
 You'd turn your back on me.

People say

I fell in love with you too fast.  
 And I do not accept that  
 your smile saved my life.  
 You need to know,  
 you're just another cliché heartbreak story.  
 No longer will I believe that  
 I love you.  
 And now I know that  
 your flaws far outweigh your perfections.  
 And it's foolish to believe that  
 You could make ANYBODY happy.

*Hazel Eyes*

# The Body



# Vagina



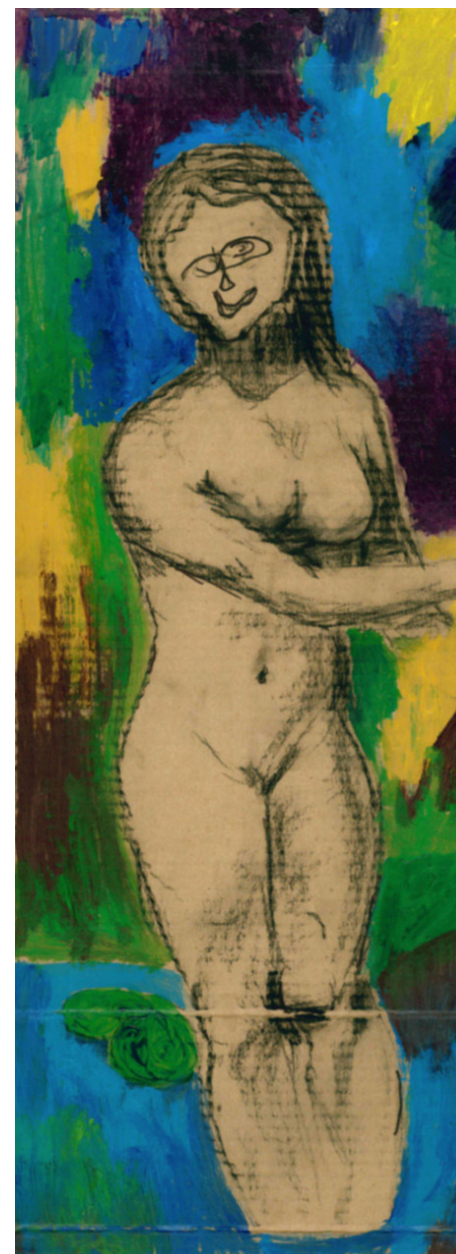
Photography



## They'll Love You

Step inside the picture frame, darling,  
 I promise it will be okay. Strike a pose,  
 any pose, good. Now hold it. Wow.  
 You're a babe. You're hot. You're—  
 Lower your shirt there, please, yes,  
 down the left shoulder. Good, very good.  
 Yes, you are so loved. So wanted. So beautiful. So —  
 Take the sleeve off, yes, entirely  
 free your arm. Good. Gorgeous skin.  
 Let us see it. Don't be shy. Show us.  
 Hold the pose. Wow, what a sight. So —  
 Here, take this sheet. Pretty skin.  
 Yes, that's the look. You will be  
 so loved. So wanted. So praised. Just  
 change. I promise it will be okay. I won't look.  
 Drape the sheet across yourself instead.  
 No, I'm not looking. Oh, wow — No, I wasn't looking.  
 Promise. Trust me.  
 Oh, is it cold in here? I'm sorry. I didn't notice.  
 It will be over soon. Listen, don't be shy.  
 Don't worry. You look perfect. You are perfect.  
 Why don't you smile.  
 You're happy. You're gorgeous.  
 They'll love you!  
 They'll love you.  
 A little to left.  
 They'll love you.

## Woman in Water



Mixed Media  
 Acrylic, charcoal, pen cardboard



## No.

My thinning period is not an invitation for you  
     to fill this lacuna in my womb  
 to scrape at me like you're picking off the broken  
     white flesh of a coconut  
 split in two and oozing milk at your demand  
     reluctantly moist.  
 I will not let you fill me with a child  
 but rather build a sepulcher of my vagina  
     and hide there  
 to nurse my beaten spirits.  
     Fuck your enterprise  
     "Her Body Is Yours"  
         [not]  
         harmlessly taken  
         [robbed]  
         eased into the palm of your hands  
         your snakish slits masked by puppy dog eyes.  
 Does my roar still buzz in your ears? Your bones?  
 Can you taste the intensity like grain and clay on your tongue  
     of the power I mined up within  
     burning you as I erupted volcanic ash and flame?  
 Emerged from a world that does not tell young girls romantic  
     persuasion is still in the realm of rape –  
 I stomp with heavy feet on the souvenirs of me in your head and  
     heart  
 I break them off your fingers and peel them from your lips.  
     I sing at the sound they make falling to the floor  
         an echoing tumult,  
     and cry at the ripple of lies on your cheeks.  
 I am a lunar eclipse on your night time, moonlight dirty escapades.  
     The firefly that you cannot grasp  
         to crush between your fingers  
     or smear on the pavement of your face.

    Can you imagine?  
     Or are you paranoid  
 that I will use your name in my cause, this  
     forsaken reclamation of  
         myself?  
 Because you are worth more than I am?  
     Baby, you are nothing but a fizzle  
     a home of bad infatuations  
     and moldy damp seams.  
 I am not your Bodhisattva.  
     Make your own Nirvana.

## The Wizard's Dancing Jig



Photography

## Hand Halos

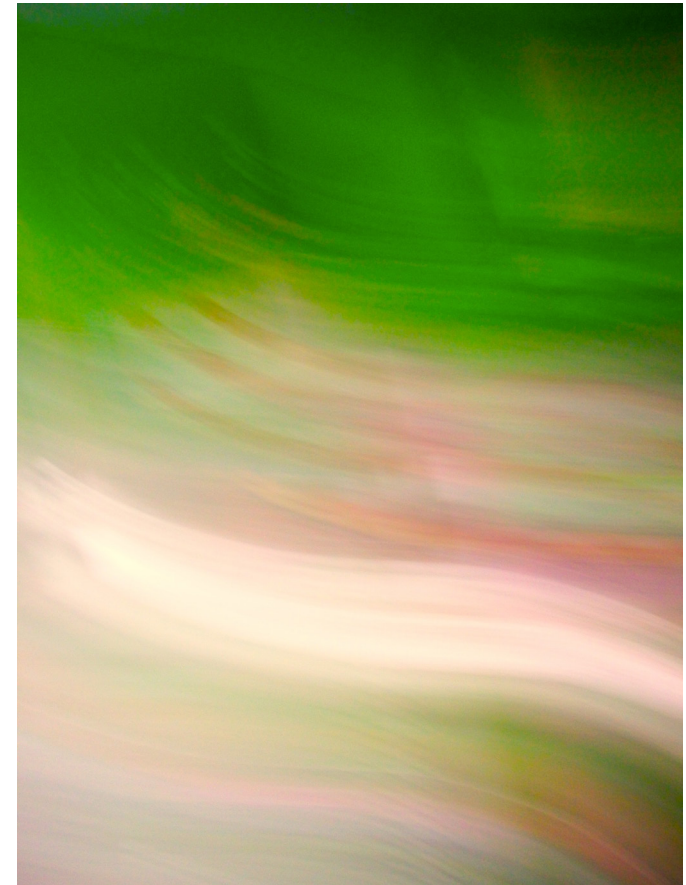


Photography

## Flatlining

We become wild  
Feral like street cats  
and hungry dogs  
tearing our minds from our flesh  
screeching inside our hollowed out chest  
mouth agape like a blackened cavern  
from which reeks poisonous fumes  
of rank and decay  
Blood beating at the walls of our veins  
Puncturing hidden escapes, forgotten open windows in a storm  
until our beams finally cave and  
like an explosion of fireworks within this flooded tomb  
we burst into our death.

## Wash



Photography

# Asexuality

You

You

I will never be able to understand you,  
How all of your conversations always turn  
to that.

That act.

That torture.

That thing you call “love.”

All you ever want to talk about  
is how her hips bucked and fucked  
and how you sucked slurped swallowed him down  
or how you popped her pussy with a prick of your dick  
or how you come and go  
and how you cum and go  
all that seems to fill your mind  
is that hip rocking knee knocking body locking  
in pure orgasmic pleasure  
slamming your bodies against each other  
screaming out names and swears  
swapping spit and sweat and semen  
and how you love to be slapped and spanked  
and you buck fuck suck  
and smack slap tap those tits  
choke his balls and make him squeal  
waist deep and can't get wetter  
waist deep and he wades no deeper  
although you beg for more  
Fuck me Fuck me Fuck me  
slaves of the act  
grip lick drip they go  
three fingers deep now  
and the piercing screaming sounds always increasing  
whipping it out  
and whipping your head back

and whipping her ass  
tongue punch that pussy  
fucking each other's brains out  
with that pounding,slamming, drilling  
blasting, blowing, ejecting loads  
eating her out while you gobble down his cock  
fucking awake and fucking asleep and fucking  
Stop!

Listen

Please.

I

I

I will never understand you.  
Not fully,  
but I will try.  
And you will never truly understand me,  
but you can try.

I had been made to believe that what I had was an absence,  
I was missing something  
or I had lost it.  
I didn't exist.  
I was evil.  
But that's not it.  
I am whole.  
I am here.  
I am who I am.

You don't have an advantage  
nor do I a disadvantage.  
You and I,  
we're just different.

## fairies live here

If you were an iris  
then I was a lily.  
Two different flowers  
but both flowers nonetheless

And maybe it won't just be by talking to me  
and me trying to explain it  
that you'll come to this realization  
Maybe I could write a poem that makes your skin crawl,  
so you can at least feel me.



Photography



## Glasses

when I go to the doctor I can't read  
the first line of the chart  
the one with the big "e"

but I remain unbothered  
sometimes I take off my glasses  
and let everything slide out of focus  
it's nice to let the world turn soft,  
edges blur together  
each object inseparable from the next,  
no difference between the faces  
the longer I look  
the more I think that this is how life should be –  
slightly out of focus  
soft  
only colors and movement  
an abstract reality and the only thing I know  
is what's directly in front of me  
why do we live in extremes  
labeled  
separate  
unable to be one thing without losing the possibility of being  
something else  
to me it's as simple as taking off your glasses  
and enjoying the blur for awhile

## HOME II



Photography

# Bridge

Did you hear Bridge?

What did he say?

Only whispers?

Only whispers.

That Bridge. He is a scary man that Bridge. He knows when he is good. He knows when he is bad. Bridge; Bridge knows every sin from experience. From experience, Bridge knows every sin. Bridge is no ghost story. He isn't blood, flesh. You, you can kill flesh. But you can't kill Bridge.

Bridge is fucked up.

He had a soul. It was wicked; pussied together with the ooze of Satan's snot.

He lost that shit. Now he has nothing.

Nothing but whispers.

And time...

You've heard Bridge, you've felt him; but you won't admit it. Shouldn't admit it.

Don't you ever admit it.

He, doesn't mind. He knows what you tell yourself... He; he knows better...

Bridge. He is the splewt, splut, of ghostly water, dripping in the darkness of your unlit bathroom. Bridge. He is the deep-pool pressure pummeling on your ears. Breath six-feet out of reach. Bridge. He is the moment of consent that you never remember. When you give yourself to sleep. When you forfeit your body, to the night. To *him*. Do you know what he does?

Bridge doesn't wear a mask, he knows no face, no flesh, no form. Bridge, he can't be seen but, he watches. He *is* watching, hidden in the very shadows that you cast, listening to your personal plague of darkness; to the secrets that you shade.

You.

Can you hear him?

There, that second heartbeat...

You.

Can—can you feel him?

There, someone's eyes on you...

*Your saliva.*

How does...

*that taste?*

bRidg kNows. BriDge knoWs. brIdge Knows. bridge KNowS. bRIdGe knOWs. BridGE kNows.

bRidg kNows. BriDge knoWs. brIdge Knows. bridge KNowS. bRIdGe knOWs. BridGE kNows.

bRidg kNows. BriDge knoWs. brIdge Knows. bridge KNowS. bRIdGe knOWs. BridGE kNows.

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bRidg kNows. BriDge knoWs. brIdge Knows. bridge KNowS. bRIdGe knOWs. BRIDGE kNows.

bRidg kNows. BriDge knoWs. brIdge Knows. bridge KNowS.

bRIdGe knOWs. BRIDGE kNows.

And he does.

Bridge knows every sin from experience...

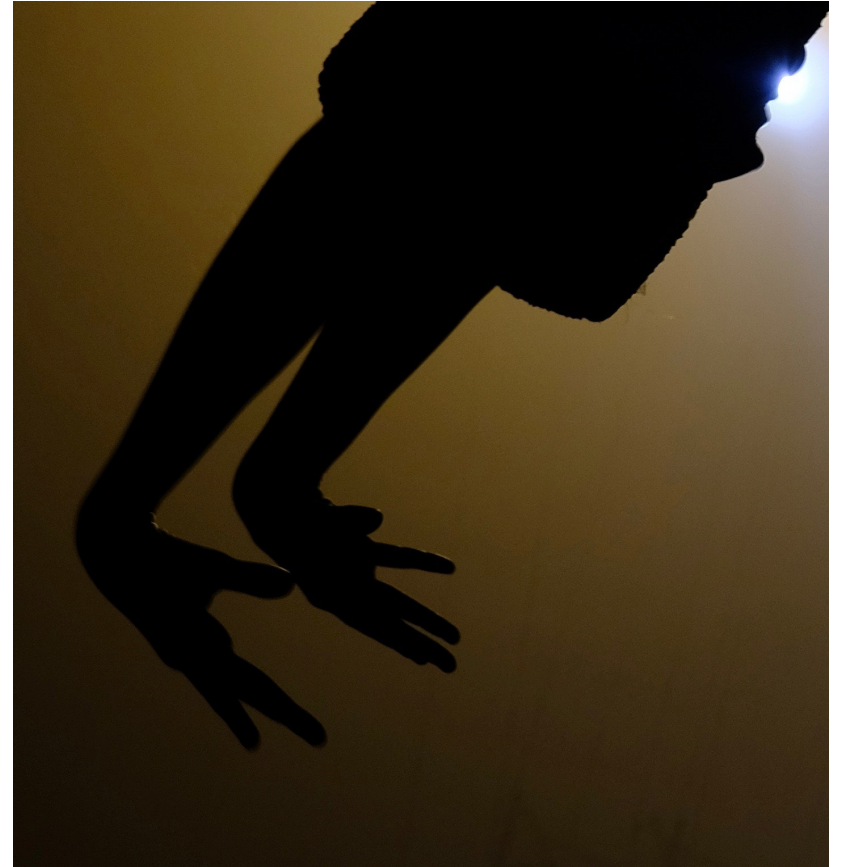
from experience, Bridge knows every sin.

# Bare Bones

# stand\_cast



Photography



Photography

## Two Hundred Miles

I noticed him the minute he got on  
Three rows ahead, facing my direction

The world whipping by his cheekbones,  
cigarette smoke curling from perfect teeth

The train rocks us both gently,  
as if to remind us that we're the only two in the car

It's the curl of imperfect hair by his ear,  
the creases in his shoes,

the seconds evaporating faster  
the longer I look

I watch him read a novel  
I watch him watch everything else

His eyes move when he sleeps  
I wonder in what world they dream of me

His voice is honey in my mind  
and whispers sweet things between bed sheets

There's a dangerous streak in him  
But that only makes the kind gestures better

I'll replace those shoes for his  
birthday, which we'll celebrate with

frosting on his nose and a cuddle fight on  
the couch we bought together

I wonder about his family  
They're beautiful

His sister took a while to  
warm to me, but she came around

Now I spend Sundays babysitting  
my nephew, who has his eyes

I go into the bathroom during a stop  
at a nowhere station, and emerge

with a handful of wasted hours  
trailing him down the station platform

I lean my face against the glass,  
memorize the back of his head

Fold the last two hundred miles into a paper bird,  
cup it in my hands, and give it to the breeze

Thank you for reading!