

Venture Literary/Arts Magazine

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Venture Literary/Arts Magazine, 2017

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SIXTEEN / SEVENTEEN

VENTURE

LITERARY | ARTS



Venture
Literary | Arts
Magazine
2017

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A special thank you to...

Those who contributed their work for publication. Each year we receive so many wonderful submissions and we thank you for taking pride in your work and producing such beautiful material. Without you we would not have a magazine, let alone one so filled with diverse talent.

Meaghan, Sofia, Claire, Jenny, Jon-Luc, Gail and Mackenzie, my wonderful Venture E-board, for putting up with me. I was lucky enough to have the best, most dedicated group of individuals working with me to make Venture a success. You each worked so hard in your respective positions, showing dedication that blew me away. Thank you for enduring my frantic double and triple emails, last minute decisions, and overall flustered, likely spastic demeanor at our meetings. I could not have hoped for a better team – I am so grateful to know and have worked with each of you.

Our reading editors/ contributors, for showing up to meetings, providing your valuable insights during the editing process, and for giving Venture your dedication and support.

Alex Paterson, the Associate Director of Student Leadership and Involvement, for your continued guidance and support of our magazine. Thank you for answering my incessant emails, calming my worries, and somehow always knowing the solution to whatever problem I brought to your attention. I am so inspired by your calm demeanor and “let’s get this done” attitude. You were instrumental to the success of this magazine and I am so lucky to have been able to work with you.

The Suffolk University English Department, for supporting me in the completion of this magazine – even if it meant a few late assignments. I am lucky to be able to give each of you a wave as I scurry through the department to this meeting and that, aware that you have changed my life so drastically. I will be eternally grateful for the opportunities and support that this department has given me.

John Winter and the Ink Spot, for producing our magazine year after year with the same wonderful quality. Thank you for working with Venture – we hope our partnership continues for years to come.

Ryan LaFleur, this issue’s graphic designer. Thank you for designing such a wonderful, original magazine. Your stunning design showcases your own artistic abilities while providing an extraordinary backdrop for all of this year’s literary and artistic pieces.

My friends and family, who not only supported me in all my endeavors as a student and as a person, but made each endeavor worthwhile. I consider myself lucky to know each of you, and your steadfast presence in my life is so deeply and endlessly appreciated.

From the Editor...

I remember walking down Temple Street as a frightened, quiet, and lost freshman during what used to be The Temple Street Fair, looking for some club or another to join. I walked past table after table of posters, sign-up sheets, and sweet incentives in the form of lollipops and tootsie rolls, until out of the corner of my eye I saw a stack of books. "Books!" I thought, my not-yet-exposed love of those wonderful, bound up little worlds brightening my demeanor. That table was stacked with copies of Venture's 2013 edition, and I was floored by the photography, art, and writing that colored the pages inside.

I joined Venture because, like every timid freshman, I really needed a place to go during activities period besides my lonely dorm room. This small club became a passion of mine - I looked forward to meetings, to reading student poetry and prose, to viewing slideshows of art and photography, to watching a book come together from student handiwork. At the encouragement of other club members, I even felt comfortable enough to submit my own work, finding an outlet through which to express myself. I quickly wanted to do more with the editing process and went from reading contributor to Visual Arts Editor and then to Editor in Chief this year - a position that I am proud to have earned.

Color and vibrancy were themes that the Venture staff saw repeated in this year's accepted pieces. Whether it be through metered descriptions of color, richly vibrant photos, or brilliantly descriptive prosaic lamentations, the vitality of the hearts and minds of Suffolk students contributed to an issue that beams with radiant feeling.

Every year this magazine captures the astoundingly artistic collective soul of us Boston-dwellers who make our homes amidst mirrored skyscrapers, red brick sidewalks, and green park hills. I have always felt a heartbeat in Boston embodied in beeping horns, subway screeches, polychromatic sunsets, swarming sidewalks, and constant musical chatter. Even at night, Boston, in its calm and knowing silence, sings with the dreams of its many inhabitants. Boston is our home, and our vivid souls animate its streets. This city is one creating, living, collective organism made of up thousands of unique, extraordinary individuals.

Please enjoy this remarkable and impressive issue of Venture, and continue to enjoy the publications that follow in the years ahead.

Warmly and proudly,
Brenna Lopes
Editor in Chief, 2017

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Poetry

Color Theory - Gail Coogan

Majesty Mauve lacquered polish with
red, blood-red, pink red, brown-reddish purple lipstick and a
black- no, off-black, green-tinted cool black with
nude, my nude...white nude? Apricot-peach
shoes.

Shit, if only the light-dark color binary were real
if only red were red were my red were your red
if only all my black clothing wouldn't have me sporting ten different
shades of darkness
in one outfit
if only nude meant a magical miracle color-changing tone that fits
me and her, and her, and her, and...

...anyway, how do I look?

Saturday Mornings - Rosalie Pothier

I wake up to golden sun and
liquid light. A halo around my face,
a crown for a queen in the kingdom of
sleep. Pink filters through coffee
eyes. Curls flow in
ocean waves, obedient to Mother Moon.

Black smoky smudges. Red veins
etching lines of sight. Peach puffs of
fluid. Tangles of gold and silver
jewelry.

White sheets like hills and pizza crumbs
like snow. A breeze filters the air.
A ball of black purring with
love at my feet.

Theater of War - Hope Burnside

Welcome to the Theater of War

Every weekend people travel far
To get a glimpse of all the shining stars
That rise to fame at the Theater of War

Rehearsals here are really rather rough

But the ones who stay are proven to be tough
As close as lovers, has to be enough
They'd rather stay at war because home is rough

A man who does well has one job all his life

And everyday, or months must leave his wife
No matter what the turmoil and the strife
He works at this theater for life

The Theater sits on the corner of FOX and CNN

Civilians pack the theater, it begins
The actors on the stage expose their sin
Only actors know a show outside and in

The people back at home could never know

The work it takes to put on such a show
And thought the cast all say, "we wish the crowd would slow,"
There's nowhere else for comradeship to go

So if you have a ticket to go see

The Theater of War show entitled, "Glory"
Remember that hiring actors isn't free
And it could just as easily be you or me

A soldier will always say he knows the score

And we see the scars that ache down to his core
But the stage is not big enough, for sure

War

To represent the Theater of

“Untitled 10” - Ryan Mettler

Under light of burning bridges,
And with chipped paint from broken homes,
Are the conditions and devices
With which I write my shitty short-poems.

Self-Portrait - Aliza Greenstein

I am tall and broad,
My body unapologetic
In the way it consumes space,
Hungry to displace air and
Water around me.

I continue to grow and
Shrink to various shapes
And sizes. Every day I
Wake up I have a different
Body. It is not always my own.

Mostly it's subtle.
A slight difference
In the circumference of my thighs
Or the curve of my stomach
Or the width of my arms.

Sometimes it's dramatic.
Suddenly my thighs are
Twice the size they were
Last night and my stomach
Is wildly swollen.

The self-conscious
Body never dies.

Red Eyes - Sarah Malis

I stand before you, inadequate.
Ashamed, my head falls as tears drop from red eyes uncontrollably.
Darkness pervades my body,
seeking out any corner to claim.
Sinning as I do, I quiver under your direct gaze, though I try to hide
my fear.
Piercing. Criticizing. Mercilessly
you say my name but I don't recognize the word.
Why did you call me back? My time still ticks.

Sent away, I crawled alone
working tirelessly day and night to meet the approval of anyone.
But especially yours, though I never called your name.
I should have - I understand now.
But hubris blocked the logic.
Still, can you blame such a base creature?
Surely not.

Grinding teeth and bloody toes lead me nowhere.
It was the invisible that needed pursuing and this was lost on me.

So here I am —
less than when you left me.
And yet you say you feel pride.
How can this be when your daughter disappoints you in every way?
There must be a missing piece.

Milk - Claire Mulvena

You've commanded me for some time now,
taken the tongue from my mouth, and tied it around my throat like
a noose.

I could only choke out words, cracked and feeble.

They were whispers in the storm.

I've clawed the marked skin from my bones
and I'm scabbed over.

Proudly, I stand.

I'm no longer a whisper but a shout.

Your face fades.

Distantly whipped farther in the wind.

The purples you left behind are faded,
and I'm Milk again.

Do I Deserve Your Kindness? - Sarah Malis

Do I deserve your kindness?
Only you may decide,
since my words and actions would scar your body
if you allow them.

Perhaps I try too hard to impress
but all I have ever wanted is to be liked by the masses.
The crowds flock to you
and surround the charming lies emanating from your pores.
Your words, pure sugar —
and as the bees rush toward the addictive honey,
they fail to notice their sustenance, poisoned.

The hardness of your soul dries up beauty, smothers passion,
and spreads cracks throughout.
You sneer at the lowly, at the poor, at the desperate,
although they share a similar pain as you do.
Turn your back and evade the misery -
regardless it follows
until silence is your final friend.

Now as I stand ahead, I turn
and watch you fall under on your wicked ways
and I realize,

Of course I deserve your kindness,
but you certainly do not deserve mine.

BOOK - Yamalia Garcia

when I opened
the Cover
there was a

mass of ink
Stains
waiting to Become

Hallucinations
whilst the Trees
looking down at

the Empty
tree trunk
mourned

but as I
Read
the trees smiled

knowing
there is Life
after death

Letter- Aashi Sethi

i wish people still wrote letters,

i wish we still penned down our thoughts,
so that your tear stains could guide me to your heart
and the coffee or wine stains to those sleepless nights

so that the scent of the sheet could tell me
what perfume was your new favourite
and your lazy handwriting showed how tired you were

theres so much more of you on paper.

A Midnight Jaunt - Jacqueline Janusis

through embers of wood
 which ricocheted through my hair
 walking over last season's leaves

my own tears a salve to my skin
 but how,
 does the sun continue to stretch
 peeking over the mountains
 yet
 I cannot get out of bed

 the woods envelop me in their darkness
 the light is so far behind me
 but wait!

I am now running... running so quick
 there is a man with a feather behind his ear
 "Can you help me?"
 eyes so soft
 but there's lines which roughen up his face
 "Child, I can't even help myself."

Tall Stories - Jenny Hunt

Hopefully I find a man who adores me the way a boy
idolizes his dogs,
the “man’s best friend” way.

The way he might lose his mind if I ran away,
sprinted for a better romance, but then pulled my leash
back when I wandered too far into the deep end.

A little too “over my head” way
the way my mother never found fascination in the right men,
who lost track of her collar and couldn’t
call her back.

When she waded too far in love no one could call her
out, save her.

My mother warned me about boys like you,
said to stay away from the children who worship your
temple and suffocate any extra bits they didn’t want,
the “kind of perfect” without half of you way,
the half that should only matter
when that’s the majority no one can replace,
but starving any personality that becomes matter
doesn’t matter when you’re hollowed out into a figure.

A replica figurine with pasty skin, the curves in all
the proper places, the hair falling, falling
across your face in that “mysterious, intriguing book” way,
but nothing is mysterious when you read my lips
and hear an inaudible phrase, which wouldn’t’ve
matter what was said if I had screamed in that way.

There’s no way I’ll find myself “over my head”
unless I’m tumbling over in some “kind of perfect” acrobatic
last memory because “man’s best friend” doesn’t suit a girl like me,
someday you’ll read about me in that “mysterious, intriguing book”
no one else bothers to read cover-to-cover.

My mother read fairytales, but never bothered to explain
the real ending.

“Untitled 13” - Ryan Mettler

The ship slowly started sinking,
And Sleep tried to lure us
To an endless night, frozen, blinking,
As he did to Poor Palinurus.
Lo, despite our struggle against the waves,
The sea was relentlessly erratic,
And so we joined the unmarked graves
At the depths of the Adriatic.

Blessed - Gail Coogan

the sky is wrecked and full of rotting clouds
the earth stained with black where green was
dust on the best golden gilded things and
the dust on us.

a bird caught in the wires above
someone with no mouth needing my help, I think
rain would barely do any justice
to the blood and grime around, all around.
the houses sink or float chained to nothing
under stars shining sick, wicked and
far, far away from killers in distant law-free
countrysides or a dim underground city.
but i,
i was blessed with bad eyes
there's a lot that i miss but i don't mind.

When We Die - Nicholas Strang

We can shriek in agony
and perish on Earth,
to the rest of the cosmos;
Or,
like Lincoln Logs as a ladder,
We can grab it with our cold hands,
at least our fingerprints will remain
the virgin white surface
We can depart safely in our atmosphere,
or
die dangerously in unknown lands.

forgotten
another species dead and fossilized.
we can pile our bodies
to the Moon and Beyond.
so, that when we're long gone
staining
of the Moon.

The Summer I Built a House - Jenny Hunt

I built a house that summer.
Well, not exactly,
but I passed it, almost every day,
breaking dawn before work, when the silent
streets echoed the pitter patter of feet along
the sidewalk
resounded my heart – beating the unfortunate
thud, thud, thud.
I'm not quite sure it was even a house.
If I were honest
anything with four walls, two arms and a door
looks like home to me, but I haven't been home in a
while.
This bed with ashen sheets, half covered in
clothes, maybe money,
the remaining quarter in books,
which leaves a small space for me.
Everything I am hasn't been mine in four years.
Although no one minds when I pour myself into this
glass, this
bath tub, this
hollow figure that quakes and shatters looking
for something to hold me up.
But the only thing found was gone.
The summer even felt like winter,
trapping me inside a shell where hammers
fell into the shallow crevices in my back,
along my spine so that my backbone could not
fight,
can not escape,
probably will not win.
So I guess it wasn't the summer I built a house,
just the moments defining me without my presence.
I think I'm trying to say:
that summer, I destroyed a home in my winter.

red - Gail Coogan

everything's Red but it's not blood

blood? no —beautiful, stunning, poetic, utopia
utopian? unachievable? united, but under pressure
pressure to have enough
enough of everything.
everything equal and even for everyone
everyone shares the gold, the sun, the light--
the lighter fluid, the fire, the warmth.

warm bodies or hot heads? everyone shares it all--
all sorrow, sickness, sacrifice.

sacrifice is Red.
an empty stomach is Red.

Red is beautiful, yes.
yes—as dreams often are.

One Rainy Day - Sarah Malis

One rainy day, I accidentally dropped my self.
She slipped out of my pocket's hole,
and into a puddle.
What a small trinket she was —
so undernourished and weak.

A child, jumping around in the dirty water
splashed her into the street where a car softly ran her over.
Slightly squished and soaking wet,
she flew into the air,
her feeble body too light to find ground.
A gust of wind swept her up.
She drifted place to place —

Passed little ones in playgrounds, with laughing eyes and giant smiles,
comforted by kisses and the sheer joy of life unencumbered.

Passed loving looks and angry words -
the breaking up and carrying on.

Passed pain and
so many of its variations.

Dry and plumped
she floated gently by a gathering, the rings, the applause,
How lovely!
By friends family food. Pure happiness.
And she became happy too.
Then their commotion sent her in the opposite direction.

Caught in a south wind, she
cried with heartbroken mothers with nothing left and
hollered with men in line demanding to be let in.

She didn't see everything, only what she could.
Love, hope, despair, indifference; it's everywhere.
She didn't have to travel the world to understand that.
But when she finally found her way back to my warm pocket,
She was never the same.

Escape the Cold - Jacqueline Janusis

My grandmother taught me that the rain washed away Earth's faults
The pure awe of the world be absolved of all its ugly
For a couple hours the world was free
I stepped out into the rain, my face to the sky
She scolded me, said that I could catch a cold.

I stood there for an hour
And I wanted to feel as free as the Earth did
Once the shower had stopped,
I felt defeated,
That the rain could not simply heal me.

Sitting on the concrete stoop
I stared at the sun until there was spots,
One rain shower does not heal the world
This fact I know now,
Now come inside before it gets too cold.

Insult/Injury- Gail Coogan

Prescription: coat your whole self
head to toe
in deep, dark velvet.
repeat, as if a chant:

my armor is me
it's soft
it's expensive
i am whole
let me be.

Dosage: stay in this state your whole life.
let no one in
let nothing out.

my armor is me
it's soft
it's expensive
i am whole
i am reaching for my alarm
stretching my hands up
humming my anthem.

Snakes - Ryan Mettler

It starts the very moment that you first miss an instant,
It creeps from the corner, somewhere dark, somewhere distant.
It darts its way round every sight, every sound,
It sleeps with you down six feet underground.
It crawls through the cracks of your safest places,
It slithers under the skin of your most beloved faces.
It calls, like an echo, through a comforting song,
It withers when you whisper what you've done wrong
.
It crashes in the silences of your sick and muddled mind,
It learns what haunts you, what you've lost, what you find.
Its ashes fall on your arm, as if from a cigarette,
Leaving burns you can't forget – from the fangs of regret.

Destiny - Gail Coogan

you can't have serendipity without pity

no wonder.

give Destiny (a backstabbing bitch)
the reins and reign of your life,
follow her careless, clumsy lead,
take ten steps backwards,
lose yourself within moments and
end up on a couch wondering about that lemonade
you never made.

Yellow - Marina Soto

Oh dear, and can't you see it all was, and is, yellow? The leaves in yellow hues hold on to branches, so many gone as to make it look like an original Pollock. Yellow were his eyes, in a dark imitation of brown, and yellow the leaves on his porch. Yellow was the air, yellow the afternoons, yellow all trees. Yellow her name, like a child singing in the wind. Yellow interconnectedness from one life to another, little room for hate.

Yellow, she swore, was the smoke coming up from streets; were the headlights of cars; were a flock of birds. Yellow was the sunset, and even yellower still, the sunrise. Yellow were all her hopes and admirations, peeking out from the corners of the world, telling her they knew, they knew about her secret, they knew of her projects and plans. Yellow let her know all was well, and underway. It was a confirmation of God, of the universe itself, that all would be well and sane; all would be blessedly perfect in the end. Yellow the shadow of peace, affirming joy wherever it went. His shirt was yellow, just as his faith, and both brought her content...

Yellow, she knew, were her days. Yellow the brush she painted with. Whirlwinds were tinted in a yellow hue, following leaves to lakes, scarves to trees, papers to infinity, and chilly bones to later days. Yellow promised to come and go as it pleased, with no notion of dates or years, promising warmth in a distant future nearby. Yellow, she knew, was everything.

Yellow was stretching its fingers, reaching out in sudden concern. Here, or there, yellow was everything. And she knew, even in dark winters and lonely summers, orange autumns or violet springs, yellow would stop by in the windows of buildings, or hide itself in the lights of cities, and always at night, always, peek from galaxies afar.

EXCESSIVE - Gail Coogan

Smells like espresso in this house, and
three kinds of smoke at least
no gunpowder, no gunpowder thank god
that would be excessive.



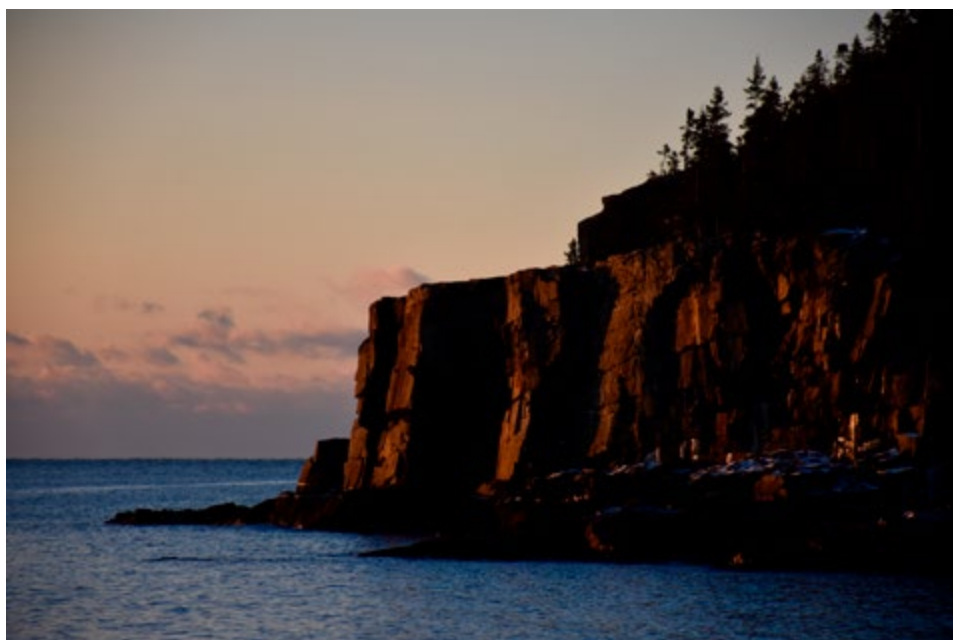
Visual Arts



Molly Kelly
“States of Matter”



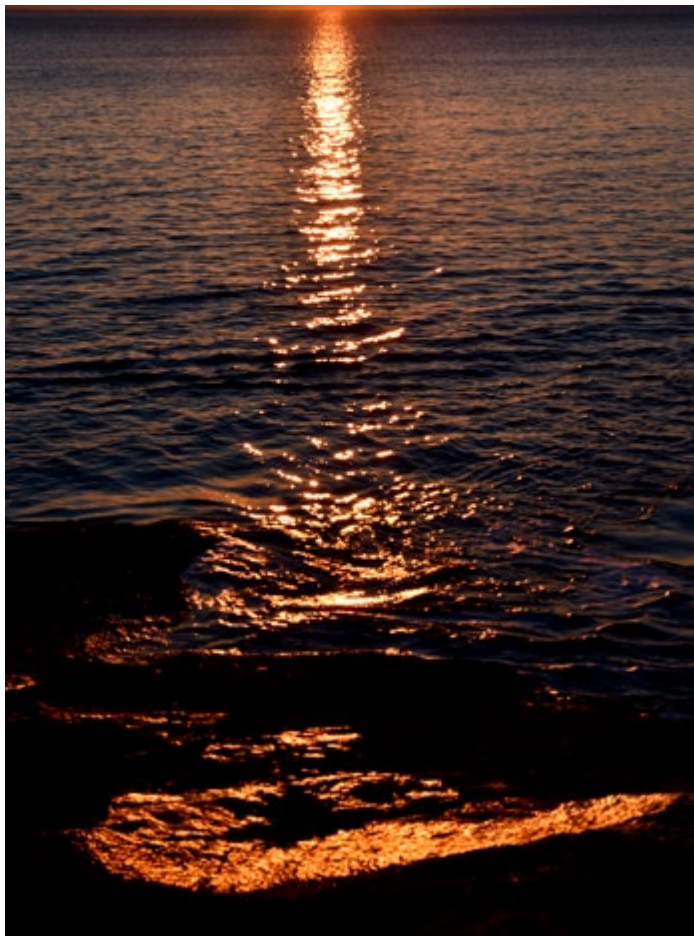
Josh Cronin



Josh Cronin



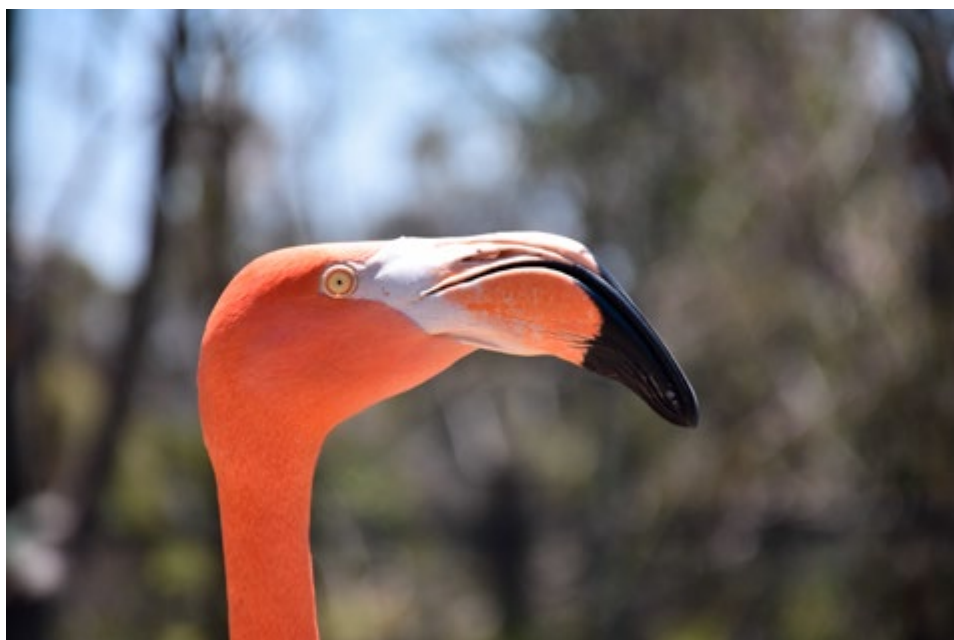
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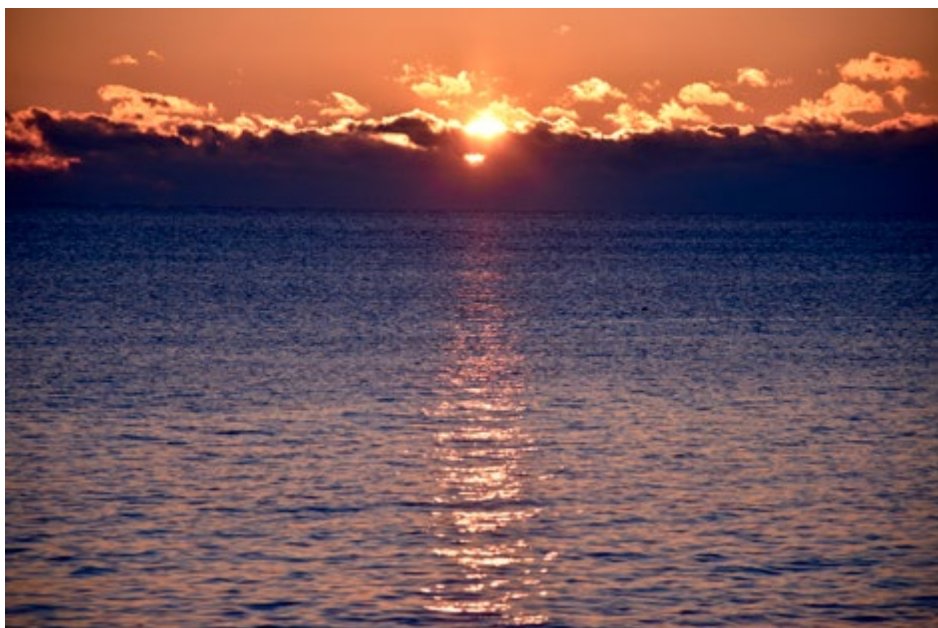
Josh Cronin



Josh Cronin



Josh Cronin



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Josh Cronin



Josh Cronin



Kristen Sallaberry



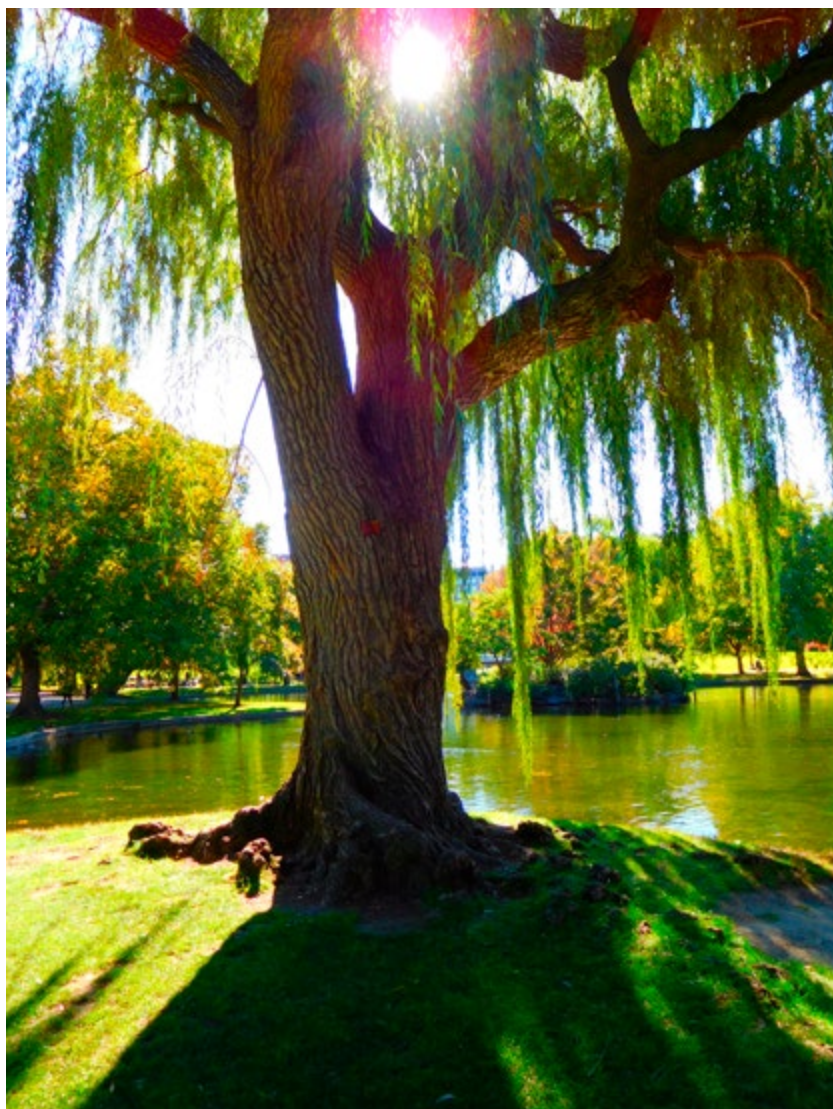
Kristen Sallaberry



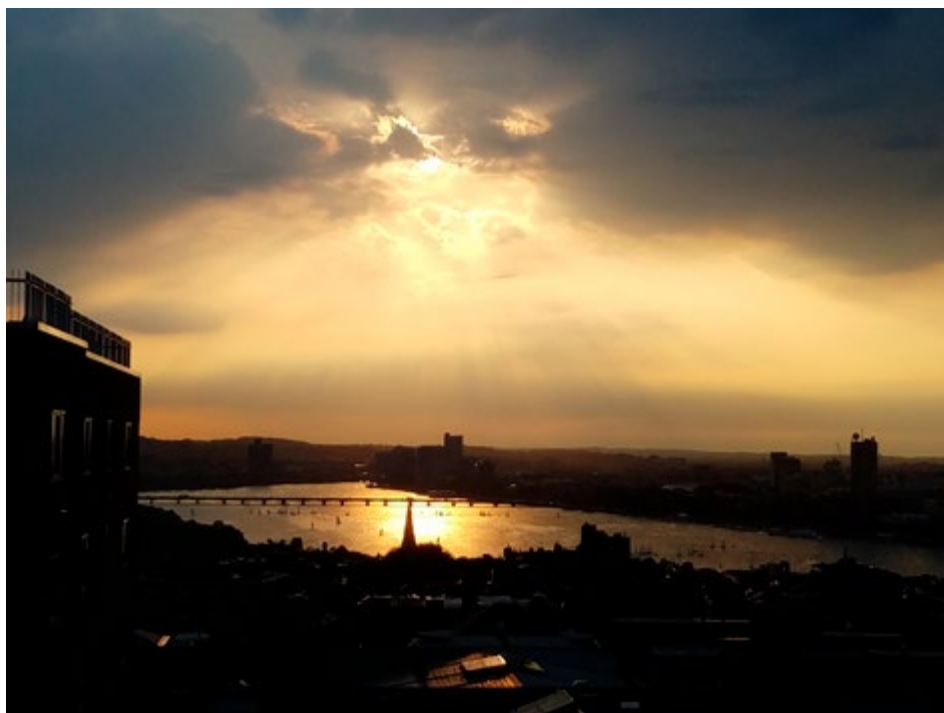
Lyndsay Bianco



Lyndsay Bianco



Jon-Luc Jarboe
“Summer”



Jon-Luc Jarboe
"Heaven's Gates"



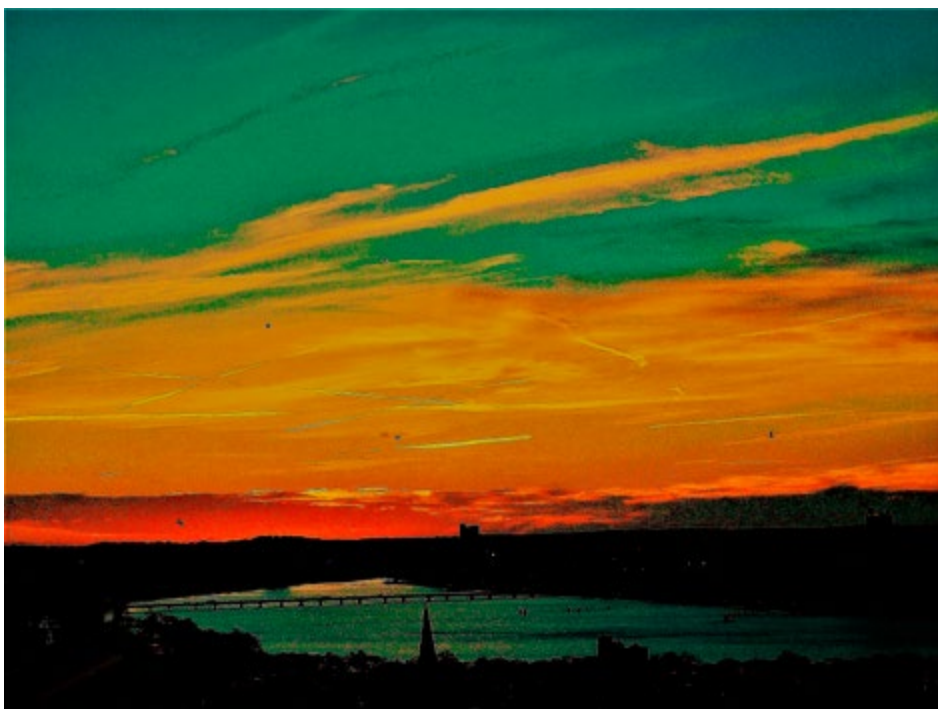
Jon-Luc Jarboe
"Trees at Dusk"



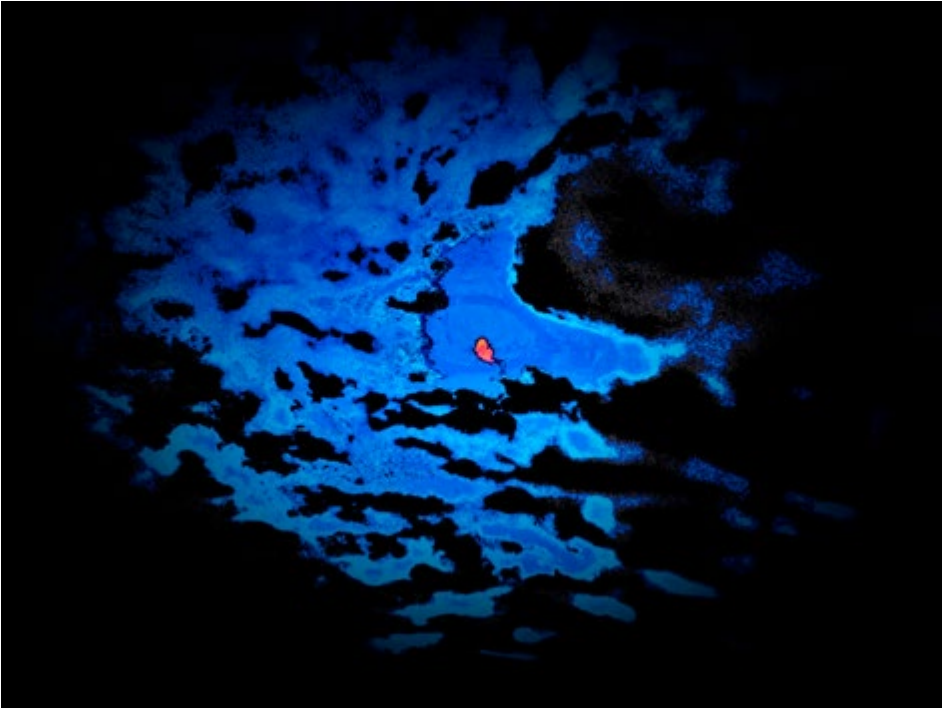
Jon-Luc Jarboe
“Sunset’s Rays”



Jon-Luc Jarboe
"Innsmouth"



Jon-Luc Jarboe
"Dreamlands"



Jon-Luc Jarboe

“A Lone Candle from the Sea”



Sherley Soraya Wijaya
“Jellyfish”



Sherley Soraya Wijaya
“Farmhouse”



Sherley Soraya Wijaya
“Big Ben”



Kendra Asaph
"Bird Watching"



Samantha Moffat



Samantha Moffat



Jake Haseltine



Jake Haseltine



Maria Werner
"Port 1"



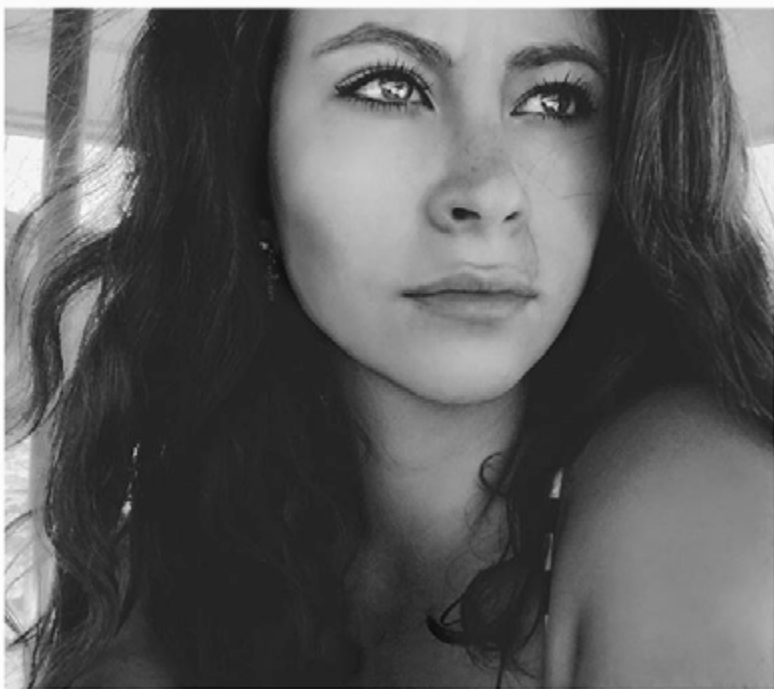
Maria Werner
“Port 4”



Valeria Sigarrostegui
“Old and New”



Valeria Sigarrostegui
“Hong Kong 4”



Valeria Sigarrostegui



Valeria Sigarrostegui
“Venezia”



Erin LaVigueur
“Curious Squirrel”



Erin LaVigueur
“Life is a Gamble”



Erin LaVigueur
"Burst of Expression"



Erin LaVigueur
"Branches on the Skyline"



Erin LaVigueur
“Innocence in the Sun”



Erin LaVigueur
“Stairway to the Unknown”



Alice Wynn



Alice Wynn



Alice Wynn



Molly Kelly
"Boston's Finest"



Molly Kelly
"Women's March on Boston"



Molly Kelly
“Flow”



Kenneth Martin

*"Busy Day, Calle Bravo Murillo, Madrid, Spain,
May 2013"*



Kenneth Martin

*“Where are the dead? Madrid, Spain,
June 2015”*



Brenna Lopes
"Flora"



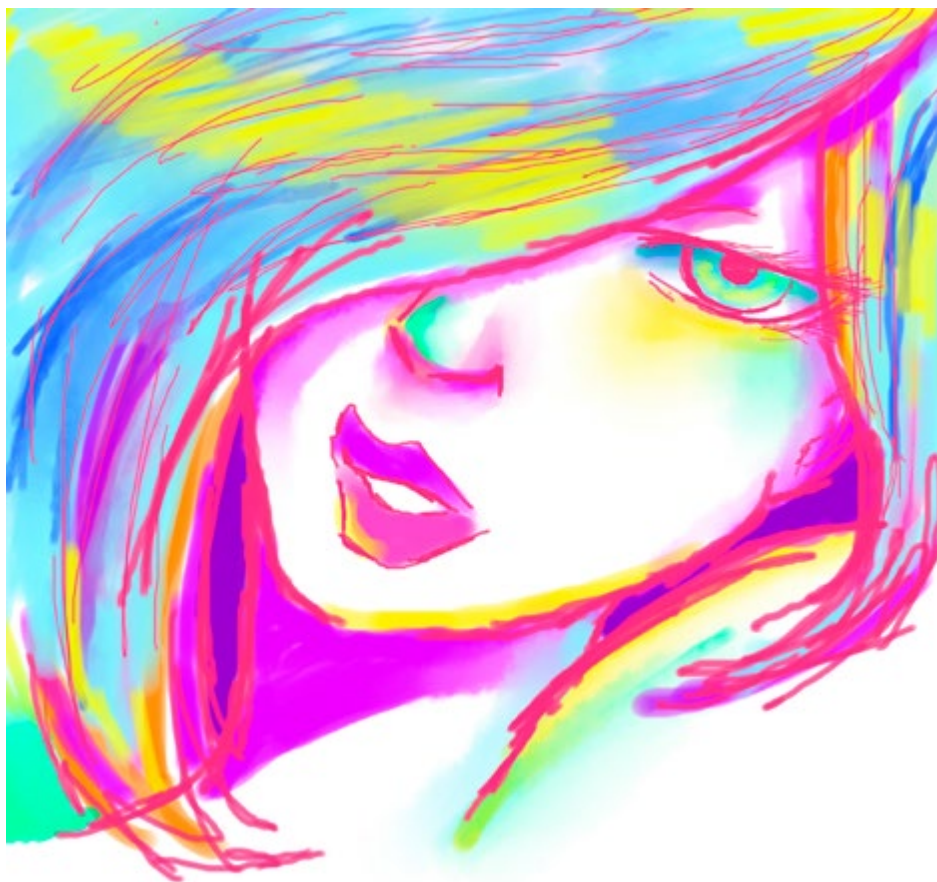
Brenna Lopes
“Glukopikron”



Hayley Cormier
"Bees"



Hayley Cormier
"Dots"



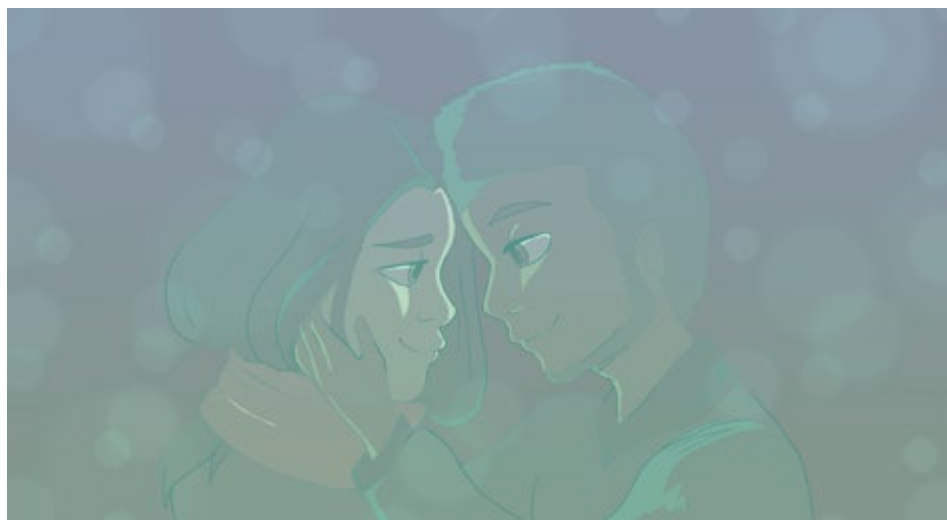
Kennedy Parker
"Colors"



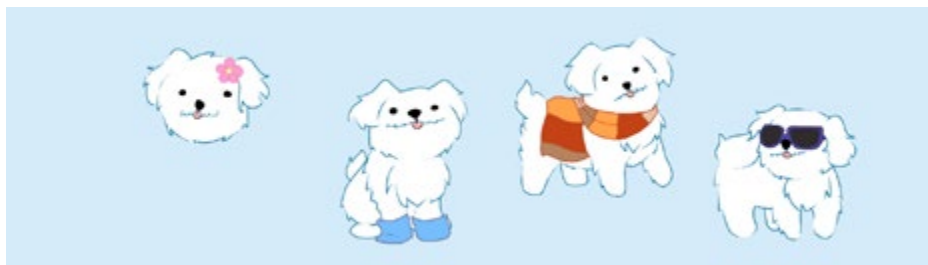
Kennedy Parker
“Winter Knit Fun”



Kennedy Parker
"I Got Paid \$50 To Draw This"



Kennedy Parker
“A Long Distance Couple”



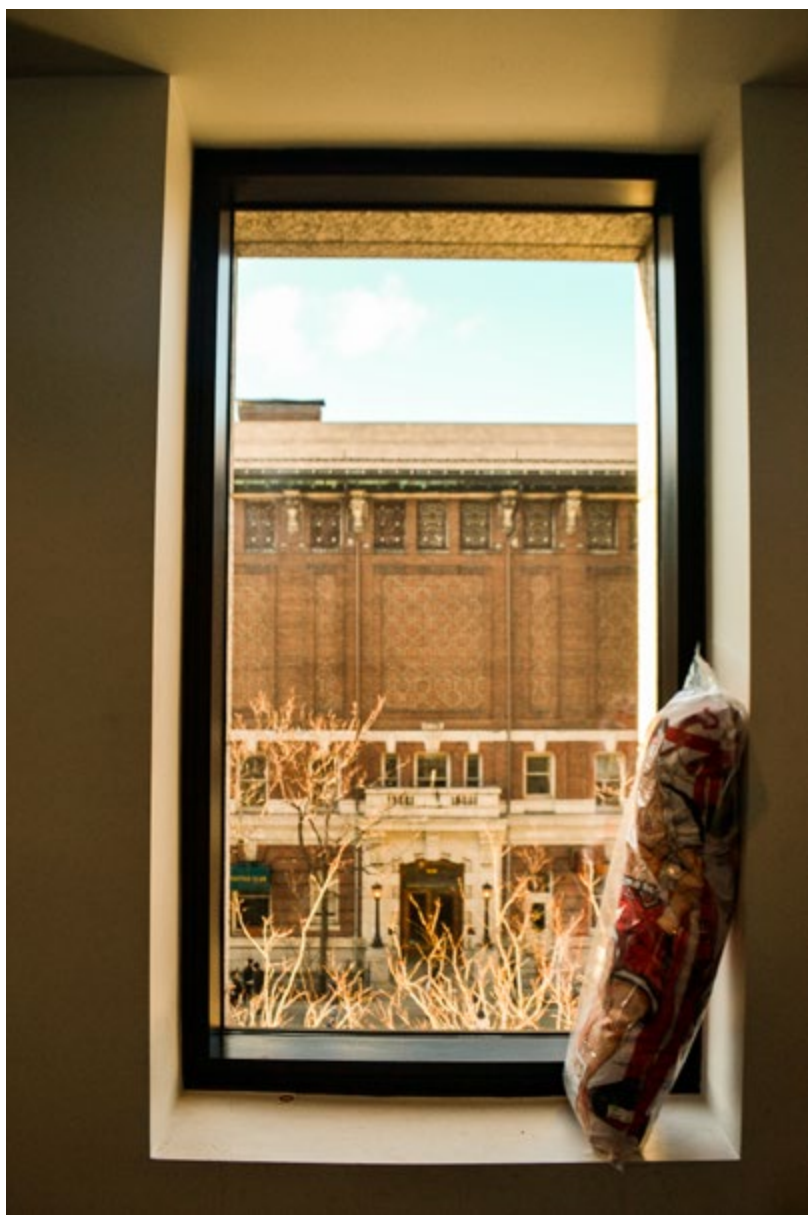
Kennedy Parker
“My Friend Tiffany’s Dog”



Kennedy Parker
“Dale Chihuly Tower”



Kennedy Parker
*“The Myriad Garden in
Oklahoma City”*



Kennedy Parker
"Serenity"



Jade Cruz



Jade Cruz

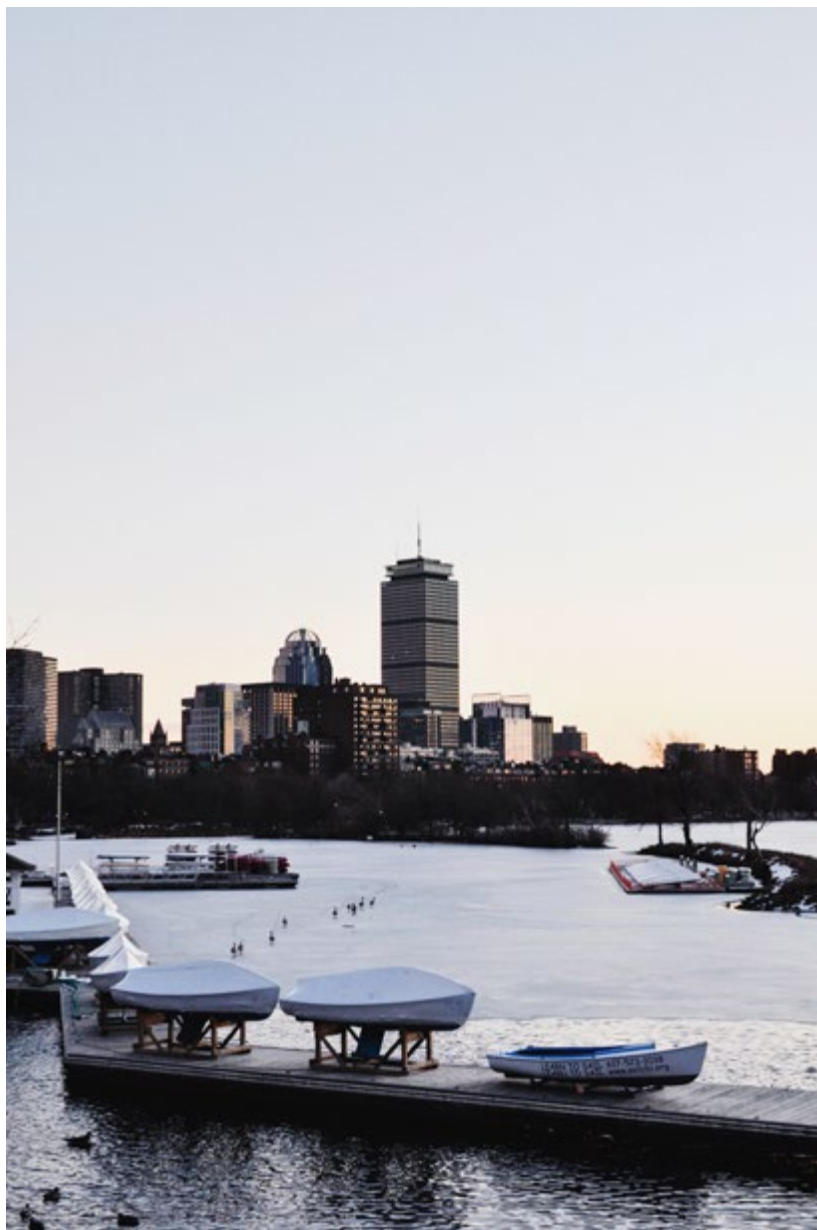


Christian Morris
“Esplanade”



Christian Morris

“Brittany Howard-Alabama Shakes”



Christian Morris
“Prudential”



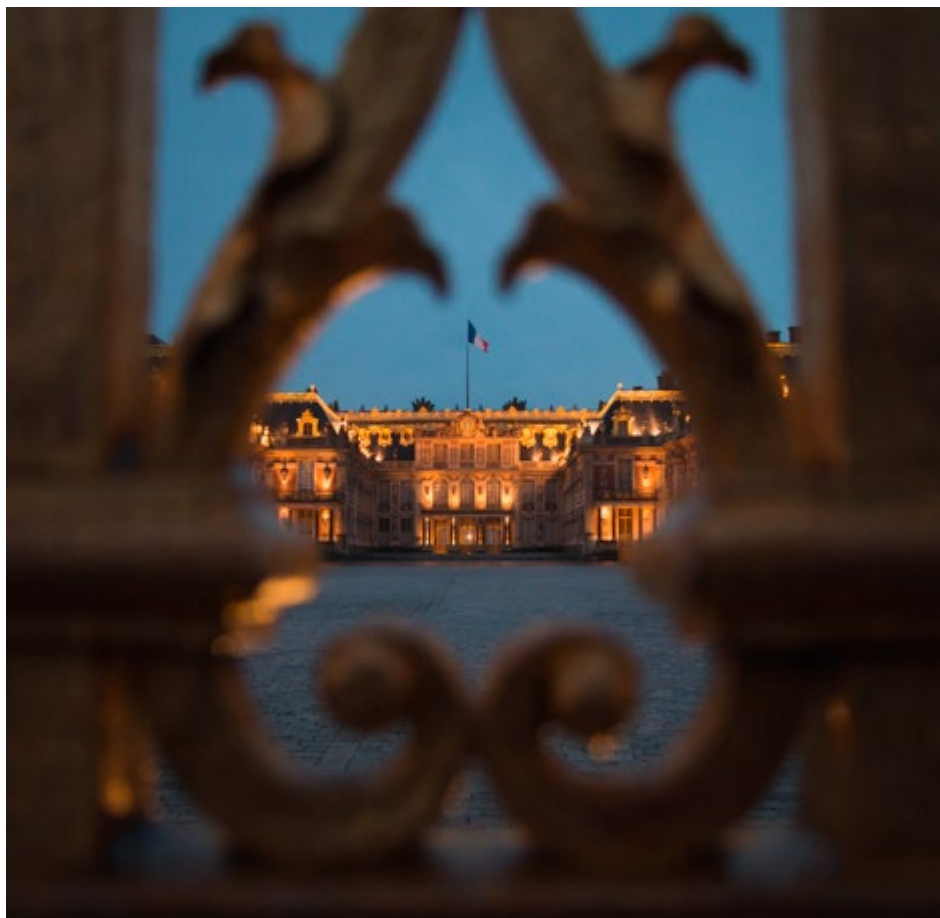
Angelika Pellegrino



Nancy Pocoli



Nancy Pocoli



Katelyn Cusick
“Versailles”



Katelyn Cusick
"Just Reminding You"



Katelyn Cusick

“Returning to Mont Saint Michel”

“I didn’t get to spend much time with my great grandfather because he passed away about 6 years into my life. My mother passed down to me a small stack of black and white photographs he had taken during WWII. They were depicting the landscape of Mont Saint Michel in Normandy, France. In September 2016, while packing for my year of studying abroad in Paris I remembered these photos were still tucked in a book and put them in my suitcase. Two weeks after I arrived in France I was lucky enough to visit Mont Saint Michel. Standing on the footbridge walking up to Mont Saint Michel I took out the photos that had been taken over 60 years beforehand and compared the landscape. Being there with the photos my great grandfather took, I felt like I was stepping back into history, seeing something through his eyes and being so close to him even though it had been 15 years since he passed away.”



Prose

“Word Vomit”

Lilian Tran

Word vomit. Two words that describe too many words that endlessly flow from a waterfall of stupid things that smart people say when they don't know what to say. It is irony at best. Spew words you believe make sense in that moment and regret it that moment after.

I am a mass of word vomit that cannot be contained and when you contain me you constrain me into something that I am not.

I am not something.

The importance of my words mean nothing more than what you want it to mean, and when I mean nothing to you, I mean nothing to everyone.

Does that make sense?

It doesn't make sense and yet it does in my head, I am screaming wall to wall, a congestion of words reverberating off of each other, bouncing around like knives piercing my brain.

When did I become insane?

Most of me believes that it happened before I could even conceive the notion of insanity, before I had even become wrapped up in my own vanity.

The narcissism is stupidly real, the ego unparalleled, and yet I think so lowly of myself.

Most days I cannot look you in the eyes.

So I stare down at the table and I spit out words that make me want to dig a deeper hole and fall.

Fall.

Keep falling.

I am always falling, never crawling up but always, ever always falling down.

But when I look up and see that your gaze has never shifted I stare back and I word vomit.

I throw up words that mean so much to me but mean so little to you and I watch myself die inside.

I feel pieces of me aching away with every wretched word I retch at you.

Why do I feel like no matter how much I breathe I cannot grasp enough oxygen when I am around you?

Not just you, but every tormented form of you.

So I keep vomiting words. They pour profusely from my mouth like a tide crashing over a broken shore, nothing able to stop its destruction. So I deconstruct.

And as I fall apart, a part of me continues to word vomit.

You hate that.

You pretend that you don't, but you hate that.

“Tattoo”

Brenna Lopes

Tattoos. She is tattooed. Words and symbols hide beneath her clothes, swirling over her skin in a noiseless symphony of private meaning. Nine, there are. Nine chapters of an infinite story. Nine visible aspects of her soul. Tattoos? They say. You have tattoos? She shies away, because who is brave enough to share one's soul with the unaware, the unconcerned? Yes, I have them, she'll say. Well what are they, let me see! No, no, she thinks, for she doesn't want to explain the awful deep parts of her. It's a long story, she'll say with a friendly smile when they ask about each one, for how can she say that she's taken pieces of her soul and had them permanently woven into her skin, that she's joined her spirit and her body, that an explanation of just one would take hours, days, years, a lifetime. What happens when you're old, they say, ad your skin sags and wrinkles, creases and withers? Well, she wants to say, my tattoos will sag and wrinkle, crease and wither. They are her and she is them. Why shouldn't her soul grow with her body? And why shouldn't those visible parts of it die when she does, to make a clean canvas for the soul once more so that its next life can get new tattoos, and new tattoos, and new tattoos? She wants to say all of that. She wants to tell them how painfully beautiful it was to extract these things from inside the inside of the inside of her. She wants to tell them the joy and serenity she feels having these swirling letters, these constellations, these young rebellions, these sly

eyes, that wordsmith's mustache, these deathly, dead, lovely hallows, this ode to the renaissance bisected by that ode to her soul's professor, these initials of Martin's mantra and Hopkin's tragic truth, Orion's prideful stance and the two eternal, celestial, destined lovers, and Sappho's word, and Blake's microcosmic cosmos all etched onto her skin. She wishes she could describe the comfort, the serenity, the fear, the truth they bring her. But she keeps it simple: she says, "It's a long story."

"The Cinema" **Sharyn Gladstone**

My parents would have liked me home by two o'clock each day, but I never made it back before five. They didn't worry—or at least I don't think they did—because they knew I was with my friends and we were off doing something fun. We weren't troublemakers, but we would pull cans from the trash bins of local shops and then kick them around in the center of town. Sometimes we would throw them against the cracked panels of the exterior of our local cinema. It was a dilapidated shack, like a haunted house with no windows that would light up our dark neighborhood in neon, leading us to lands of make believe that we could have only dreamed of.

Once in a while, we'd make enough money from chores or doing small deeds for people in town that we could actually go inside. We'd get a ticket from the volatile old clerk who detested our youthful energy. We'd run inside and grab a seat and try to beat everyone to the front row—which we later found out wasn't much of a race. Once the film would start playing, I'd usually fall asleep. I hated those things. We'd watch people move around for what felt like forever, and they would never say anything. Sure there were title cards, but I wasn't really into reading. But there was one time that I awoke before my friends could shake me. And then I saw someone on the screen. I rose from my comfortable slump with such amazement in my cloudy eyes. Who were they? They didn't have a name. Not one that I could hear or understand. But I wanted to know. And the only reason I kept spending my money at that theater was to find out.

It was only a matter of time before I decided I wanted to work there. I had to be brave like the cowboys and soldiers in the movies and ask the old clerk—who also owned the theater—for a job. He only agreed seeing that I could complete small tasks that he did not want to do—and that I was too young to know I should be paid. I would walk up and down the aisles of seats after a screening had ended to collect moviegoers' trash in a small, rusty wagon. While I didn't enjoy the cleanup, I did get to watch the films. I would sneak into the back of the theater and find a comfortable lean against the back wall. The light from the projection booth would shine in a straight line just above my head. If I made any sudden movement, my head would absorb the stories—and people would surely notice if the screen turned black prematurely.

Most of the films would play at the cinema for weeks at a time. But people still lined up out the door to see them. I'd usually get bored after a few viewings, so I would just refocus my gaze down onto the people. I watched their eyes dance in the reflections of black and white and gentle caresses of shadow blanket them in their chairs. I wanted so badly to lift my little hands into the projection and watch the stories unfold in my hands on my own private screen. Sometimes I would and the silhouettes of my fingers would appear on the screen. The people were quick to turn around to the booth where they would see me leaning against the wall and scold me for my interruption.

I searched those faces in the theater and faces in the streets or in my neighborhood. None were ever like the faces I saw on the screen. There was a peculiar happiness that actors showed to one another, like life had only shown them kindness and that regardless of people treating them terribly and making them cry, they were always able to find a way to smile again. In my town, everyone seemed sullen. Like they had given up. That going to work day in and day out was some kind of repentance for selling their souls to fantasies of greed. I would have been lucky as a child to have seen faces that looked as happy as those on screen. But perhaps the cinema offered no more than laughter, or a distraction, for once you left the cinema, people became nothing more than ghosts who may never smile back at you.

I couldn't help but stare. It was just so odd. It seemed wrong. A crowd of people gathered on the screen. It looked like the end of a war. People clapping and dancing around, cheering and embracing while the anguish of battle burst from their eyes and mouths. The audience was gasping and yelling at the projection. No one could believe their eyes. The people in the movie, the actors we had grown accustomed to, the stories we had been expanding inside our heads. They were talking to us. Telling us what was and what might be. How they were feeling.

How was I feeling? I didn't know. The silence had been sliced and noise had been born into my private atmosphere. I needed that air back.

I hurried out the cinema doors and staggered out into the street. My head hurt, my heart was pounding and I felt like I couldn't hear. I imagined the faces on the screen. So bright, flickering with smiles and laughter. And I had just heard that laughing. I heard why they were smiling. I stood still with my arms behind my head, trying to get more air. Around me were droves of people, too busy to look at me. They were carrying on. And for once—instead of staring—I tried to listen.

They moved along. They conversed about all things. They were all speaking to each other, but none of them were talking to me. After a while, I slouched my way back inside that theater. And I stopped watching the movies. I stood in the lobby, broom in hand, anxiously awaiting to be called by the old clerk for cleanup duty. I leaned against the wall trying to daydream and block out whatever muffles of sound I was picking up from the films playing in the next room. There were spiders in the corners I neglected to kill, spinning webs. I couldn't bring it upon myself to kill them. I felt I was tied to them in some way. Like I was shackled but squirming in the dungeon of a place I had come to un-love.

I'm leaning against a wall now. They're tearing down the cinema. I can't hear a thing. And I think it's better off that way. I have tried my whole life to recall what I loved and how it was removed, but watching this little shack be dismantled, I can't help but listen. I'm closing my eyes and trying to remember. There were bright faces that stuttered in the light along with triumphant symphonies of admiration and love. I could put moving pictures on my hands, and then I went outside and saw real people. I don't think anyone can see me right now, I'm trying to keep my distance. I can't see them well anymore; my sight went away. Wars are vicious even when they are not being filmed and paraded around to audiences. Faces are stained with words that cannot be said and I am left watching these pictures in my mind, these people, all moving away from the scenes of life with no words. The people around me remain quiet—speechless from what they have seen. And I, in my own private cinema, am leaning against a wall in solidarity, silently suffocating with everything they say.

“What if He Stifled His Cough?” Emily Jane Nayer

Blow away faint, evergreen leaf. Hitch a ride with the windy waves that make the curtains flutter ever so gently and caress the thin walls of this shattered apartment. Walls that carry the sounds of whispers, kisses, and child's play. How comfortable this pillow over my head has become, trying to muffle the bellows of deep and sharp voices coming from inside and out. Detach yourself from this life, little leaf, for you are much too pure to be watched, picked, and ripped by the hands of the young or the hands of the troubled. I have killed many of your kind but not from hatred, no, but from the rage that rips through me like the split second between the drop of the soil onto the coffin longing to be opened one last time and when it lands, splattering against the hardwood. Knock, knock, knock go the little grains but begone! murmurs the tender breeze. Save yourself, young one. Don't let it be the last you see of this world as a forlorn one. Blow away faint, evergreen leaf. Far off where the dead never die and the living never cut open their hearts and bleed out their cries. Do not worry, my child for I will come along in due time. Long before these clammy hands, that hold the gun pointed up and down, up and down, like a swing on a playground, let themselves fall on their own. Long before I hear the knock, knock, knock of the dirt plummeting into darkness for I shall not be the one to awaken from this miserable and pitiful world anymore. Don't wait up, little one. I am right behind you.

* * *

Feebly, the pale light seeped through the cracks of my eyelashes. I had forgotten to shut the lavish, lavender curtains of my room, allowing the rays of the bright sun to stream in like an unwelcome guest. Although the sun was at its peak, the air was frigid and I was surrounded by several blankets of different shades, from midnight blue to rose red to ivory white. All that stuck out from underneath the mountain of cloth were the toes of my left foot and my flushed face. Untangling myself from the grasps of the warmth begging to pull me back into bed, I pushed aside the unbearable desire and let my bare feet touch the chilly wooden floor that constantly gave me splinters. I know I should have worn something on my feet to protect them, but I hated wearing slippers. I had gotten a pair for Christmas just a few weeks ago from my mother and they still stand where I had left them, right next to all the slippers my mother gave me for Christmas every year, in my cramped closet. Untouched except by an accumulation of dust particles.

Tilting my head to the left, I felt the stiff bones in my neck release a set of quiet cracks, soft whispers of consolation. Breathing in, I counted to three and heaved myself off from the luxury I call my bed, letting it squeak unsatisfactorily. I raised myself up onto my tippy toes and tilted my ankles outward, letting them pop

out from their fixed state. Planting both my feet back flat onto the floor, I took four steps over to the massive window that spread across half of the cream-colored wall, located to the left of my cluttered full-sized bed and with my arms stretched above my head, I yawned.

Throwing on a black robe, I slid open the balcony door, letting the cool breeze envelop my bare calves and feet. Stepping onto the minuscule balcony, I curled my toes against the fraying carpet that hid the cold stone beneath and leaned against the metal railing with my hands dangling over the edge. A few stories below was a pathway. Along it stood benches with green peeling paint. An elderly man sat on one with his cane propped against his thigh and a newspaper before him, his round eyeglasses peeped over the top.

My gaze wandered from bench to bench, until coming upon a leaf. It was a shade of emerald with five blades sticking out from the stem, a high five from nature. As the breeze blew wisps of my tangled hair from my face, the leaf left its temporary spot and fluttered in the wind, flipping multiple times and spinning on its axis before landing on the aged man's paper.

With a rippling cough, he gave one shake of the news and the leaf was off once again, dodging the trees that bordered the pathway to my home sweet home and to the bustling sidewalk where it dove under the feet of skipping children and leapt over intertwined hands of a couple and while it tried to make its way through the swarm of chatting folks, the wind pushed it back, forcing it to oblige and dance into the streets where cars zoomed by. This way and that, under and over, back and forth the leaf fluttered until at last the red light paused the booming commotion and the breeze once again grasped one of the leaf's five blades, taking it for a midair waltz.

I let go of the metal railing, unaware that I had been tightly gripping it as I kept watch over the leaf, now a speck in the radiant blue sky. I took a step back and wiped my clammy palms against the sides of the robe, letting my eyes wander through the trees of red, yellow, and orange leaves. A survivor at last.

“Breathe.”

Ariana Messana

He thinks I should breathe. He says lean on me and I'll lean on you in return. We'll go back to the good old days when we had nothing but bare feet and quarters in our pockets. Breathe. Feel the make believe kisses and the endless afternoons crushed in between the delicate lines of your sweet hands. Breathe. For the times that I made you cry and the times that I didn't. You are utterly welcome. Anything. Breathe. Remember me as I was. The little boy with the freckles the size of constellations. Your boy. Forever and ever. Just breathe.

“21”

Hannah Cechini

0. A few months ago, I did the math. My birthday is November 7th and babies develop in 9 months. 9 months before November 7th is approximately February 14th - Valentine's Day... Was I conceived on Valentine's Day? Gross, but I needed confirmation so I asked my mom the question. She said that yes, I had been created in an explosion of Valentine's Day romance. I think I am going to puke, I replied. I imagine my mother, bustling around the kitchen of my parents' first New England apartment, Doting Wife in action, laying out a candle-lit dinner in anticipation of Mr. Business Man to come heroically home. I wonder if Mr. Business Man's girlfriend fantasized about this very scenario.

3. The interior of the motel rooms looked a lot like the one in Psycho, but I wouldn't see that movie for another 12 or so years. All in a row, the small buildings stood at attention against the crystalline blue sky, the impossibly close sun beating down on their shingles. Across the one lane desert road that they were situated on, burning pink rock formations guarded the way to the powdered blue mountains in the distance. It was hot and dusty and the door to our motel room stood swinging in the sunlight, the chain bolt glinting. A pair of bundled up socks flew past my head. Then another... Then another... I sat there, knees crossed crisscross applesauce on the scratchy motel bed duvet, watching the ballet of airborne footwear play out before my eyes.

The socks, having just been washed, were piling up in the sandy parking spaces outside after being hurled out of my screaming mother's hand and out the door. I sprang up, half because the yelling of my parents was becoming overwhelming, and half because all of our socks were being thrown out the door.

I darted out into the sunlight, grabbing an armful of socks and scurrying back inside, dumping them safely into a suitcase. But my mother kept throwing them (Where did she get so many socks from?) and my father kept yelling. How could my mom have been so stupid as to mix up his socks and my grandfather's socks on this family vacation? My mom didn't say "fuck you" out loud in response, but the rapidly growing pile of socks outside spelled it out. I wished she would stop throwing the socks. Couldn't she see that she was ruining my loyal sock-collecting duties?

I haven't been back to the Grand Canyon since that summer of '99.

6. My dad sat me down and my mom loomed in the corner, probably wishing that she had laser vision so that she could just disintegrate him right then and there. He asked me if I remembered how Kobe Bryant had a "friend" (a lady "friend") and because of that he had to break up with his wife. I thought back to my Kobe Bryant jersey hanging in my closet. They waited for my answer, and I said yes. My mother's words pushed his head into a shameful hang ("Goddammit Mark just tell her the truth."). So then I understood, Dad and Mom were splitting up. My mom told me later that Dad had a naked girl in his hotel room. I wondered why she was telling me this and if I'd be able to forget it; it made me feel gross. I don't remember the rest of that night, but I do remember another night when hairdryers and plates were being thrown like snowballs. I wished they were throwing socks.

9. I was fumbling with the second hand digital camera that I'd been given in order to record my adventures in South Africa. The tires underneath us rumbled and rattled over the dirt road (if it could even be called a road), sending orange dust flying into the otherwise cloudless day and jostling the tank-like bus that was zipping us around the reserve. I had seen more animals than I could count that day and was desperately trying to mentally catalogue the lions' sandy fur and the giraffes' netted patterns and the elephants' massive tusks and the rhinos' menacing stance in the middle of the road. All of the African safari animals that I had learned about throughout my childhood were suddenly right there in front of me. I was an intruder on their homeland.

My mom noticed me struggling with the camera and took it from my hands. Exasperated, she urged me, "Take a picture with your mind!" So, I turned my head towards the wall of mountains that enclosed us in the Serengeti valley. The sky's expanse towered above the mountains, holding the sun up as it illuminated the rippling coffee mountainside dotted with shrubby trees. The sun shone like it always does before a major storm: eerie and ominous, begging you to come outside and daring you to stay for the impending torrents of rain. At the foot of the mountain the plains sprawled out, sparsely punctuated by Acacia trees and hiding animals; they knew the rain was coming, but they didn't warn us. When the sky finally did open up, sheets of rain pelted the earth, the bus, the animals, everything. The thunder cheered on the rain, crackling and exploding with streaks of electricity. The bus driver pushed the pedal to the ground and we pressed on, anxious to get back to our not much more sheltered campsite and to not get struck by lightning. We zoomed by a giraffe, stripping leaves off of a tree with its tongue, apparently unaware of the hurricane-like squall that it was enveloped in. I laughed.

When we finally got back, my grandfather was sitting in front of a campfire, balancing a huge umbrella and a plate full of grilled ox tail, his head lamp slicing through the torrential downpour and umbrella barely providing shelter.

12. In middle school everyone had to take a cooking class and a sewing class. During the second half of my 7th grade year I took the required sewing class, noticing (begrudgingly) on the first day that I was unfamiliar with most of the kids in the class. Whatever.

The teacher stood in front of the classroom and instructed us to find a partner and a sewing machine, the fluorescent lights shining off of her balding scalp. I figured I'd let someone else come to me because I didn't know any of these kids and I was shy. I didn't have to wait too long before a girl introduced herself as Jenna and asked to be my partner. Blinking, a little caught off guard, I accepted. Wow, this girl was really pretty. We joked and got along pretty well, and I was struck by her smile and her laugh and the weird nervousness that was dancing around in my stomach.

By the end of the semester, I had a full-blown, big, fat lesbian crush on this girl. Why was I thinking about what her lips might taste like instead of worrying about the fact that I didn't have a boyfriend? Do I have a crush on a girl? Am I gay?

Just like any other millennial, I took to the internet. I asked YouTube "How do you know if you're gay?" and it answered with a multitude of videos. I clicked on the first one. It didn't offer very many answers, but I settled on the fact that I was at least bi-curious. Next on my to-do list was to confess my undying pubescent love for Jenna. The plan unfolded in my head: I would tell her on the last day of school so that I wouldn't have to see her the next day. Genius.

That fateful day came, and the bell rang at 2:39 PM, indicating that summer had begun. Jenna said "Bye, fuck face," smiled at me and left. I couldn't wait to tell her that I was in love with her and have her fall into my arms like a sighing princess. When I got home, we Skyped and I beat around the bush, not sure how to do the task at hand.

Finally, I just spit it out and the words hung suspended in the air. They were knocked to the ground with an "Oh...", followed by nervous laughter. Almost exactly a year later Jenna told me that I was disgusting and deserved to die and that she never wanted to talk to me again. I got my first girlfriend not too long after. Joke's on you, Jenna.

15. When my mom was informed by my Facebook-snooping father and stepmother that I had a girlfriend and was therefore gay, she decided that the best plan of action was to take me to a local sushi restaurant and confront me about it over some edamame. Of course, I denied it, lied until I could feel the panic burning under my skin. When I admitted it, we both cried. She was crying because she was disappointed. I was crying because I was fucking terrified.

After trying to rationalize these unnatural feelings and suggesting that it was just a phase, my mom paid for the food before it even came out and we abandoned our dinner date turned disaster. Silence clogged the car's cabin on the way home and I felt like I was suffocating. When we pulled into our driveway I jumped out of the car and started walking. Not having a specific destination in mind, I ended up at a nearby pond and I crouched in a patch of wildflowers and rocks. What a combination.

I called my friend Sarah and said, "Something really bad happened and I think I am going to hurt myself." I don't know why; I had never done that before. She told me not to and I said that I wouldn't. I lied. In the shower that night, I tested the elasticity of my left wrist with a disposable razor. The blood formed rivulets down my fingers and swirled playfully down the drain. It was strikingly red against the white bathtub. I thought about how blood only turned red when it came into contact with oxygen. Today was my blood's lucky day. I kept slicing, drunk on the glory of being able to control the blood flow and the size and shape of the cuts and the pressure of the razor, when the rest of my life was spinning utterly out of control. It was intoxicating, and I was hooked for the next 3 years.

After that first time, it didn't take long for me to graduate to kitchen knives.

18. On my 18th birthday, my girlfriend (now best friend) gave me a Marlboro menthol cigarette and drove off to her house. I followed in my car (because I had to work early the next day), excited about the upcoming sloppy, drunken sex that I knew some Coronas would encourage us to have on her basement couch. I rolled down my windows and lit that cigarette - my first cigarette. As I followed Rachel's green Lincoln down the winding back roads, I felt the nicotine take my hands off of the steering wheel and replace them with its own. My entire body buzzed and my brain could not make the connection between my tires and the road. I swerved, feeling like I was drunk, feeling stupid. I couldn't think, my hands were numb, and the music blaring from my sound system was deafening. Soon, the buzzing metamorphosed into a barrel wave, crashing over me again and again and again and sweeping me away in its current. Then it stopped. I definitely was not prepared for something as simple as a cigarette to bowl me over like that. Was I just being a pussy?

When I got to Rachel's house, I stepped out of my car, knees wobbling. "Can I have another cigarette?"

21. I'm almost there. In 8 months I won't have to nervously hand my fake ID to the Walgreens cashier who doesn't actually give a shit about some underage college kid buying shitty wine. Sometimes when I'm walking down the street in Boston, flanked by a group of beautiful people that I love with all my heart - my friends, my everything - I can't believe it. Is life finally falling into place? Am I actually on the way to completing a degree in order to get my dream job? Am I really living in this beautiful city? Did I really find true happiness... finally? I never thought that it would be me who would flip that switch on the back of my brain. Everything used to be gray and hopeless, but the flowers from Boston's Public Garden are shoving themselves through the cracks in my mind's sidewalk; I can feel it.

Sometimes I still feel like that little kid running in and out of that motel room, desperately grasping at that pile of socks; life can be pretty hectic in that way and sometimes it feels like you're going to be running for your life, for the rest of your life. But I've learned that sometimes it's okay to leave those socks in the sun: it warms them up.

“Waitress” **Sofia Ohrynowicz**

There was that one slice of cake I served about every three days, at the restaurant and I swore I'd have it on my last day working at that Italian place that summer. The customers might have ordered the tiramisu or cannoli, the chocolate cake or cheesecake with the ice cream; the real favorite was the snicker bar blitz. It's a creamy motherfucker, like a cheesecake had sex with a snickers bar, morphed into one under a blanket of whipped cream in a proud, messy heap. It said 'look at me, at what I have become', and it didn't care.

It's a dish we served cold. We left it splayed at the front of the refrigerator by the cash register. We wanted the customers to see it, so it stayed there the entire day in a tempting glow from the light. That way, you couldn't say no, especially when we were running low. You wanted a slice before there were none left. And it worked, especially with the midday lunch takeout orders. They would run in, see the fridge before they saw the cash register, and with mouths watering, they asked for a slice to be added to

the order. Since that bumped up the price, I cashed in from their lunch rush every Tuesday afternoon.

The last day came. I was going to get that slice before I left that night. The high school waiters were slacking because it was a slow, late night. Earlier I saw them hovering over the cake, stealing a slice for dinner before our anticipated busy night. They always took a slice before work or when it was too early to close but too late for anyone to come in. They'd slip it out, spray whipped cream over it, slide into a corner table of the dining area, and hunch over. They ate, guarding themselves from view, hiding ecstasy as though they were doing something they shouldn't be, smiling to themselves with each satisfying lick.

I know I could have tried it before my last day, but it wouldn't have been special. I would have worked a summer with slacking waiters and bosses who threw all the work on me, but got to eat cake. It wouldn't have meant anything. There wouldn't be the blaring trumpets as the fork slid between my lips. No sparks when the cream pooled from the heat of my mouth. But that night, it was time. An hour before closing, I sauntered past the three waiters. I tugged my apron string and let it fall to my feet. The boys watched. They sat in front of the refrigerator that had one slice of cake. In silence, as if waiting for me to reach for it, I picked up my tip money from the register and stopped at the fridge.

I gave it one look over, examining how lonely it was. It was the last slice. I knew I should have been tempted because it had been waiting for me the whole summer. We had served together, made people feel guiltily happy together. But my stomach didn't move. I wasn't in the mood for cake after all, and I left it there for the boys to devour.

"Lament Six Feet Under" Catarina Protano

I feel remorse for a period in my life that stems back so many years, curling through time like a golden rope that ties around my neck and lifts me into the air. My lips grow cold and blue, my cheeks lose their rosiness and my body begins to rot under the cold earth. It stains my cheeks with mud, cakes my fingernails, and scrapes my throat where lies and untold truths settle and wither away into nothingness.

I'm trapped under that earth, unmoving yet flailing every bone and muscle, clawing at my constraints and screaming until my voice is raw and I can no longer make noise. Yet I was never able to make any noise to begin with. I was never able to scream or claw or struggle, because I was trapped in inky darkness, darkness that had become so commonplace that I forgot what the light was, and when it caressed me once again with a motherly embrace, I did not know how to accept its love in return.

The light blinds me, its golden rays so potent on my skin that I cower away from it and reject it, only feeling warmth in the familiar coldness I have come to know. It does not fight, only promises me that I know where to find it when I'm ready, and leaves without another sound.

I am alone again under the earth, yet this time you're there lying with me, our fingers knotted together, your hair spilling over the edge of the mattress we lay upon, your eyes filled with fire as you thrust and I scream, but nothing escapes my lips. You're beautiful, you tell me, but I can't hear you. My heart is in my throat and I taste metal, while your tongue explores mine. My nails dig into the hot skin of your neck, leaving tiny red slivers while you leave burning red stains on my ass and purple bruises on my forearms.

I lay there, naked and shivering, watching as your rib cage rises and falls with each wild breath. The hair on your chest bristles, my legs are still splayed

I lay there, naked and shivering, watching as your rib cage rises and falls with each wild breath. The hair on your chest bristles, my legs are still splayed like an open door. You ask if this is the first time anyone has ever seen me naked and I reply with a quiet no. Your brows knit and you try not to show your disappointment, but it's etched deeply into the harsh lines of your face.

You're the first one to trace your lips along the slope of my breasts, to gaze upon my untouched skin, and admire the width of my hips, but you've never peeled back the layers of skin and bone to see my heart thundering like a storm. You've never even looked at me at all.

You get up and I watch you tug on your worn jeans and lace your weathered boots. We both sit there in silence for a moment before you slam the door. The only trace of you are the puckered scratches raked across my shoulder blades like the raw veins of lightning streaked across a wicked sky. And for once, I wish the light was there to blind me.

“The Path”

Jon-Luc Jarboe

It's so dark, he thought as he gazed into the entrance of the path. Trees crowded against each other, their trunks, dark and swollen, and roots had fused into an overgrown wall of vegetation. The entrance itself was a rudely cut out hole in this wall. As he gazed deeply into the darkness, he could feel a rush of cold wind fly out like the breath of some beast.

Earlier, he had celebrated his birthday, sharing laughter with friends and family as they joked about how young he used to be. How his cheeks were once so pinchable and chubby, and how as a child he had been such a rascal. But that was all behind him now, they said, he was now old enough to become a part of the community and take on responsibilities. That was, if he could walk the path.

He had always wondered about the path, why it wasn't talked about, why it was kept far from the village, why no one seemed to give any details or explain why it was a path at all. All that was said was that when the time came, you would be tasked with walking the path through the forest and when you were done you would be an adult. They always said not to fret over it, when the time came, he would know exactly what to do. But his mind was blank as he stood there, his stomach growing weaker as his mind told him to walk away. But he knew, he couldn't be a coward and run away. And so, he took a few hesitant steps forward into the entrance. Then another few, until he was soon underneath the canopy of fused trees. He looked to his feet and saw a narrow-trodden path made of dirt, with patches of grass and moss growing on it, that led deeper into the woods. He breathed in deeply, and told himself, *there's nothing to fear, it's just a path, no different than the other ones you've walked on before, so relax*. And so, he walked onward into the forest. But, it wasn't long before the young man found himself at a fork in the road. *Which way do I go*, he thought, *they can't both be right?* He grew anxious, pressure suffocated his brain and heart. *I guess, if I'm wrong, I'll just walk back and try the other one*. He continued onward, but the fear and anxiety of his decision persisted as he went.

As he continued walking, he slowly began to calm down and discover how beautiful his surroundings were. There was a sweet smell of pine floating around him while golden rays of sunlight streamed through the trees, turning the grass into a layer of emerald gems. He wondered why no one came down the path. *Perhaps, I should come here again in secret*. But as he thought this, he felt pressure on his right foot as he kicked a small object out of the earth. He looked down to discover a stone, no bigger than the palm of his hand lying on the path. *That's odd*, he thought, *I haven't seen any other stones on the path*. He reached down to pick it up, but instantly threw it back as though it were a cobra bearing its fangs. He felt a shock run up his arm as it began to convulse and constrict like a python. He attempted to hold it down with his other hand, but it kept moving and wriggling. It then collapsed to his side, and he could move it again. *What was that?* He stared at the stone, as a shadow fell onto it. He turned and saw the sun's white and gold colors changing to orange and red. *I've got to get moving before it gets any later*. He walked cautiously around the stone as though it were a pit of spikes and continued forward.

What an odd feeling. He tried to imagine the way his arm struggled and moved on its own, but found himself unable. *Was that real, couldn't have been, but...* he looked back. The stone with its gray texture hadn't moved an inch. He looked over to the sun, *I know I shouldn't, but one more touch should be enough*. No, he tried to tell himself, *I have to get moving. But...just one more*. He walked back and grabbed the stone again. His pupils dilated as his arm writhed out of control. The feeling of warmth and energy rose through his shoulder and into his torso. It wasn't long before his whole body moved to the stone's chaotic music, dancing in circles, his head swirled with pleasure as his eyes fluttered rapidly. His body dropped to the ground and his hand released the stone. He laid on his back, his chest rapidly moving as he tried to swallow air into his lungs. *Wow!*

He looked over and his heart sunk. Dusk had emerged. *Oh, no*. He hoisted himself up, and was about to run when he noticed the stone. He scooped it up and placed it into his pocket. *For later*, he thought. His legs stretched forward as they raced past each other kicking up dirt as he tried to make up for lost time. But as he ran, he heard a voice in his head begin talking. ***Why are you running? You're just tiring yourself out, relax, you've got time. No, I have to keep moving. No, you don't, you're just doing it because you think you need to.*** The young man stopped. *What? Forget about it, it's getting dark you need to rest, just in case...*

In the distance the cry of a lone wolf echoed. The young man's pupils grew wide, *I should rest*. And so, he slowed his pace as the moon rose over the horizon, changing the sky to a muddy blue. He continued walking looking deeper into the forest for the path's end. His head itched, his body felt hot, and he was growing frustrated. He looked down to his pocket. *No! I can't stay here any longer, but...* he felt something flutter in his stomach. *...I want to hold it so bad*. He looked to his left then right and took the stone out of his pocket, firmly gripping it. Energy slowly filled his body again; his skin cooled, his head grew free of pain, and he became content.

He grinned, *I knew it was a good idea to hold it, so what was I so afraid of? Becoming addicted to it?* He giggled at the thought. It wasn't long before the young man arrived at another fork in the path. *Hold on, I need to focus.* And so, he put the stone into his pocket and tried to focus his thoughts. But all he could think about was the stone. ***Touch it. No! Touch it.*** His face flushed with frustration. *Why can't the path be easy, what's the point of it all?* He scratched the back of his neck. *And why am I so damn itchy!* He felt something wet at the bottom of his skull. In disgust his hand flinched as though it had touched a leech. He frantically tried to grab it, but each time he got a grip, the thing slipped quickly out of his hold. His mind raced as he thought of the worst possible scenarios while screaming like a child. He grabbed the stone again, looking for comfort. Heat grew out of his hand and flowed through his body. His breath slowed and his body slumped. Thoughts of panic drifted off from his mind. *It's nothing*, he thought looking down at the gray rock. *It's probably just some wet hair.* Content, he put the stone away. *Now, I need to get moving. But, where am I again?* The young man looked around trying to see the landscape. *Where did this fog come from?* He looked for the sky and the dark wooded trees, but only saw white. Even the ground had become alabaster as though clouds had consumed the Earth. It felt as though he was trapped in a plastic bag unable to escape as the thick air entered his mouth and nostrils like smoke.

No, if I can't find my way, then everyone will know...I'll say it wasn't my fault, it was the fog and this stone that...No...no one will accept that. They know I'm too capable to be misled by something as miniscule as a stone. He sighed, gazing blankly at his ashen surroundings. *Why couldn't this have been simple?* He could feel small tears form at the corners of his eyes as his heart turned in his chest. *No! I can't cry, a man doesn't cry, not unless his arm is being torn off.* He reached for his pocket, this should calm me down. His face grew cold. His body became light. His heart slowed to a crawl and the tears faded. As he held the stone, he could feel his thoughts fading away. The fog grew denser until even he could not see his own body. *Hmm, but what's that over there?* Amidst the white, moved a stark black creature on its four legs. Its fur was curled into soft black horns. Its tail was balding and swung side-to-side like a sword. Slowly and silently, it trekked ahead of the young man seemingly unaware of his presence. *I wonder...* he gripped the stone tighter...*what its fur feels like.* Forgetting the path, he began to follow the creature. When it changed direction, so did he, when it moved, he moved, and when it stopped, he stopped. His eyes focused on the tar-black coat and nothing else. Once, the creature walked close to his open hand and he gained the chance to pet it. His hand slid across its greasy back collecting a wet trail of dark goo. The creature stopped moving and gazed up at him with yellow eyes, its crimson mouth pouting. The young man looked beyond the animal and saw before him a lake of ink. Its water darker than the night sky. He felt a bit apprehensive, *maybe I should go back...* but soon heat grew out of the stone once more and his thoughts faded as pleasure took over. He took a step forward into the lake, the water warm and welcoming as it formed over his thighs. He sunk deeper and walked further out. The wolf followed supporting the arm holding the stone. "Thanks", the young man said, the wolf did not reply.

The lake was calm, its water cozy and thick as gel. The two swam deep into the center of it, passing rocks jutting from the surface like teeth covered in rusted chains. The young man was focused on the warmth of the lake; it reminded him of the comfort of his bed sheets when he awoke. *Maybe I should take a nap when he's done taking me where we're going*, he thought. Arriving at the center of the lake where a jagged piece of obsidian sat, the wolf left his arm and swam below. Unaware to the young man, below the murky water, the beast had grabbed leg cuffs with its mouth and proceeded to attach chains to the young man's legs. The creature was about to leave, when it saw the young man's legs were uninjured. Its cavernous mouth opened, revealing a series of silver needle-like teeth that clamped onto the young man's leg. Up above, he screeched in pain, dropping the stone from his hand. He tried to swim away but flinched, feeling an intense, throbbing pain in his right leg. He couldn't move. Below, the creature's eyes lit up. It opened its jaws again, greedily sucking in the blood like rare wine. The young man howled, and grew catatonic. The water surrounding him turned a dark red with swirls of ruby popping from below the surface. He tried to swim again, but was unable to move an inch without screaming in pain. *Where's the stone? Where's the stone!* He grew panicked as he groped in his soggy pants for the rock, but found that it was lost to him forever beneath the water's depths. Underneath, the wolf's fur began pulling apart, floating to the surface, as its bones grew and changed, tearing apart its skin as it transformed into something more.

The young man was silent unable to speak as wet tears flowed down his face. *I have to get out. I have to get home, I don't want to die...* He then saw a new face grow from the sludge surrounding him. Its mouth concealed silver daggers as teeth arranged into a smile. Its head appeared in the shape of a dragon with its skin bloated outward like a decomposing corpse, purple veins crisscrossed around underneath its black translucent skin. Its eyes were the same as the wolf's. The young man had to remind himself to breathe as he quickly felt a knot in his throat choking him. The creature rose from the lake and spread its rotting wings in a triumphant pose before flapping them, launching a powerful gust that forced the young man beneath the waves. As it flew out of the dark waters into the misty sky, it cackled and cried, ***"I've hooked another one; now let's see how long you last!"*** It flew faster and faster circling the lake, summoning harsh winds that dispelled the fog.

The young man felt calm beneath the water. Its warmth and slow movement began to make him drowsy. *Maybe this is just a dream, he thought, I'll wake up soon and it'll be my birthday and I'll walk the path then. But, I'm not sleeping, I need to swim or the chains will drag me down further,* he thought, feeling them pull him deeper into the lake's darkness. *I have to get moving! I have to swim! I can't die here!* But no matter how much he pled and cried, he couldn't summon the will to convince himself to live. *I can't wait here and die.* He began to move his arms clawing against the turgid liquid until his head broke through to air. His eyes opened and his mouth vomited the lake's water out as he swallowed in air. The sky was clear. However, the young man had little time to think before the wind flew at him like a swarm of hornets leaving cuts along his face. He winced and opened his eyes again; above him circling was the creature who had summoned a hurricane. The wind howled and kept pushing him under, leaving more scratches and blisters as he tried to stay up. He swallowed some air and ducked underneath the water for safety. And again found himself sinking into pleasure as his mind grew foggy and tired. It's too hard, he thought. *I should give in. What's the point? It's fine. I'm fine.* The chains dragged him deeper in. *I'm fine, there's no problem. But I have to keep moving. But then you would be in pain. Why not just relax? I can't imagine a death like this being so bad.*

The young man saw the surface growing further away. The light becoming more darkness. His lungs unable to hold out any longer, let go of the remaining air out through his mouth as a series of bubbles. *It's fine,* he thought as his eyes closed and he drifted into the black void of the lake. *I'm not...addicted to the pleasure.* Deeper he fell, the sound of water growing weaker in his ears. The warmth of the lake becoming harder to feel. His eyes flickered open. *Rocks,* he thought, *black rocks all around me covered in chains. People, several colors, several ages, several genders, all tired, all chained, all drifting deeper into bliss.* But, instead of looking away the young man stared at the chained people. Looking at their closed eyes as they all held onto their own stones he thought, *they'll never see, hear, or feel again. They'll live in bliss, peaceful as they give in and feed the lake their final breaths.* But then, he thought, *I won't live to see that either. I need to swim up. No, stay. No. I want to, I need to live. No, you'll just feel pain, you don't want to be in pain, do you?* The young man thought for a second and replied gritting his teeth, "Yes, I do. I want to feel, I want to live." His right leg moved forward, then his left leg. And so, he swam up fighting the desire to stop. His head broke through the lake's surface. He stared up and saw the wolf-dragon circling the sky before being pushed back down by the wind. Determined to live even with the wind cutting his cheeks, he swam further and further away as blood ran down the sides of his face. He felt the tug of the chains, but not as powerful as before. He gazed up and saw the beast hovering and beating its dark wings. The man screamed, "Not today, you monster, today I live!"

Its eyes grew small and pointed, its grin turned into a scowl as it howled, *"I'll see you sink! I'll see your body grow lifeless and grey just like the rest! I won't rest until you fail and drown!"* Its wings mustered a typhoon that obliterated the sky. The man began to swim faster than he had ever before. Though his arms grew weak and hot with pain, he clenched his teeth and moved forward. He swam in rhythm going from one sharp rock to the next, until he saw it, the shore. Its sand turned into jewels in his eyes. The chains' tug was gone, the typhoon's winds subsided, and he climbed his way onto shore and gasped for air. His arms stretched out, enjoying the sharp feeling of the tiny specks of sand prick his skin. *I have to keep moving,* he thought, but as he tried to stand, he now noticed the damage to his leg. It was over.

That was until he saw a low hanging branch, he grabbed it, and hoisted himself up. It was true he couldn't walk or run, but he could limp and crawl forward. Hobbling his way through the rough brush, constantly shouting and cussing, he finally forced his way back onto the path. He never questioned which way to go, *anywhere is better than that lake,* he thought. Along his way, he encountered more stones, some in large piles, some the color of amber and rose. He didn't look at a single one for he knew where he would be if he grabbed any of them. The sky grew from black to blue to lavender, orange, yellow, and red as he reached the end of the path. He fell to his knees and wept at the spectacle and heard himself say, "I need to live, I love life."

"Son?"

The young man turned and saw his father. He firmly hugged him as though he was being blown away by the wind again. Between gasps and sobs, the young man said "I thought I'd never get to see you again."

"I know, I know. Let me help you to your feet. Listen, I know you want to tell me about your time with the beast, how it shook you, but first let's get you inside, so you can begin recovering."

"Wait, you knew about it? Why didn't you tell me?" The young man didn't understand how his father knew of the stone and the creature that used it as bait for travelers on the path.

"Son, there are times when I've wanted to help you, but I knew you had to do it alone. Believe me; I know the horror of the lake." The young man looked at his father's legs, his eyes grew wide, they showed scars left by the chains. More people began to appear, some tugging their shackles, others marked like his father, and some with nothing at all on their legs, the young man looked at his father confused.

"Some of us took the stone along the path, some didn't. Not everyone needs to be guided, to know how important their life is."

"But Dad, I'm weak, I let it take me and almost kill me. I'm not ready to be an adult."

"Son, yes you are. Anyone can be charmed by the beast, you, me, even Granny Georgina. But what separates us from those still in the lake is that we value every breath we take, we live one day at a time, good or bad. That's true strength, and you showed that today."

"Is it over?" The man's father didn't reply. He only shook his head and offered a weak smile in return. The man leaned on his father's shoulder and the two walked home together.

It was on a sunny day, that a familiar shadow loomed near the entrance to the path. His hands shook as he tried to pry himself away from the still forest entrance. His mind echoed for him ***to come in and enjoy***. His stomach fluttered as he thought back to the stone. How warm it was, how smooth it was, how delightful it was in comparison to his life. The young man couldn't help but want it back despite what he may have said at the lake. *One touch wouldn't drag me completely back, right?* he questioned, hoping he was right.

His body yearned to return to the cozy lake waters and his mind begged to be free to think about the forest and its beautiful surroundings. Despite the temptation, he knew he couldn't do it with a clear conscience. He slowly walked his way back home. But as he glanced back at the entrance one final time, he could have sworn he saw the beast in the entrance's darkness, patiently waiting for him to return to The Path.

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