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Expressions

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Spring 2020

### Expressions 2020

Xander Clubine

Delaney Dunne

Cale Edgington

C.C. Griffin

Mark Jones

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# expressions

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# from the editor...

As a judge for the creative writing contest who selects the work for Expressions—along with several faculty members from campuses district-wide—I have noticed over the years that every issue of the journal tends to find its own voice. This is unintentional, of course. However, once you stand back and look at the work as a whole, each of the poems and stories tend to overlap in terms of theme or style. A central preoccupation always seems to lie beneath the writing, like an undercurrent, and often this topic connects to the cultural world around us.

These last few years, the predominate subject of our writers has been a concern with Identity—and not the traditional coming-of-age stories of the past. Instead, these stories and poems reveal a new generation's sense of Self. The writing examines contemporary concepts of gender and sexuality, as well as tensions over race and class. It struggles with the aftermath of trauma, including war violence, sexual assault, and grief over lost loved ones. Not to mention the ever-increasing presence of technology and it's implication on individuality.

The work in this issue of Expressions is a reflection (and response) to a culture that has become fractured by politics and polarization. But in the midst of this division, these stories and poems attempt to find a unity amidst the conflict. They dig into the issues with empathy, discover the nuance within the noise, thereby allowing something entirely human (and humane) to be brought to the surface.

—Marc Dickinson, Editor



PHOTOGRAPHY: KATE CEBAN

# Meet The Authors

**Xander Clubine** lives in Ogden and is pursuing graphic design and digital marketing. They write for Banner News where they work as editor. They enjoy coffee and monkeyshines.

**Delaney Dunne** graduated from DMACC in 2019 and will be attending Iowa State in the fall to major in Psychology. She also plans to continue writing since it is one of her passions.

**Cale Edgington** is a 26-year-old full-time student and veteran currently pursuing an Associate's degree in plans for higher education.

**C.C. Griffin** is currently a second-year student at DMACC. He plans on transferring to the University of Iowa to pursue a degree in creative writing.

**Mark Jones** practiced in Family Medicine for 40 years before retiring in 2018. He now enjoys taking classes at DMACC, especially in creative writing.

**Isabella Nielsen** is a sophomore majoring in general education. She writes for fun in her free time and especially enjoys poetry. She hopes to continue improving her writing skills.

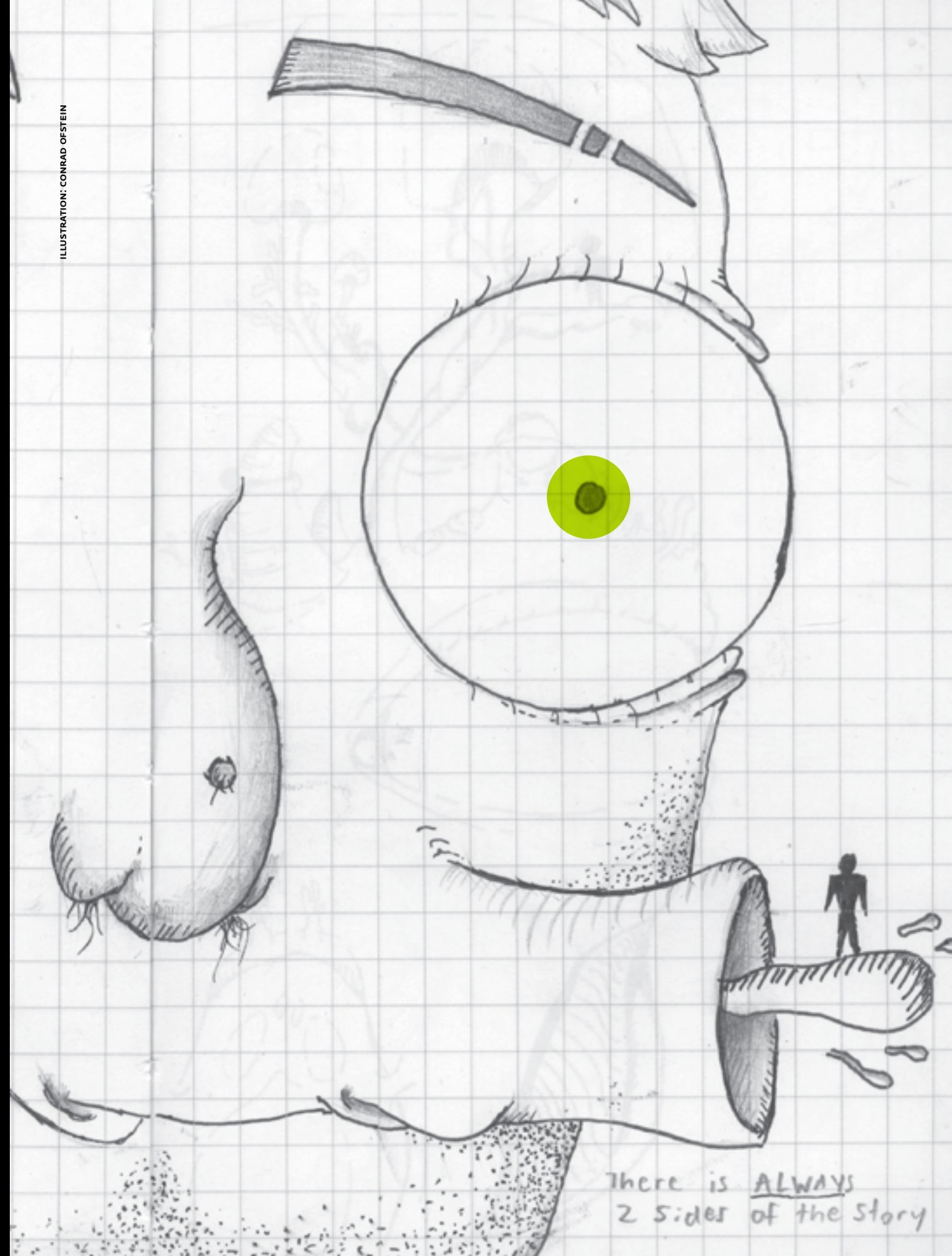
**Jordan Roubion** is an Iowa native, Army intelligence veteran, feminist, bibliophile, and animal-lover. Her first love is writing, but she works full time as a paralegal to pay rent

**Stettson Smith**, age 19, is from Winterset Iowa and will graduate from DMACC West in 2020. He enjoys creative writing and dreams of being an English educator.

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ILLUSTRATION: CONRAD OFSTEIN



There is ALWAYS  
2 sides of the story



# Friend Squad

C.C. GRIFFIN

We were your “Friend Squad”  
when you were young.  
You used to hug us, cuddle us, love  
us. Now we are divided; some  
on shelves, some shoved  
in boxes, some sold off  
to the snot-nosed neighbor.

Bears, dogs, and giraffes alike,  
we were brought together  
for a single purpose. We thought  
we did a bang-up job  
making you happy. Whether playing,  
or soaking up your tears, we  
were there to give you love.

We were happy to have met  
each other. We were happiest  
to have met you. Were you  
not happy being with us? Is that why  
we don't play anymore? Did we  
do something wrong? Do we remind you  
of Mom and Dad? Of memories  
that make you sad? We  
may not understand, but  
we are here for you, those  
who remain awaiting the day  
when you need us again.



HEATHER HORTON

The blue lighter in your hand  
is the same shade as my eye shadow.

*He wouldn't, because he loves you.*

I dress up for you.  
My shaved legs are silky smooth.  
I paint on my face that you  
smear on the couch  
as you push yourself inside  
of me. You promised me a date,  
but instead you etched into my skin  
a day that I can never erase.

Alcohol burns my nose.  
Not unlike the burning of my skin.  
Not unlike the burning of the hot  
tears, the flow from both of us  
like the hose I played with as a kid.  
Not unlike the burning of my blue  
dress that I wore because it was your favorite.

*He couldn't, because he loves you.*

I am too afraid to know,  
but you howl at the sight  
of your latest destruction.  
I look at my body to see the peeling of me,  
like a snake shedding its skin.

I ask you why,  
in the midst of all my pain my heart  
begs you for an answer.

*How did he, if he loves you?*

You pour cold water all over me,  
flooding the mattress. Attempting me to liberate  
me from the excruciating pain.  
But you didn't bring enough water  
to let me sail away.

*He was supposed to love you.*

My flesh is peeled off me.  
My lips have been sewn closed.  
You killed me without stopping my heart.

*Why didn't you love me?*

I hold my melted blue dress,  
the same color as the lighter you hid  
from me in the trash.  
The same color as the veins  
bulging on the backs of my hands,  
as I grip to the pieces  
of me that I have left.





# GOOD OLD DAYS

DELANEY DUNNE

The  
Box the  
Daze comes in sits in  
front of my apartment, too heavy  
for me to lift. I open the door, pushing it in on its  
side with all the strength I can muster. My dress, one Nova had  
bought for me, gets caught on the side, tearing a hole in the skirt portion.  
Without stopping to catch my breath, I yank at the wooden sides until Styro-  
foam peanuts topple out. Inside, there's a slip of paper that says, "handle with  
care." Instructions for setting it up are underneath the paper.

I dig through the Styrofoam peanuts like it's a present I've waited too long to  
open. I want to be let down when I open it. I want to be able to send it back  
with a complaint about how it looks nothing like Nova, how it looks just  
like a cheap sex doll. As I pull the Daze out of the box, my stomach sinks. Its  
upturned nose, brown eyes, and freckles, an exact likeness of her.

According to the instructions in the box, all I need to do to activate the  
Daze is press a button on the bottom of its tongue and say, "Welcome, Nova."  
The instructions for shutting it down are a little more complicated, so I take  
a picture of them, so I don't forget. This all seems contrived to me, but I  
press the button and say the words anyway, subconsciously running my  
hand down the arm of the Daze. The skin feels like the texture of a child's  
Halloween mask.

The machine jerks after I activate it, twitching slightly so my hand is no lon-  
ger on its arm. Touching it seems sinful now that it's awake, so I sit back  
and wait for it to figure its shit out. Maybe it won't work, and  
I can send it back, convince myself that every-  
thing that's happened was a dream.  
Nova is actually still my  
girlfriend,

holding my hand, belting out the lyrics to music from the 2000's in the passenger seat of my car, her laughter becoming the only tune I want to carry.

"Hey there, Bailey." The Daze's voice sounds so similar to Nova's that I'm thrown off by it.

We watch a television show together, one that Nova loved, and I force myself to not pull away when it tugs me onto its lap and cradles me in its arms like a child. It laughs at the same jokes she laughed at, gently traces its fingers down my chin and neck, like it might break me if it presses too hard. I find myself squirming under the Daze's grasp, forcing myself to not cringe at the cool touch of its fingertips.

"Something's wrong," it says.

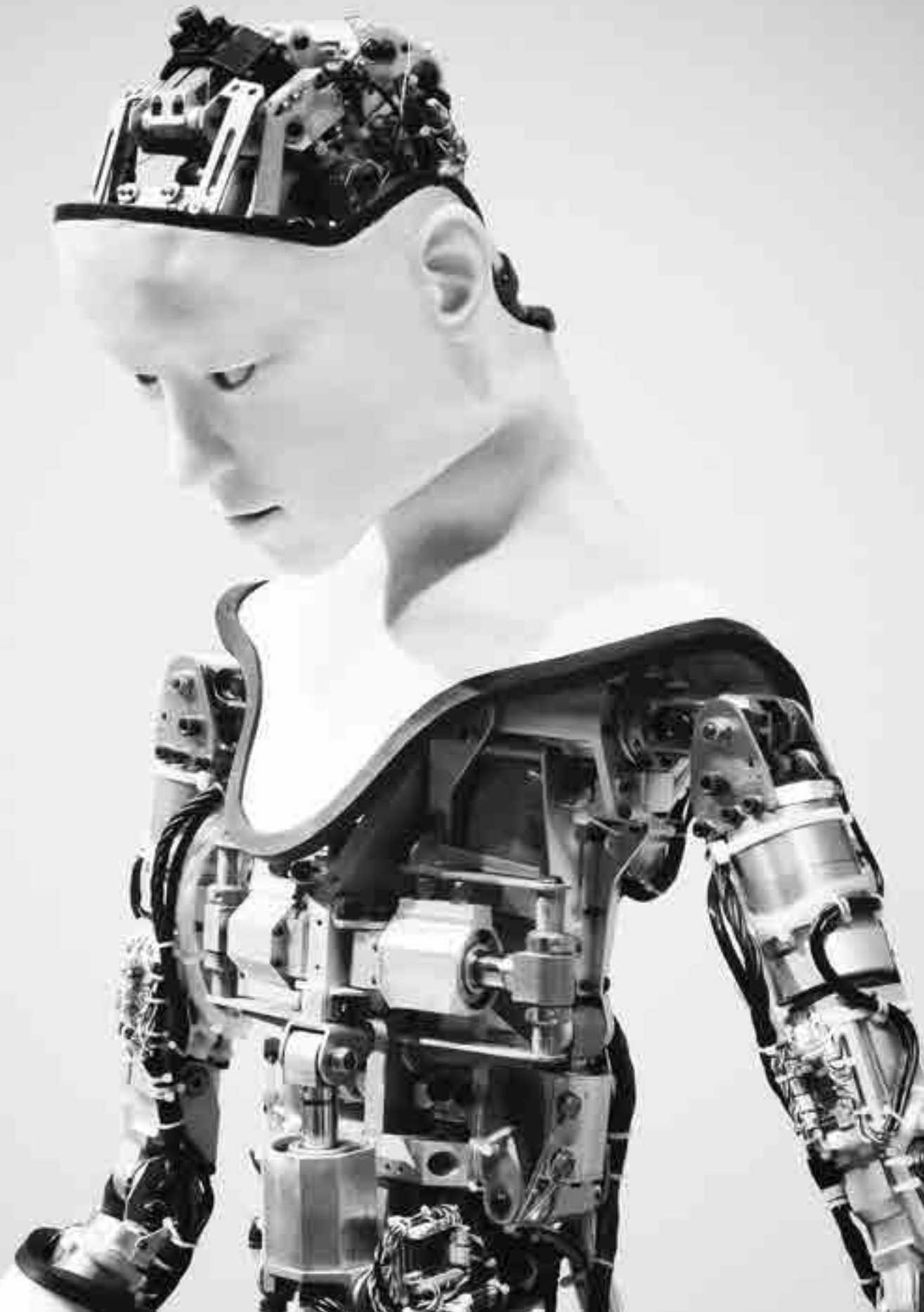
Nova hardly noticed when I was upset, or maybe she just didn't care. At first, it didn't bother me, allowing me to act like everything was okay so we didn't get into fights. After a while, I'd end up blowing up at Nova over the tiniest things, her unfolded laundry or her late night phone calls, and that cycle repeated itself. The day before she left me, I told her sometimes it felt like I was going through the relationship just pretending to need her. "Don't pretend," she'd said, slamming the door behind her.

She was gone the next day. No notes left behind with the cartoons she liked to draw of us holding hands. No accidental magnet left on the fridge that she'd conveniently have to come back for because she just couldn't live without this particular fridge magnet. I found my favorite dress, the one she'd sewn for me, normally hung among her skirts and fishnets, on the floor of our closet, mice-teeth-shaped holes along the edges. When I went to the Starbucks where she worked, they told me she'd quit without a two weeks' notice. She left the way ghosts exist, quietly and without purpose.

"It's just been awhile," I tell the Daze, digging my nails in the couch. "I need some space."

The Daze doesn't hesitate to move away from me, a gentle smile on its face. We go to the kitchen and start setting the table together, plates and silverware clinking against each other. There's a charge in the air, like it's waiting for me to do something, but I think I'm the one waiting for it to make a move. Its arm keeps bumping against mine, our bodies only inches apart at times, and still, the Daze does not try to hold me. The radio plays in the background, a station that claims to play all types of music, but only sticks to classic rock.

Grabbing a fork off the table, the Daze belts out the lyrics to a Rolling Stones' song that's playing into the utensil like it was a microphone. Its voice is scratchy compared to Nova's singing voice, but it's close enough that I can almost trick myself into believing it's her. My feet tap against the dusty floor, hair falling in my face as I shake my head to the beat of the song. The



machine reaches out its hand, and I give it mine. It twirls me around the chairs, pulling me in close for mere seconds before spinning me away from it in one quick motion. I don't think about how Nova didn't know how to dance; she could only jump and head-bang. I don't think about the night we spent listening to this same radio station, jumping from couch to chair, throwing pillows at each other like we were middle schoolers at our first sleepover.

"You're beautiful," I say, stepping up to press myself against the mechanical body of the Daze.

"So are you." It places its hand on my face, rubbing its thumb against my cheek. Every part of me wants to tell it that as a machine it'll never know what true beauty is, but at the same time, all it needs to do is look in a mirror, and it'll find out.

"Not as beautiful as you."

"That doesn't matter."

That night, we lie together in the bed Nova and I shared, and I allow my back to press up against the Daze. My dark purple sheets gripped tightly in between my fingers cause my hands to sweat. I'd picked the sheets out with Nova months before; the light blue sheets had been prettier, but Nova insisted on the purple ones. They reminded her of how she felt when we had our first kiss. It's too bad I hate purple.



I work this morning, and the Daze seems to know this. It has made tea for me, sitting in a mug shaped like my favorite superhero, mint leaves sprinkled on top. Next to the cup is a small doodle of a person holding a puppy with the note: Have a great time at work! I notice the machine is laying on the couch now, seemingly charging, so I leave without thanking it.

I take the shortest route to get to the animal shelter because I'm running late. I avoided this drive for the past few weeks, each restaurant and shop I saw a reminder of the places I'd never taken Nova. We'd always gone far from home; she was a risk-taker after all, always searching for the rush of something new. Today though, I don't feel anything but hollow smugness, knowing I have the ability to go places that she hasn't tainted.

Once inside, I feed the dogs and cats, singing along to the music playing throughout the shelter. I even find myself moving to the beat, similar to how I danced last night. I pet each animal on the head, kiss their tiny noses, give them extra treats even though we're only supposed to give them a select amount.

"What's up with you?" My co-worker says. "Are you on uppers or something?"

"Am I not allowed to be in a good mood?"

"Not without an explanation."

I don't respond, mostly because I don't have a reason for being in a good mood. If I wasn't so sure he'd judge me for buying a Daze, I'd tell him all about it. It is quiet this morning, and I realize that I hadn't fed Hobbes, my favorite dog at the shelter.

"Where's Hobbes?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to text you about that. He got adopted yesterday." He sounds expectant, like he's waiting for me to react in a certain way. He twines his eyebrows together when I drop the bag of dog food I'm holding.

Hobbes had been at the shelter since I'd started. He was a huge dark brown pit bull with white spots and a missing eye. Our boss said there wasn't much hope of him getting adopted, and I took it upon myself to baby him in every way possible. I'd have adopted him if my apartment allowed animals and Nova actually liked dogs, but ultimately, I did the second best thing I could, taking care of him at the shelter.

"I know he was your favorite," my co-worker says, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry I didn't let you know."

I pull away quickly and turn my back to him. "I could've said goodbye." I huff, kicking the bag of dog food so it flops onto its side. The dogs on the front of the bag are smiling, their noses shiny with the wetness only happy dogs have.

"If you'd told me."

"It's just a dog."

I kick the dog food harder this time and manufactured pellets of food scuttle across the floor. I head to the back of the shelter, muttering under my breath as I go. The kennel Hobbes stayed in is way in the back, and when I get here, it's already been cleaned, ready for another helpless dog to spend the night. I halfway expect to hear the snorting noises he made when I greeted him in the mornings, but I'm met with the sound of distant barks and floorboards creaking.

The new dog in the shelter isn't even close to being as great as Hobbes, but I cuddle with it anyway. It hasn't been given a bath yet, its fur matted and covered in fleas. I look at it in disgust, knowing that Hobbes was replaced by this mangy thing. Guilt kneads my stomach, and I kiss the animal's scratchy nose as if it were my own dog. I do hope it finds a home, but it won't be mine.



The apartment is booming with noise when I get back from work. There's a vacuum cleaner running in the bedroom, the cord extending out into the kitchen and through a mess of trash bags. I wonder why Nova would be cleaning when she should really be at work, but the Daze pokes its head out the doorway, and I am reminded that Nova will never clean the apartment again.

"Work went well?" It phrases this like it's a statement rather than a question, and I bite the inside of my lip to stop myself from crying harder. My cheeks are already slightly wet with tears clinging to the tiny hairs on my face. The Daze approaches me, and without any hesitation, wraps its arms around me in a tight hug.

"A dog was adopted. Hobbes."

"You were close?"

"He could've been mine. Ours." I tuck my hands in my pockets to avoid hugging the Daze back. I breathe in deeply, waiting for the scent of Nova's shampoo to hit me, but all I can smell is bleach. For a while, we stand in that position, the Daze refusing to let go. I give in and hug it back. "I didn't even get to see him before he left."

"Who adopted him?"

"Some chick. Marisol Gleason."

My Daze looks thoughtful, absent-mindedly twirling my hair while staring up at the ceiling with its eyebrows drawn close together. I watch out the window, the dying light of the sun pale against the dark green pine trees. There's a couple walking their dog, and I imagine myself in their place, strolling side by side with Nova and Hobbes. There's a part of me that wants to open the window and yell at those people about something small, like how the dog's collar is too tight or how it's too cold for them to be outside.

"Let's look her up."

I wish the Daze hadn't even put the idea in my head. As the long hours of the night drag on, I lean against the bedpost, and pretend that everything that happened was simply a dream. The moonlight peers in through the window, casting its bright light along the Daze's arms. The dainty hairs along them stand out among freckles and moles. It almost looked too real to be human.

We had a simple plan; we waited two days before figuring out where Marisol lived. It was easy to find with how invasive technology is. The Daze drove me over, humming along to Nova's favorite songs. This was something Nova might have gone along with; she was the rebellious one, after all.

The Marisol chick's house was bigger than I was expecting it to be, or maybe it's just bigger than I was hoping. The front yard had flowers lining the edges of the sidewalk. Behind the house, the gated backyard looked wide and spacious. I wondered briefly if this could be considered stalking.

"Do you think this is a little creepy?" I asked my Daze.

"No." It rubbed the back of my neck, the way Nova sometimes used to do, and I resisted the urge to pull away. "Remember, just say you're from the shelter. Here to check out the living conditions."

"What if they don't believe me?"

"Of course they will. It's not a lie."

We started our walk towards the house, and it felt like I was examining every blade of grass in their yard, searching for something that might let me take Hobbes away from Marisol. The Daze held my hand along the way. It felt like the type of strolls Nova and I used to take through the park when we first started dating except her skin was soft and warm; it didn't feel like melted flesh.

My Daze rang the doorbell for me, and the faint sound of a dog bark could be heard from deep inside the house. The door opened to show us a tall woman with spiky hair.

"Are you Marisol Gleason?" I asked her.

"No. Who's asking?" The woman said and I made eye contact with my Daze, my voice refusing to push past my throat.

"We're from the shelter. We're here to check on Hobbes," my Daze explained.

"We weren't expecting a visitation." The spiky-haired woman narrowed her eyes.

"Right. We tried calling, but the number must have been wrong."

"Olive, don't be rude. They told me they would send people to check up on Hobbes for the first few months." The voice came from a shorter woman



who had appeared behind Olive. Based on the Facebook page we looked at, I assumed she was Marisol. She motioned for us to follow her inside the house. The interior of the house was even nicer than the outside with clean carpets, soft rugs, and wide rooms that seemed to stretch on forever. I spotted a picture of the two women on a table that we passed by, holding each other and smiling real, authentic smiles, the kind you find on children playing or on friends seeing each other for the first time in years.

"Here he is." She had led us to the kitchen where a fluffy bed sat along with a bowl of water and torn-up toys. Hobbes lie in his bed, his one good eye closed and twitching. At the sound of his owner's voice, or possibly my scent, he lifted his head, and waddled over to us. He rolled onto his back for me, and I pet his belly. He made the snorting noise like he always did, his back leg kicking the air in joy. From somewhere in the house, I heard Marisol's wife calling for her, but it was hard to hear with all the noise Hobbes made. Marisol walked towards the exit, looking back at us. "I'll be back."

"Let's take him," I said to my Daze, as soon as Marisol left the room.

"What? We're just here to say goodbye."

"It's not enough."

"We can't take him. They've got everything he could possibly need."

"I know." I stood up, stomping my feet on the ground, annoyed by the fact that everything about the place was just so perfect. On the side of one of the walls, a cabinet hung halfway open, and I shoved it, watching as a bag of dog food fell out. "Ha! Cheap ass dog food. I'd never feed him that shit."

"It's just a dog, Bailey."

The back of my throat burned as I tried to think up something I could say that would put the Daze in its place. Even if Nova didn't like dogs, I knew she would've jumped at the idea of doing something wild, especially since I was the one who came up with this plan in the first place. I almost told my Daze this, yelled at it that it wasn't doing what it was programmed to be doing, but I remembered that we've got to move fast if we want to get Hobbes out of here. Hanging on the wall, I spotted his leash, and I snapped it to his collar, starting to tug him towards the exit.

"He needs me," I told my Daze and continued to pull Hobbes forward. Looking back on it, there was no reason for me to think that he would come with me. He was comfy and cozy in a new home with two women who loved him more than a dog like him could comprehend. Yet when I noticed he was dragging his feet, digging his nails into the tiled floor, I kept pulling on him, tears forming in my eyes. "Come on, Hobbes. We've got to go."

"Let go of the leash," my Daze said.



"Get up, buddy. Come with me."

"Bailey, you need to let go."

I looked up from the cowering Hobbes to see my Daze standing in the doorway, deep sadness on its face. It reached out its hand, casting its eyes downward for a second to look at Hobbes then back at me, as if pleading for me to see how badly this dog did not want me. The leash dropped to the floor, hitting it with a soft thud. The Daze took my hand, and as we left the house without a goodbye, I continued to stare in the direction of the kitchen, imagining Hobbes chasing after me and jumping into the car with me.

Now, as the moonlight shifts over to my side of the bed, I watch as my Daze gets eaten up into the night. My legs are warm from the piles of blankets placed on them. In the moonlight, the blankets almost look like the shape of a dog.

"You're awake," my Daze says, turning to face me.

"So are you."

"I don't sleep." It inches towards me and places its hand on my shoulder.

"Today wasn't too bad, do you think?"

"Oh yeah, I love it when I'm not needed."

"I'm sorry, Bailey."

"Maybe I can pretend that someone else needs me."

"Don't pretend." The Daze looks up at me with its wide eyes. I lean forward and kiss it, preparing myself for disappointment. Despite the rubbery feel of its skin, the lips taste just like her, and I wonder for a moment how the company I got it from was able to capture such an intimate detail about her. Maybe it was just a lucky guess. Maybe that's just how everyone tastes.

We make love, and it does everything I could possibly want. I keep waiting for it to do what Nova used to do, focus on itself, stop when its satisfied, leave me hanging like a rotten apple on a perfectly healthy tree. It doesn't though, and when we are finished, I put my head in the crook of its neck and pretend there's warmth coming from its body.



My Daze is laying on the couch. Friday has rolled around quicker than I expected. It's been charging for twenty minutes. The charging allows for a nice break from its constant touch and unbreakable stare. The television plays in the background, Nova's favorite show, and I inch over to the remote hiding in the corner just so I can turn it up louder.

The apartment is quiet when the Daze sleeps. My phone does not buzz; my doorbell does not ring. I live in a haunted house without the ghosts. It's weird watching the machine sleep when it looks so lifelike, but its chest doesn't rise and fall at all. I reach out and lift its arm, dropping it and letting it fall like a dead weight. Its hand comes down on my leg hard, and it stings for a moment before ebbing away.

Grasping the Daze's wrist in my hand, I swat at my upper arm, leaving screaming, red marks across it. The Daze's skin feels more lifelike than it ever has before; its palms imitating exactly how it feels to be slapped. I crinkle its fingers into a loose fist and beat it against my thigh once, twice, three times, until I'm sure it will bruise. I crawl away from it and try to pay attention to the TV show.

"What are you watching?" It says, startling me. I hit the off switch on the remote without really thinking about it.

"Nothing important."

"Don't pretend."

"I'm not," I say, and my skin feels like there are bugs burrowing into it. "Will you drive me to the bar?"

"I'd love to." Its voice is too sugary to be Nova's.

The bar I'm going to is one that Nova and her friends frequent. We used to spend a lot of time there, mostly because it's where we had our third date. That night, we hung out in a booth in the darkest corner, getting as close to fucking as the public eye would let us. Even if Nova doesn't show up, I could still flirt with hot women, pretend they're actually in my league.

The Daze drives me to the bar that night, asking me if I want it to come in, repeatedly asking me if I'm going to be okay without it, and already I'm desperate for a drink. At one point, it pulls off to the side of the road just to kiss me. Nova did that when we first started dating; she couldn't get enough of me. It stopped after a few months, and now, instead of reminding me of the good times with Nova, I am reminded of all the silent car rides, heads turned away so even our breathing wouldn't touch.

The bar isn't very busy, and I easily spot some of Nova's friends hanging out near the bartender, heckling him for free drinks. She's nowhere to be seen though, and I drag my feet over to a booth. It's right next to the same one Nova and I used to sit in, and without really thinking about it, I go over to that booth instead and sit down.

"Hey gorgeous." A woman with greasy hair and smeared makeup approaches me. "You want a drink?"

"Vodka tonic."



I try to catch the eye of Nova's friends, but I don't have much luck. They're laughing, louder than probably necessary. I want to believe they're avoiding me; it's more like they just don't care enough to notice me. Nova had to be the first person to really notice me, to actually see me, know me, and still need me.

I place my hand underneath the table and search for the spot where she'd etched our initials into it with her keys. It should be easy to find since she made it so big. Instead of feeling the indents in the table, all I feel is smooth, untarnished wood. It occurs to me that maybe they'd replaced the tables.

"Do you come here a lot?" The woman's voice interrupts my thoughts. I grab my drink from her, and chug it without a second thought.

"I'm going to the restroom."

The bathroom is so far away; it's like I've walked miles and I still haven't gotten there yet. Nobody's looking at me, but I wish they would because if they did, they would be able to see just how badly I need to get to the fucking bathroom. There's a bitter taste in my mouth, probably the vodka, but it could also be the bile in my throat finally reaching my tongue.

There's nobody in the bathroom. I place my hands on the mirror in front of the sink and try to control my breathing. I feel as if I'd been broken apart, my skin peeled at the seams. There aren't any threads strong enough to stitch it back up.

Ten minutes pass, and I have not vomited. I stumble out, look for the woman, and spot Nova and her friends talking to her. Nova must be here. The lights in the bar are far too bright for my tipsy brain, and I narrow my eyes and dig my index finger into my thumb. Nova's wearing a shirt I've never seen before; she smiles wider than feels humanly possible.

"You good?" The woman asks me when I get back to the table.

I don't respond.

"What're you doing here, Bailey?" Nova sounds surprised to see me.

I grab the greasy-haired woman's drink from the table and swallow the whole thing. She doesn't seem to notice; she's talking to some chick with bigger boobs than me. In fact, all of Nova's friends seem like they have bigger boobs than me. When I look at them, it's like I'm looking in a mirror that shows you all the things you've ever wanted to be. One girl's lips mixed with another girl's legs mixed with the last girl's laugh.

"I've been here the whole time," I say to Nova.

"Have you been following me?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I don't mean to be rude, but I really didn't expect to see you here." She looks across the table at her friends.

"It's the only gay bar in town." I puff out my chest and gesture to the greasy-haired woman. "What, are you jealous?"

"You're so annoying," she sighs, standing up and heading towards the door. She motions to her friends that she's stepping outside for a smoke. "Don't follow me."

Like hell I won't. As soon as she's out the door, I practically sprint across the bar to get outside. It's cold out; Nova's shivering. My jacket's inside, but I wouldn't offer it to her if I had it. Instead, I would wrap my arms around her, kiss her fingertips and the palms of her hands. She's standing too far away, too far away for me to even brush an arm against her.

"Figures," she says when she sees me.

"I didn't get to say goodbye." I try to make eye contact, but she's looking away. I bite my lip, reaching out my hand to grab the cigarette from her mouth, like we used to do. She steps out of my reach, towards the door, towards the exit. "Can't I have a drag?"

"No." She stops avoiding my gaze, meeting my eyes with an expression so full of exasperation I almost turn my head away.

We stand in silence for a while, and I watch the way her breath curls up in the cold night air. I think of the day I met Nova. It was a brief, common occurrence. She was smoking outside a gas station, her lips turning blue from the cold. I'd left my wallet at home, had no money to buy a pack, so I approached and asked if I could bum one. There was no hesitation when she reached for them, her fingers long and nimble painted a light pink, like branches stretching out and growing flowers.

"Your hands are warm," I said when she handed me one.

"Yours aren't."

We didn't speak again, but she handed me a piece of paper when I left with her name and number and the message, 'I'll keep you warm?'

"Hey, man! The new tables look nice." Nova's voice intrudes upon my memories, and I see a burly man with multiple face piercings walking towards the entrance of the bar. I recognize him as the owner of the establishment; he used to have to kick Nova and I out when we got too drunk and made out on the tables.

"I appreciate that. They were looking pretty worn-out."

"And all that graffiti and shit. Not a good look."

I spring forward, snatching the cigarette from between Nova's fingers, letting the bittersweet smoke envelope me and send me away. Nova glares at me as I take a drag, toss it on the cement, and stomp on it.

"Oh, were you not finished?"

"It's just a cigarette."

A few feet away, I see my Daze pull up to the curb, and I check my watch, noticing it's exactly the time I told it to pick me up. It gets out of the car, tilting its head to stare daggers at Nova, and before I can stop it, it's walking over and standing next to me. Its face holds a deep scowl; the same exact look Nova made seconds before when I'd taken her cigarette.

"Hey, Nova. Meet your replacement," the Daze says, hooking its arm with mine. It has a smug look on its face that makes my stomach burn with anger, but I'm frozen in place, too stunned by its presence to move.

"You bought a Daze," she says after a long silence. "I don't know what to say."

"Once again, avoiding a conversation," my Daze laughs.

"What are you doing?" I finally say.

"You really think this was a good idea, Bailey?" Nova asks, and I remember how I'd bought the Daze on a whim after seeing an ad from the company Good Old Daze Co. at the bottom of an article called "How to Stop Missing Someone". The website asked for all the information I could give about Nova and my relationship, and I'd found myself ranting to a computer about everything that had gone wrong with our relationship. By the time I'd purchased the thing, my entire body had gone numb. I thought I'd want to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. I couldn't feel a single thing for anyone.

"I am everything you're not," my Daze says.

"Stop." I step forward and lightly push my Daze.

ILLUSTRATION: KATE CEBAN





"What a fucking hero," Nova's voice gets caught in her throat.

"I'm just a machine."

"Fuck off." I push the Daze harder, and it stumbles backwards into a street light.

Nova has already turned away from us and walked back inside, her shoulders straight and her head held high, and a part of me knows that this will be the last time I see her. Even if we meet again, it'll never be enough. I watch her go while my Daze is gripping my arm and trying to pull me away. There were so many times Nova had grabbed me the same way, dragging me along to some place I ended up actually having fun at. It's weird how even now, I'd do it all over again if it meant having her touch me one last time.

"Look at me," the Daze whispers.

"I don't want to." My eyes don't leave the place where Nova had just been standing. Thick silence surrounds us. Finally, I turn to look at it, and its dark brown eyes look so fake I want to peel them out. "You think you can't hurt me? Try it."

"What?"

"Hit me."

"I'd never do that." It steps away from me, putting up its hands as if its expecting me to throw punches at any second.

"You already did." I tug the waist of my pants down to show it the bruise on my thigh. It's a sandy brown, barely visible under the streetlights, but I grab the machine's hand and place it on the bruise, wincing at the touch. The Daze tugs its arm away from me. In the artificial light, every part of it looks misshapen and false.

"You did that to yourself."

"Yeah. I guess so." It only takes me a moment to reach out and press the button located behind its left ear. The robot's arms go limp; its face contorting in horror at the inability to move its limbs. It lurches towards me, forcing me to grab it by the shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

I drop its shoulders and press the button behind its right ear. It falls to its knees. Its hand rests in mine so it does not fall on its face, and I think only of Nova's soft skin, of all the warmth she held in just the tips of her fingers.

"Please don't do this!" It yells. "You need me."

I don't respond, holding my free hand against its cheek, wanting nothing more than to feel the delicate wetness of tears, but I feel only cold rubber.

"I'll keep you warm, Bailey."

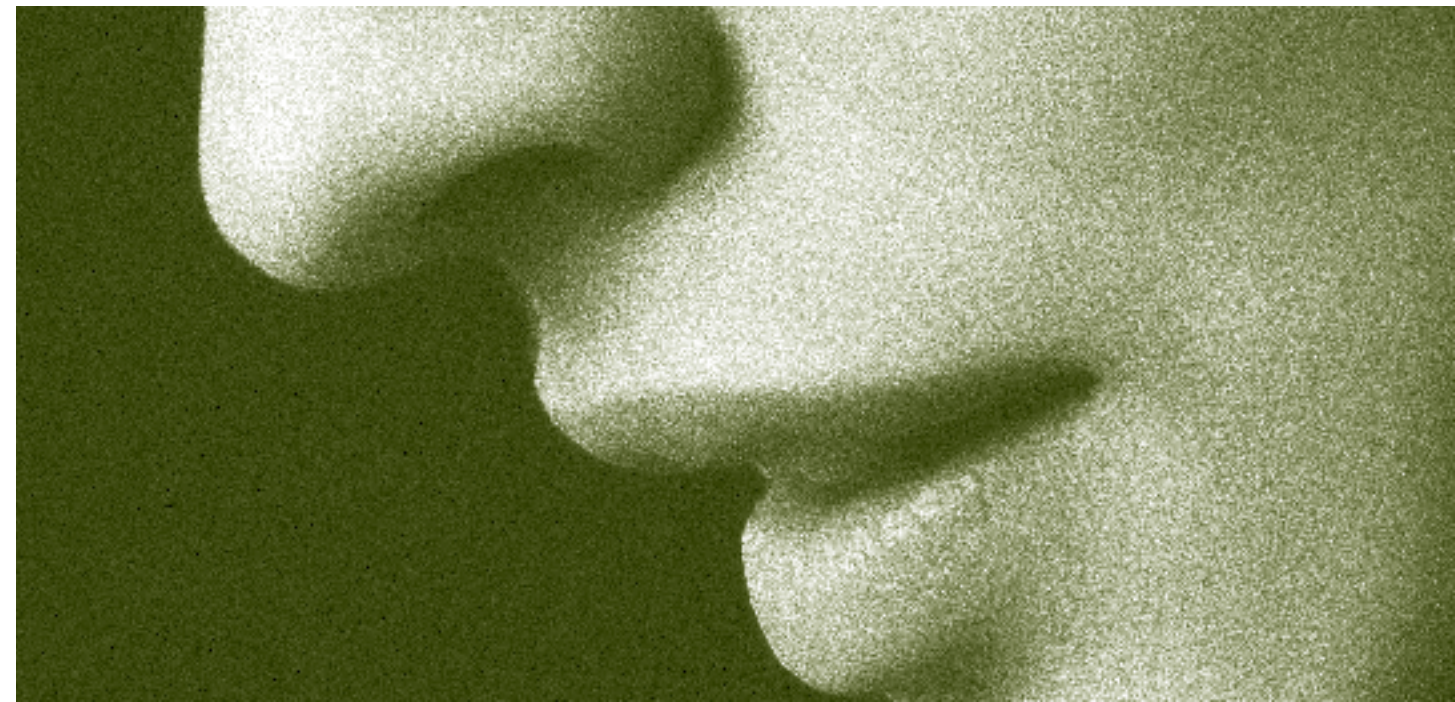
"Don't pretend." I lean down and lock my lips to the Daze's, slipping my tongue in, and pressing down on the button in its mouth. Its head rolls to the side unable to stand up any longer. My eyes trail across its face, taking in the freckles, the perfect nose, the plump lips, and the brown eyes. All the details that don't matter.

"Goodbye, Nova," I say, dropping the Daze's hand, and letting its body collapse onto the cool concrete.



The sun peeks through the clouds, allowing for a little bit of warmth to seep into the earth. All the dogs at the shelter are running around outside; none of them seem to mind the snowy ground and the freezing wind. It is just my luck that I'm assigned to daycare duty on one of the coldest days of the year. I watch as the dogs dance around each other, tails wagging faster than the speed of light and eyes shining. I picture Nova, just for a second, curled up with hot chocolate on her couch, and I hope that maybe someone's there to tuck her in when she eventually falls asleep.

Across the yard, the new dog is running circles around the obstacle course we have set up. Its thin legs weave in and out of the pegs, stretching to jump over hoops. I squint my eyes against the sun, and I lean down to pet it when it runs up to me. I scratch at its ears; they're warm against my bare hands. I notice the spots under its belly, a similar shape and size as the ones Hobbes had. As the dog bounds away, I find myself pretending that it's actually him. In the sunlight, it almost could be.





# TO MY BODY PARTS

DELANEY DUNNE

Illustration: Lupe Gamboa

Five hours until birth,  
a noose around my neck  
once made of life and nutrients  
now threatening to crush  
a tiny pebble's lungs,  
doctors fished me out  
of my mother's stomach,  
a sea of blood and my screams—  
*She'll be beautiful.*

Four hours until my parents come,  
a wet splatter of pink tar  
nested in strands of my hair,  
the classroom an uproar hidden  
behind coughs, nails tapping,  
soundless whispers—  
*How'd that make her prettier—*  
becoming hyenas after  
they find the lion's prey.

Three hours until my tattoo  
could be pythons, daggers, roses  
Dad's voice like a heavy needle  
never letting up, dragging black  
strokes of camouflaged shame—  
*you're already a work of art—*  
but art is not anything  
until after it's gone.

Two hours until our first date  
is over, he says my butt looks great  
in the jeans my ex bought me  
stuck between a thank-you and a fuck-you  
settle on an I-barely-even-know-you  
when I get up to leave  
eyes catch on my own reflection  
seriously your ass is your best feature.

One hour until this poem is due  
and I am questioning  
the difference between  
loving yourself and simply  
breathing at the right times  
listening to your heartbeat  
on the mornings waking up  
feels just like giving up  
holding your head steady  
when your body wants nothing  
but to witness its own demise  
I'll keep avoiding mirrors  
if it tricks me into believing  
I could be beautiful.

Now in this moment, I wonder  
is it not my love that matters  
but my forgiveness?

# Hunting

CALE EDGINGTON

It's winter in Alaska, 2019 when the man I hope I can be slams on the brakes.

A few things happen, one on top of the other, in those next few seconds.

He tightens his grip on the wheel to be nearly white-knuckled. He tightens every muscle in his body, waiting for the impact.

And at the same time, he risks taking his eyes off the road for just the briefest second to look at the young girl sitting next to him in the passenger seat.

She yelps and looks like she is trying to push herself as far back into her seat as possible.

And at that moment, as the truck comes skidding to a stop, neither of them moves.

His eyes are back on the road the second he is sure she's safe.

An elk stands in the middle of the road, frozen in their headlights.

It watches them as if in a trance where it can't remember how to move.

He watches it with a chest so tight it's like he can't remember how to breathe.



Dial it back a few years. Its Afghanistan in 2015.

The man I never wanted to be braces himself hard against anything he can when the driver slams the fighting vehicle to a stop. Thirty tons of steel and violence can't stop as well as a pick-up truck, and it's even worse when he's not strapped in. He nearly face-plants against the steel and glass of his front viewport, cursing when he cuts his cheek on a sharp corner before slamming back into his seat again.

He looks beside him, where the vehicle's gunner is in a similar state, dazed and confused, and trying to shake off the pain.

And when he looks out the front viewport, he can't see anything save for dirt and falling rocks. An orange and black cloud that tells him everything he



needs to know.

Something just exploded in front of them. Something big.

He swears again and tries to will the tightness in his chest to pass so that he can breathe again.



"It's an elk." She whispers, almost star-struck, "Uncle Guss, look."

He nods, "I see it, kiddo."

And he can stare at it and watch their headlights shine back in its eyes.

They stay there, locked in place. One beat. Another.

And the elk slowly starts to trot the rest of the way across the road, watching them the whole time as it goes.

It steps into the brush and greenery on the side of the road, but he doesn't get ready to start moving again until he can barely make out the bull's towering form – antlers and all – disappearing into the dark of the Alaskan woods.

It's a good sign, he thinks. They came out here to hunt elk, after all, so seeing even one means there might be more.

"Where'd it go?"

He shrugged, "Who knows? Probably somewhere to find food."



"Do you think we'll see it again?"

Children. Even at fourteen, they were something else.

"No. No, I don't think we will. Kodiak Island's a big place, after all." He looks to her, "Are you okay, kiddo?"



"Hey! Hey, are you okay?! Sound off, talk to me!" He screams for the ringing in his ears as he stumbles into the swirling black and orange miasma.

The smoke parts as he draws closer, and he can see the first glimpses of the damage.

The truck that had been in front of them was thrown onto its side. The roof of it is facing him now, and he can see the gunner's position – the cupola where a heavy machine gun and the young man operating it were when the IED cooked off and hit them. The kid's form is slumped against one of the armor panels that had been meant to keep him safe and he's not moving as Guss draws closer.

"Talk to me, man, come on. Say something! Something!" He trips over his own feet and goes to his knees, but he crawls the rest of the way to reach out and grab the kid by the shoulder-straps of his vest. He pulls on him once then twice, and he can finally get him out onto the sand. Or at least he pulls what's left of him.

There are streaks of red on the armor and sand when he pulls the body out.

He looks at the mush of red and white and camouflage where legs should be. Bile rises in his throat.



He can't help but smile when she tries to eat. Since this was her first time out hunting, he had cautioned her about moving slowly when waiting for their prey. What he had meant was not to go running around or to jump up whenever she got excited. But what he gets is the sight of watching her peel the white and black shemagh gingerly from off her face with a pair of hooked fingers, then with the urgency of a snail, she raises a granola bar to her lips. She doesn't chew with her mouth closed.

But then his ears perk up to another crunch and snap, and he sees her eyes go wide.

They'd pulled loose branches and foliage into something of a hunting blind, but he can see out well enough. And there it is, forty meters away. A proper bull elk stands out among the white and wind-swept curves of the hills and

cuts a perfect form between trees that had turned white from the last few weeks winter maelstrom.

"Oh my god – oh my god, there it is." She all but spits out her granola.

"Yeah. Quiet now. Or you'll spook him. Got your rifle?"

She turns to look at him, "I – yeah?"

"Well, go on then. Get it up."

"But –" She furrows her brow.

"Come on. Before he runs off."

She raises her rifle to her shoulders and lets the gunmetal gray barrel slip out from among the branches, bringing her eye to the scope.



He looks around. They had been on the edge of the town.

In one direction, there are open fields. That's where the blast had come from.

In the other are the houses and business where the locals are scattering and running.

Others are rushing up now, trying to secure the area. The medic had pushed him away, yelling something about going into shock or needing space. Somebody asks him if he's okay, but he can't hear them – not really. He scans the buildings, searching for anything. There had been two trucks in front of this one: a pressure plate would have gone off when the first truck hit it.

That means there was a triggerman who set it off.

The locals who had been on the streets are running in a panic.

Somebody screams something. He hears a woman crying just over the faded ringing in his ears. But just as he starts to hear, he shuts it all out again.

The two men lock eyes. The American muscles tense and grinding his teeth.

The Afghan man is tucked behind a half-open door. Maybe ten meters away.

The door slams shut, and the American moves on autopilot with a white-knuckled grip on his rifle as he storms towards the house. He can't hear anything now, but the blood is rushing through his system. Somebody tugs at his shoulder, but he shrugs them off. The world is going red as he makes it to the door.

That cheap, old wood splinters when he drives his boot against it.

The rifle comes up as he steps through the doorway, "US Army, get on the ground!"





"I c-can't." She sniffles.

"What do you mean you can't?" He grits his teeth.

"I – Uncle Guss, look at him!" She tears her eyes off the scope, and he can see the red there, "I can't do it!"

He growls, snatching up his rifle, "For god's sake."

"Guss, no!" She rises to clutch at his arm, shaking him, "Uncle Guss, please!"

He brings his eye to the scope even as she tries to shake him from it.



The world comes back to him when his gunner comes driving into his side.

The red washes away just as a fist comes against his jaw, "You psychopath!"

His gunner bellows, grabbing him by his vest before he can fall to the ground, "What's wrong with you?!"

"I –" He tries to speak.

He has the wind knocked out of him when the larger man slams into him again and pins him in place, "What's wrong with you, Guss?!"

The room is suddenly crowded. A woman huddled in the corner, screaming between her tears as her home is invaded. First him, then his gunner. Now six soldiers all cramming themselves into this woman's living room, trying to find out where the fight must be. But they all get a chance to take in the scene.



The man – the boy, lays face down on the ground.

And Guss can see it now.

Three blossoming rings of scarlet in the kid's back.

"What's your malfunction, Guss?! You can't just go murdering kids, man!"

Another punch comes before he can even think of what to say.

"I just – he – the bomb!" He looks to his gunner. Can't he see? Can't he see how obvious it was?! There, in that moment it's terrible, but even seconds ago it was so obvious!



"Uncle Guss, please!"

He can't keep the target centered. Not with how she pushes against his body.

And she stops saying his name. Or anything. She starts to sniffle and cry.

He should know better. He should know better than to bring a kid along.

But she needs to learn, doesn't she? This is life. It happens. Whether or not you like it.

He tries to bring his eye to the scope again, and she pushes firmly into his side. She stays there. Crying softly against his shoulder. He can't feel it through all the fabric, but he knows it's there. And he tries to ignore it. To focus on his breathing. He needs to focus on his breath and his trigger pull and the target and she's still crying but louder now.

He steadies his breath.

"Guss." Her throat sounds so damn dry.

Steady.

He feels her hands clutch his coat all the tighter.

She yelps when the rifle goes off.

And there they are again, trying to breathe or to remember how.

The elk turns and runs. The bullet is short, stopped in a thick tree with enough force to knock snow from its bark. And the smoke still rises in a soft line from the barrel as he lowers it down. He slumps back against the tree behind them.

His niece pushes more firmly into his side, and he lifts an arm to bring her in closer.

Finally, when he feels brave enough to talk, he offers, "Let's go home, kid."



**HEATHER HORTON**

I sit with my back against the sharp  
brick wall, my heels slipped  
from the warmth of my shoes  
like I slipped silently from your bed.  
Exchanging comfort for freedom.  
Pondering, now, if the known  
is an easier burden. Like the learned  
helplessness of Seligman's dogs.

I need to feel the grass on my feet  
to remind me of where  
I come from—the dirt.  
I can hear the tires on the freeway,  
rhythmically in time. The birds  
are chirping from somewhere  
overhead, unable to be seen  
because they're hiding  
from me.

Like the way I would hide under  
the bed when the noise  
of their arguing woke me.  
Eyes close and ears plugged  
to mute the sound of violence floating  
over me, holding me still.

Staying is always easier  
when you believe there is no other way.  
Now, I know.

I turn my face towards  
the sky, feeling the growing warmth  
of the rising sun on my skin.  
Reminding me of how I felt as a child,  
lying in the middle of the backyard  
until the calm of dawn.  
Arms spread open, welcoming the healing  
I didn't know I needed.

Making a home out  
of the clothes on my back.  
The soles of my feet on the cool grass.  
I face my fears, with my eyes  
still open. Inhaling the sweet smell  
of life bearing life within me.  
I rest the palms of my hands on the  
ground,  
spreading my fingers to feel the grass  
tickling me  
with every second,  
we both are growing.  
Impossibly,  
slowly,  
unnoticeably.

# Drug Facts

by Stetson Smith

Active Ingredients (In each tablet)

Purpose

Big brother's regret, Little sister's control .....Wrong Fusion

**Uses** Whether temporary or not, the roles are forever changed

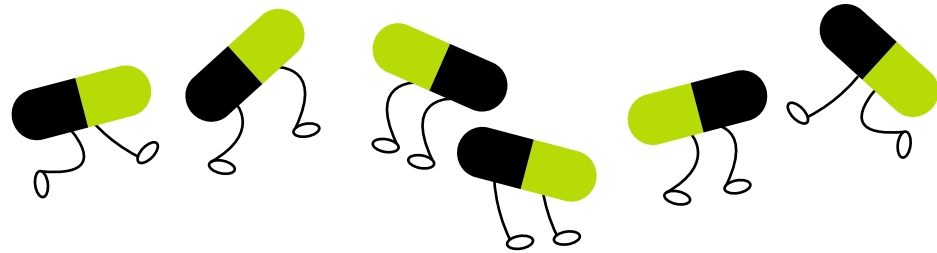
## Warnings

- What good is family? They ask for favors at your expense;
- They take like baby birds, harmless at first. Not realizing just what is at risk;
- Your love.
- We love unconditionally. Why?
- What if it didn't need to be that way?
- We could leave the nest guilt-free, but no.
- They clip your wings and tie your beak to keep you ensnared forever.
- A family holds you down. Drags you back so as to ask more and more from you.
- Watching you dwindle away until;
- Your Life is Not Your Own

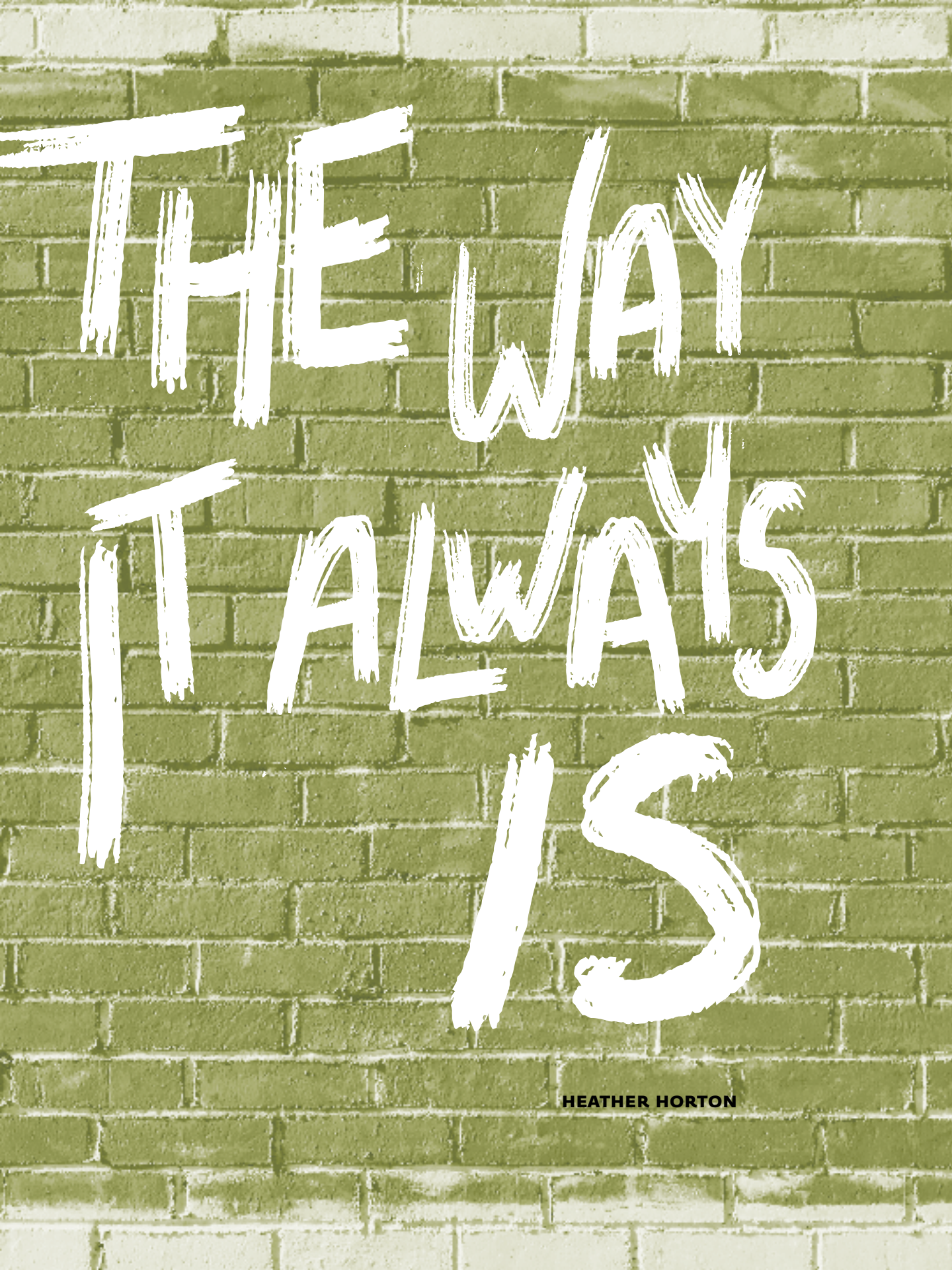
## Directions

- Leave. ■ There is no other option than to let the baby birds die or fly own their own. ■ She asked you to steal, because she knew you would do it for her. ■ Are you going to stay tethered and hooded? Or learn to fly?

PEEL  
HERE







HEATHER HORTON

## *I step out of my bedroom,*

wrapping my hair in a used towel from the hallway floor. My cotton t-shirt clings to my wet skin, but I'm not up for the fight, so I leave it caught around my arms, making the entire shirt feel a size too small. I count the three kids and T by the sound of their feet. I run out of my door, taking the steps so fast, my feet feel like they're jumping.

"T, oh my God!" I nearly scream as I run through her open front door, which lets me know she was expecting me.

She sits on the flipped cushion of her worn leather couch. There is a tear in the leather on the underside of the cushion from her ex, Darnell, from when he took a kitchen knife to some of her furniture. He was a hot-head that always thought she was cheating. The kids have disappeared into their shared bedrooms.

She doesn't look up at me when she answers, her eyes looking lifeless and exhausted.

"Hi, baby." Her voice is flat, mechanical.

I fall at her feet, afraid to touch her and bring her back down to this place. Afraid to not touch her and leave her alone wherever she's gone off to. "T, fuck. Darrin came by yesterday and told me. T . . . mama . . . look at me, Tierra . . ." My voice trails off, realizing she's already gone.

I close my eyes and inhale slowly, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. This isn't my time to be emotional. I don't get to steal this from her. I shove the thought of Darrin, Tierra's younger brother, running up the stairs and pounding so hard on my door that it sounded like scratching. It sounded desperate, like he was trying to escape from hell on the outside of my door. I shake my head hard, remembering the way I just stood there, eight feet from the inside of my door with my hands gripped tight around my mouth, not allowing the silent tears to betray me. I knew what he had come to tell me. I just wasn't ready to hear it.

The apartment is impeccably silent, making the whole place feel foreign. I turn around on the floor, so I can sit with my back against the couch, next to her feet. I stare in the same direction as Tierra, both of us not saying a word.



I walk into Harold's to pick up dinner for myself and T's kids, so she won't have to worry about dinner while she plans Luke's funeral. It's not quite a restaurant, but not quite fast food either. But it's cheap, and a classic, and it's opposite Millard Ave, so I can take the bus without having to see that place. Every surface is covered with a thin layer of grease, but I can't complain. Harold's has some of the best wings in my neighborhood.

"I need four pizza puffs with fries, mild sauce on the side. A ten-count of wings. Don't be light with the sauce." I glance at the woman before looking back at the menu which is plastered on the wall above the small window that she's taking my order through. "And let me get three pineapple and two orange sodas."

"Is that it?" she asks, raising her eyebrows. Her tone is impatient, but you don't go to Harold's for the customer service.

"Yes, ma'am," I reply, trying to overcompensate for both of us.

"\$13.75," she replies, looking past me as the door chimes.

I hand over fifteen dollars and walk away. I sit down at the red plywood booth, my back facing the wall. I pull out my phone, trying to ignore the life I'm living. I hear the door chime again.

"What's good, Joe?" The man that just entered nods in the direction of two other men who walked in after me.

I look back down at my phone, realizing I'm the only woman on this side of the counter. I don't want to have to tell anyone I'm not interested, so I try to look like it. I lose myself in my news feed, reading a headline from the Chicago Tribune. Twenty-three people killed last weekend.

I close my eyes and inhale sharply. All those lives, memories, families—grouped together in a number. In a headline. It feels as if we've become numb to the murders happening on our streets, only praying that it won't be our family. But then, when it is, we're even more disconnected. Because no one is paying attention to our grief. I close my eyes, feeling overwhelmed and knowing better than to cry in Harold's.



I'm brought back to reality when the second man that walked in sits down opposite of me, waiting for his order. I look up to notice him staring at me.

"You good?" he asks, his face composed and indifferent.

I roll my eyes, and shrug my shoulders, trying to look stronger than I feel. "Yeah. Why are you asking me that?"

"You just looked like you were hurting, that's all."

I try to gauge his demeanor before I sigh and say, "Thank you for asking."

For a split second, he drops his mask and looks surprised.

"You're welcome."

Kindness has become so scarce, no one knows if it's genuine anymore. It's just not worth the risk of looking vulnerable.

"102. Ticket 102. Your order is ready," yells the woman behind the counter.

I pick up two bags of food, and head outside, sliding past two more people walking inside. The sky is bright blue, the type of day I dread. Someone is always dying when it's sunny in the city. Everyone is outside, too hot and too on edge. I walk a few blocks down Madison Street before I realize I left my keys at the table. My heart jumps into my throat, knowing they're probably gone by now. I pick up my pace to just short of running. I walk past the man that sat with me, ignoring his yelling. They always want the same thing, and I don't have the patience today. I rush inside, looking around the occupied table. They aren't there.

"Hey, girl. Man, stop ignoring me, girl. These your keys?"

I whip my head up to see the man I sat with holding my keys, looking impatient and irritated. I press my lips into a hard line, grabbing them from the palm of his hand. "Thank you," I say, looking up at him.

"I really appreciate that."

"What's your name?"

"It's Molly."

"I'm Boosie."



The living room is lit up by the television, dark except for the light dancing across four little bodies.

"Where is your mom?" I ask, turning on the dining room light as to not scare anyone.

"She's been in bed since we got out of school," Michelle says, leaning forward to look at me before falling back, slumped into the couch.

"You all need to go brush your teeth and put your pajamas on."

"Are you spending the night?"

"Yeah, Jamal. I'm sleeping on the couch. Go get ready for bed. Boys take the bathroom first," I say, putting my hand on my hip. Tierra raised all of them with respect. The two youngest head to the bathroom.

"So your mama been asleep since this afternoon?" I say with a sigh, sitting on the couch between the two girls.

"Yeah. Ava went in there early, but she said Mama was sleeping."

"I don't know if she was sleeping. She was just lying there."

"She still hasn't cleaned up the kitchen since last night."

"You didn't clean it up for her?" I say with a cocked eyebrow, staring back and forth at the girls.

"No, ma'am."

"Go on then."

We all stand up, walking to the kitchen at the back of the apartment. Tierra's apartment always held a lightness. Now, it feels dismal. Without conversation, we each go to work cleaning. Ava collecting the garbage, Michelle collecting dishes, me filling the sink with water. We work silently, sending the boys to bed while we mechanically clean. Two bulbs are out overhead, casting melancholy shadows across the room. I look up to see the girls working together to sweep a pile of dirt off the floor. I place the palm of my hand directly over my navel, imaging a different moment in a different life, created by different decisions.



I wake up with cold sweat on the back of my neck. I can't breathe. It feels like I've been kicked in the chest. I lie there with my eyes plastered on the ceiling. It takes a couple of moments for my eyes to adjust, but longer for my mind to come back to this place. I dreamt of Luke running towards me as fast he could, the way he used to when I would take the kids to Douglas Park with Tierra. The park right across the street from where he would have his last moments. Tierra is only six years older than me, but life had made her older. She got pregnant with Luke when she was fifteen.

“He was the first man to ever say he loved me,” she told me one afternoon. She was facing the stove, listlessly stirring one of the pots in front of her. “It should have never happened. But it did.” Luke’s dad was six years older than Tierra, and went away on kingpin charges when Luke was only two years old. I moved into the apartment above T four years prior, when Luke was only nine. We shared the brownstone, and our lives, ever since.

In my dream, Luke was trying to reach me, but he kept getting farther away. Then, I heard the shot echoing around in my mind right before I woke up.

As my eyes adjust, I stare at the water stain on my ceiling. I sit up on the side of my bed, running my hands over my face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” I say, glancing back at Boosie over my bare shoulder.

“You had a nightmare or something?” he says, sliding across the bed to sit up next to me, brushing my hair away from my face. I look down at my hands, ashamed to admit my fear. “You can talk to me. Girl, we been seeing each other for months now. What’s wrong?”

I look up and stare at the wall in front of us and pick at the skin around my thumbnail. “Someone important to me died a few months ago. It’s crazy, you know. I mean, I saw him just the day before. We were all talking about going to Sunday service that weekend. He was just a kid, you know. I’ve known him since he was a kid. He was only nine when I moved in. He wasn’t even into nothing to bring it on himself. He was a good kid, Boosie. I mean, I’ve never even held a gun, and people out here

are just dying. They’re killing everybody, but it’s not even an us-versus-them thing. We’re killing each other, and I’ve never even held a gun.” I shake my head hard and clench my teeth, trying to calm my shaking voice.

We sit in silence for a moment, then he says, “Do you want me to show you how to hold a gun?”

I look up at him sharply and realize he’s already staring at me.

“You have a gun?”

“Girl, of course I do,” he says, as if I just told a bad joke.

“How many do you have?”

“Just the one.”

“Yes,” I say without breaking eye contact.

“Yes, I do.”

We climb out of bed silently, standing by the single window in my bedroom. The street lights illuminate my small bedroom through the white sheet hanging over the long window. The sounds from outside seep in through the few open inches. He pulls his gun out of his jeans pocket, checking it over before looking at me.

I stare intently, feeling the buzz of anxiety in my chest. He grabs the barrel, holding the grip towards me. I feel the cool metal on my fingers, grabbing the piece from him. There is a man outside talking to himself too loudly for this time of night. I imagine he’s drunk, or high, wandering down Kenzie Avenue. I grip the handle, slowly raising the gun to eye level. I turn my head, still holding the piece. Boosie stares at me through his eyelashes, his chin dropped. His lips are pressed into a straight line. We stare at each other in silence, my arms locked, the gun loaded.



“So, when am I gonna meet him, Molly?” T asks, arching her eyebrow at me. We sit on the front stoop, drinking wine coolers and watching Tierra’s youngest three children play soccer in the empty lot next door, along with some of the kids on our street. We used to do this all the time, but today I nearly had to drag her into the sun. I feel the cool bottle on my lips, using it as a buffer to take my time. “It’s been, what, a month now?”

It had been nine weeks and three days since I met him at Harold’s. But I didn’t tell T for a few weeks after. With the funeral and grieving, it didn’t feel right to bring the newness of my life into hers.

“Soon, T. I promise.”

“Has he been good to you?”



“Yeah, he’s been really good to me.”

We both sit, staring towards the kids. She has always been protective of me. She took the role of an older sister in my life. With me not having much family around the city anymore, and sharing the brownstone, it just felt right. She was like the best parts of a mother and a best friend. Even her kids called me auntie.

“Then bring him by for dinner Sunday night. I’ll make the whole bit. It’ll be good for the kids, you know. Have our family dinners again. You can bring the yams though.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see if he’s free.”

“Mhm... I’ll have dinner ready around seven.”

I smile at the neck of my bottle. “Yeah, okay. So have you decided if you’re going to write Luke’s daddy?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe down the line when it don’t hurt so much.”

“How’s Darrin been doing?”

She shakes her head. “He’s not doing good. I have three—I had three sons. I don’t have four. I hear he’s been looking for who shot Luke. The other day I walked in the apartment, and he was sitting on the couch with his strap in his lap, finger on the trigger. I think he was off a pill or something. His eyes didn’t look the same. He’s playing tough like he’s the only one grieving. I can’t deal with him right now. I told him not to come back until he gets it together. The kids don’t need to see their uncle like that.”

“He’s looking for who killed Luke?” I feel my eyes widen. Darrin is nothing like Tierra. He is quick-tempered, irrational, and chases adrenaline like a junkie.

“Yeah. So what’s been going on with that man at your job? He still giving you a hard time?”

I pick at the skin by my thumbnail. I feel the type of discomfort that plagues women when we’re forced to face our discomfort, instead of just pretending it doesn’t exist.

“Yeah, but, you know, I don’t see him that much anyway.”

“Molly.” Her voice is steady and strong.

I don’t look up at her, although I know that’s what she’s waiting for.

“Molly, you don’t deserve to let some rich, white man talk to you any type of way. You don’t need that job that bad.”

“Yeah, well, it beats my last gig doesn’t it?” I say sharply.

“You think trading one form of exploitation is better than another? Baby, you’re smarter than that.” She pokes my forehead with her finger. “You moved here to get out of the hustle for a reason, baby. And it wasn’t to be treated the same way.”

“Yeah.” A droplet of blood forms on my thumb. “You all going to church on Sunday? It’s been awhile.”

“I don’t know, baby. Maybe soon, you know, when it don’t hurt so much,” she says, sighing and sounding disconnected—a million miles away. “One of his teachers called me the other day. You remember Luke talking about Ms. Johnson. You teased him, telling him he must have a crush on her to be studying the way he did.”

“I told you no boy that age cares about social studies like that.”

“Well, turns out Ms. Johnson is almost twice my age. That boy just liked her class, I guess.” We both shake our heads, bewildered. “She told me she talked to the principal about calling. He still has some stuff in his locker at school.”

“When do you think you’re going to pick it up? Do you want me to go with you?”

“I don’t know, Molly. Quit asking me when I’m going to do any of this.

I don’t know. I just buried my son. My first born—my baby.”

She stands up and walks inside. I sit on the front step and bow my head, begging God to take this pain away from her. Begging Him to show me how to not make this more painful for her.





“Good evening, Molly.”

“Evening, Mr. Frazier,” I say, walking toward the elevator.

“You mean, good evening, don’t you?” he says, winking at me as I stand next to him in the elevator.

We have this same routine every day, whether we meet in the elevator, or in the office, morning or night. Sometimes it seems like he intentionally walks past the cleaning supply closet just to make me feel like entertainment to him. I press the button for the ground floor, ignoring the question.

“You look really nice today, Molly.” I can feel his eyes raid my body. “We should get drinks after work sometime.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Frazier wouldn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“You don’t need to worry about my wife.”

“But you do.”

He lets out a noise that sounds like a growl. He is used to control, to having authority. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. The silence fills the space between us, weighing down on me. I imagine what it would feel like to have the piece in my bag, like a shield keeping me safe, until the door opens, letting me go free.

I walk out quickly, my long legs taking large strides. The lobby is nearly empty, apart from a couple people lingering, their bodies present, their

minds anywhere else but here. My mind is alert, my body warm.

“When are you going to stop teasing me, Molly?”

I turn my head quickly, realizing he is still following me as we step outside, the evening beginning to set in.

“Good evening, Mr. Frazier,” I say, continuing to walk briskly. It’s five blocks to my bus stop. I begin counting my steps.

I hear his shoes clicking the pavement behind me. He lets out an empty laugh. “Good girl. So you can be taught.”

I grip my bag tighter around my shoulder. This treatment feels familiar, yet completely foreign in this setting. I quicken my pace, but I

can feel his presence behind me for another block, until I hear him call out: “No one likes a tease, Molly. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My legs feel like they’re running. My skin is cold, but under the surface my muscles are warm. They’re ready. I notice every detail. The couple on the other side of the street are not holding hands, him a stride ahead of her. The car with tinted windows parked a block ahead. I ask myself if it’s safe to walk past, or if I should cross the street at the next intersection. I see a man entranced by his phone, grabbing for the door on my right. I walk past quickly, reading that he isn’t a threat. I notice every detail on my way home.

When I walk up our steps and through our front door, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I made it. I need a cigarette. I don’t need to be alone. So I knock on T’s door before I open it. The television is on, but the room is void of noise, except for Tierra rustling papers on the table. “Hey, T. Where’s your pack?”

She looks up without saying a word, grabbing her menthol cigarettes off the table. She waves them at me.

“What is all this?” I ask, lighting the tip.

“Luke’s teacher brought all his things to me today.”

I take a seat, looking over the beat-up notebooks and multicolored folders on the table. His handwriting sprawled across the papers spread over the dining room table. I trace the tip of my finger over his name printed on the top of a science worksheet.

“He’s been writing his daddy.”

“What?” I look at the pile of envelopes Tierra has been holding in her lap.

“For over a year in looks like. They talked about everything. About school, us, Mark’s hustle that got him locked up in the first place. They talked about God. And this girl Luke likes. He never talked to me about no girl.” Her voice cracks. Quickly, she’s in tears. I stand up to hold her head against me, comforting her like a child. I run my hand over the back of her head, closing my eyes, trying to absorb the heartache she’s spilling all over my chest.

"Damn, girl. That sounds amazing."

"Get your nasty fingers out of the pot," I say, swatting Boosie's hand with a towel before I wipe the sweat off my forehead with it.

"What can I help with? I brought a bottle, if you all want to drink. And this." He smiles as he pulls out a cleanly rolled blunt.

I smile back and cross the small space between us to kiss him. "I just need to clean up, then we can head down there. What time is it?"

"Ten to seven."

"Okay, I'll be quick."

I step into the bathroom to change my clothes and wash up for dinner. It had been a couple days since I'd seen Boosie. Since the night T and I sat up late, reading Mark's letters to his son. Since that evening when Mr. Frazier followed me out of work. The last couple shifts, I've told my manager I had to leave early, so that I wouldn't get stuck alone with him. I feel a buzz in my chest, knowing I could only leave early so many times before I began to jeopardize my job. I swallow my fear like a large pill and step out of the bathroom, avoiding any look in the mirror.

"You carry the food. I'll carry this," I say, grabbing the blunt from his fingers.

We head downstairs and are immediately surrounded by the smells of barbeque chicken, collard greens, and baked macaroni. This, I think to myself, is home.

"T, where you at?" I holler, walking towards the kitchen where I know she is.

"Back here."

"T, this is Boosie. Boosie, this is T—"

"I'm Tierra." She wipes her hands on her apron before reaching out to shake his. "Molly's family."

"It is an absolute pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I brought this," he says, holding up the bottle of brown liquor. "Molly said y'all had the food covered so . . ."

"Hey, hey!" T says, laughing. She opens the cupboard to grab three glasses. "I appreciate you."

The sound of laughing fills the kitchen as we finish preparing dinner together. Boosie stands against the wall to avoid getting in the way. T and I move in time with each other, serving the kids and sending them to the side-lot after they eat. The three of us sit at the table near the window, looking out at them and talking about our shared histories, while debating the best fried chicken on the West Side, and discussing the political state of our city. Over an hour passes and almost an entire

bottle of brandy.

"I don't think there needs to be guns on the street, period. We can't even say it's about who has the gun. The entire purpose is to kill. It don't matter who it belongs to."

"So you don't have one then?"

"Hell no," Tierra says.

"You don't think it's important to have to keep you safe?" Boosie argues back, stretching back in his chair.

"Can't nothing keep anyone safe out here."

"Shit, if someone ups a strap on me, at least I can shoot back. I'm not gonna look goofy out here getting caught without it."

The room goes silent and I stare hard at Boosie. My mouth goes dry. He looks back at me questioningly, realizing the mood has shifted.

"I don't believe my son was killed because he didn't have a gun on him. He was killed because someone else did."

"Oh, my God, I am so sorry. I didn't real—"

"Molly didn't tell you?" T asks, looking at me.

"It wasn't mine to share, T," I say, looking back.

"All I knew was someone important to her died. I didn't realize it was your son."

"Over off Millard, on the corner by Douglas Park. He was fifteen."

Boosie bows his head and closes his eyes, and I wonder if he's praying.

"Maybe it's time for this?" I ask, holding up the blunt.

We both look outside, gauging how long we have until the kids come back inside. Three more neighborhood kids have joined in a game of tag. We have time.

"Yes, it is," Tierra and I say almost synchronously.

The bedroom is dark, the kind of pitch blackness that makes the room feel simultaneously huge and claustrophobic. I used to fear this type of darkness, but not now with Boosie beside me. I sat on the bed the day he hung the blackout curtains in our bedroom. I watched the way his white t-shirt stretched over his shoulder blades as he hung them. I don't know why it happened, but I knew something shifted. Maybe it was after he snaked my shower drain. Or when he brought me soup and a magazine the weekend I was sick with the flu. He rolled up a blunt that afternoon, telling me it was medicine for my appetite. Or maybe it was when we rode the bus all afternoon and talked about our favorite movies and memories. I don't know when it happened, but I had fallen in love.

I lie here now, and I can feel his fingers next to mine. Our arms are

touching all the way to our shoulders. This bed has begun to feel like ours, instead of mine. My space, my life, my world feels shared in the type of closeness that is love. We listen silently to each other's breathing. This is our ritual, our church.

"Do you believe in God?" I whisper.

"Yes, but I know I'm not making it up there. I've made too many mistakes."

"Me too, probably."

"Like what?"

"Why don't you think you're going to Heaven?"

"Why don't you?"

I accept defeat, or maybe it's an opportunity.

"She would have been five this year." The words hang in the air, balancing on the silence of words unspoken. "What's your excuse?"

I hear him fill his lungs with air, as if he was about to jump into a body of water. "I've hurt some people. I stole some things. You know the way it is. My older brother taught me how to cook hard when I was fifteen. That's just the way it was."

I can feel my lips pressed down on one another. I lie in silence, feeling him unravel his fears slowly beside me.

"You know, it's not that I ever dreamed of doing this shit when I was a kid. It just happened, and we was hungry a lot growing up. It's just the way it was. And it was cool, at first. I mean, I was seeing more money than I had ever seen. I mean, stacks of money. I was buying clothes, shoes. Throwing a whole G on one 'fit. I never had money like that. Going out to eat, getting myself two meals. But the game is only fun for so long, and my brother got locked up when I was seventeen. The weight was just too much for me. I mean, it wasn't that I couldn't handle it or nothing like that. But I was a shorty, still."

I can't see, but I know he's rubbing his face with his hand. We lie there, listening to sirens pass somewhere nearby. I can feel my body on the mattress, completely in-tune with every inch of my body. I know his trauma without him even telling me. It's the story of survival. I had seen it throughout my entire childhood. It's just the way it was.

"I had the neighborhood on lock. But it didn't feel the same. It wasn't fun anymore. I had people to take care of. I had responsibilities. I wasn't out there buying the newest Jordans anymore. I felt fear all the time. You don't just have to worry about the police, you know. It's the people closest to you. My aunties were stealing from me, doing my drugs. My little cousin stole a rank I had put up. I was alone, trying to feed all of them. But that's just how it is out here. And then I got word that someone

else was selling on my block. It's eat or be eaten, you know. I had to do something about it."

I feel an electric current run down my spine, warming my entire body. I feel hollow on the inside, and completely aware of every inch of my skin. I can almost hear my heart pounding in my chest. I stare up towards the ceiling, realizing I'm in love with the man beside me. I know this from the lump in my throat, and the undeniable urge to protect him from the world. I want to reach out, to touch him. But his words are flowing from his mouth like water, and I don't want to take this moment of freedom away from him.

"So, me and my people went out. We hit the block forty, fifty times, every day for a week. I'm talking canvassing that block for an entire week, trying to figure out who was moving in on me. Around that time, two people close to me got locked up. And, you know, I was stressing. I just knew someone was telling on me. I mean, I was hot. Stressin'. And, one day, me and my body went out, and he told me he recognized the dude on the corner. I didn't even ask if he was sure. I was just heated and afraid. I was afraid, Molly. It was beautiful out that day. The sky was bright blue. I remember looking out at Douglas Park right before we looped the block for the final time and thinking how nice it would be to just be outside with some friends, a bottle of liquor."

I stop breathing. I stop thinking. My eyes are wide open, and yet I can't see a thing. My heart beats hard in my chest. My fingers go numb. My mouth is dry. My tongue feels like a weight in my mouth, keeping me silent.

"He was just a kid, Molly. A kid in a black hoodie that someone else told me looked familiar. And I pulled that trigger. One, two, three times. I don't know who he was, but late that night, my people told me it was some kid. He didn't have nothing to do with nothing. And I killed him, Molly I drove past that place every day for weeks." His voice cracks, and I hear him start crying. He lets out a noise that sounds like choking "Every day for weeks. I'll never forgive myself for what I did. I deserve to go to hell for what I did."

I lie there, the knot in my throat making me feel like I'm choking. I disappear somewhere inside of myself. I can't breathe.

"Molly, say something to me."

I don't know how long we've been laying in silence. I don't even recognize the sound of my own name. I reach out, feeling the skin on the back of his hand against me. This is home.





The morning sun wakes me up, shining through my thin curtains. I glance over, watching the rise and fall of Boosie's chest. The stillness of the air welcomes me. I tiptoe across the wood floor, pulling on my blue slacks. I tie my hair back into a tight bun, then button my white shirt. I like my mornings in silence, but spinning thoughts fill my mind with noise. I know tonight I will have to stay until the end of my shift. I know today I will have to face Mr. Fraizer, once again. I know today I will step out of the door of my only safe place and have to face the war in my city. I stand in front of my bedroom window, looking out onto the roofs of the brownstones across the street. I imagine what it would feel like to be a bird in the city. I bet they would prefer soaring through the air. Nothing ever looks as nice up close. But, up there, we would all look so neat and tidy.

I glance over, breathing in time with his rising chest. Glancing at the time, I grab my bag to head to the bus stop. I walk towards the bedroom door, then turn back to the top drawer of the dresser where Boosie placed the gun after I was ready to hand it over. The metal shines back at me, as if to say hello. I run my fingertips over the cool metal.

I slide my fingers around the grip of the gun, feeling the weight in my hand as if it were my anchor. I place the loaded gun in my purse before walking down the stairs and out my front door.





## TO WHAT DO YOU POUR

XANDER CLUBINE

To what do you pour  
in this cup of life?

What blood runs through your veins?

Something strong or sweet

humble or proud

intelligence or wisdom

or dashes of whimsy?

What do you pour

in the concoction of your soul,  
drinking to reap what you sow?

And should you drink in poison,  
making you weak with pain,

remember that this cup of life  
only reflects what you give.

# KISMET

JORDAN ROUBION

Ruby is driving northeast just before dawn on US-54, just outside of Kansas. She is warding off the early November Midwest chill by blasting her old Fiesta's heat, occasionally rubbing the steering wheel and whispering to the ailing car, "Keep it together, Maria, you can make it."

She has been driving since midnight. She had hiked the stairs to battalion headquarters at Fort Bliss for the final time, at exactly one minute before midnight the day of her Expiration of Term of Service, and signed the roster, effectively removing herself from the ranks of soldiers in the United States Army.

She cried, driving the highway that encompassed the base, passing by the familiar, utilitarian buildings that blended with the desert landscape of El Paso. She didn't know why she mourned; there were bad memories made in those sands, and she was leaving nothing of value in the car's rearview.

The first rays of dawn leak over the horizon, watery and pale. Ruby watches for the glimmer of deer eyes shining in the deep ditches.

"Dusk and dawn, you'll see a fawn," her mom always said.

Oklahoma, bleeding into Kansas soon, is dry and shades of dull beige this time of year. But Ruby craves the bright, kaleidoscope colors of Iowa's fall: emerald green, golden yellow, and sparkler red. The only other place that rivaled Iowa's scenery was spring in Alabama when the magnolia trees were blooming. She and her husband, Daniel, suffered in the sands of the Texas desert, missing the verdant and floral qualities of their home states.

Ruby shakes her head. She does not want to think about Alabama. It's a beautiful state, but its paradise is poisoned by its people. The fever-bright, shark's eyes of Daniel's mother flash through her mind, a crown of thorns behind her on the wall, and Ruby, comforting Daniel in the face of that fervent zeal. In that moment, it had been the two of them against the world, but she'll never go back to the Deep South.

A sign races toward her and when she comes upon it, it reads:

LAST GAS 100 MILES.

She doesn't want to stop, but she needs food and gas, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to avoid the deer population. She's heading just east enough that the sun is making her squint, giving her a headache.

Another sign, this one reads KISMET, KANSAS and Pop. 459. Ruby doesn't raise an eyebrow. She's from Iowa, where the entire state is composed of ninety-nine counties filled with tiny towns fighting annexation tooth and nail. She graduated high school with fewer than ninety peers, and that was a combination of six towns.

Ruby pulls into the first gas station at the edge of Kismet.



Daniel is on US-54 East, driving fast in his silver F150. He estimates he's just a few hours behind Nora. He refuses to call her Ruby. The platoon had given her that nickname, and he wasn't part of that rabble. He was special to her.

He inhales another lungful of smoke from his American Spirit. He read somewhere that the habit isn't just the nicotine, but also the smoker's first deep breath of the day. Nora had taught him all about conscious breathing; she loves yoga, and he loves her ass in yoga pants. They had an argument once because he didn't like that she wore those curve-hugging leggings out and about. He didn't like the way their platoon mates leered at her, the filthy animals. She had acquiesced eventually when he'd worn her down.

Daniel could admit to himself, as he drove with his knees and lit another cigarette, that things had been rocky the past few weeks. He attributes this to Nora's transition from soldier to civilian. It was stressful when he did it, too, and he understands that, but true love always wins the day. They are meant to be together, complement each other in so many ways, their lives running parallel even as they balance each other as opposites.

She was short with dangerous curves. He was tall and lean. Her eyes were smoke, her hair deep chocolate with cherry highlights in the sun. His eyes were crystal, his hair shockingly orange.

"Like hot sauce and honey," Nora always said.

They had both made Corporal, the only two in the company, one after the other. He was first, of course, even though she had more time and achievements because he'd had an in with the squad leader. At least he did have until the staff sergeant had taken a liking to Nora, another

filthy beast, staring at her when she wasn't looking. He hadn't told Nora that she had gotten promoted for her smoky blue eyes and baby-birthing hips.

They both loved Alabama, too. She had gushed about the trees and the rolling hills. They may be on their way to Iowa right now, to settle down together, but he knew he would convince her to leave her family and move to Auburn. Go Tigers, he thinks.

Daniel lights another cigarette with unsteady hands and misses the gleam of eyeshine in the ditch. The doe springs from the depression, eyes bulging in the face of Daniel's headlights. He's a city boy, not used to driving in the country, but his instincts are good. He doesn't swerve, but slams on his brakes and prays. His cigarette falls from his lips and drops to his seat between his legs, but he can't worry about that now. The doe bounds, unharmed, across the pavement, and Daniel exhales, then jerks up from his seat, where the cherry of his cig has burned a hole in his jeans to the sensitive skin of his inner thigh. He curses and swats at his leg, glaring after the deer, but it has disappeared.

He can't blame the deer. The deer is fear and instinct and dumb—earthy intelligence. It goes where whim tells it to, gives in to every desire, has no trigger guard or safety catch.

He has no time to waste if he's going to keep up with his wife. He's back on the road in five minutes, another cigarette between his long fingers.



Ruby leans against Maria as the gas flows from the pump. She's the only customer. Kismet is still asleep, drowsy, and not yet searching for coffee. Her stomach rumbles, and she glances again at the diner next door. It's called Flat as a Pancake. There are no cars in the parking lot.

The pump clicks, and she removes the nozzle and takes her receipt. She walks inside the station, the door chiming her arrival. She smiles at the attendant, a willowy thing with their head half-shaved and fine, fae features. She can't tell if it's a teenage boy or young woman.

"Good morning," she says.

The attendant glances up from their smartphone.

"Morning."

Ruby gets a cup of coffee. The cups are styrofoam and thin. The hot coffee burns through to her hand, so she wraps the cup in napkins.

"Is that all for you?" the attendant asks.

Their name tag reads, "Jordan."

"Is that place next door any good?"

Ruby would rather fill up on greasy gas station fare, continue to hurtle herself through the flat lands, and get home, but hot breakfast potatoes and eggs sound so good.

"Flat as a Pancake? Yeah, it's good. Doesn't open for another hour, though."

On the way to her car, her phone buzzes. It's her mom, texting, asking about her progress. She calls her mother as she drives one parking lot over.

"Where are you?" her mom asks.

"You can't text me, Mom. Not until I make sure the phone is clean."

"I know. I just woke up. Wasn't thinking about it," she sighs.

"I'm in Kansas, just barely. I should be home by nine."

"I have cold Blue Moon waiting for you, and a sweet red for me," she says, and Ruby can hear Beans, the mastiff, barking in the background.

"Thanks, Mom. I'll call again in a couple hours."

"I worry, you know."

"I know. Love you."

They disconnect and Ruby leans her seat back as far as it will go, which isn't far, because her back seat is filled with the last of her belongings. She had packed her shit in a frenzy, whizzing around the one bedroom apartment, considering and rejecting anything that could be easily replaced. Her squad leader had helped her, shoving things in boxes and packing them in his truck. She'd stored everything at a U-Haul, to be picked up by the professional, Army-approved movers. She shook hands with Sergeant Fournier outside the extended-stay hotel and said goodbye. She hadn't left the hotel room until it was time to sign out of the unit. Just in case.



Nora had told him to go to therapy, and he had, even though he had thought it was a crock of shit. He did learn from it, though, and he could admit to himself that he shouldn't have put that spyware on Nora's phone. He wouldn't have had to admit that if her bitch mother hadn't figured it out. He'd slipped, revealed information that he shouldn't have known. The spyware was still there, but his alerts were silent. Nora had stopped texting.

That's all right. Everything would even out once they got to Iowa and settled down.

He hauls through podunk towns with historic main streets and ghosts behind boarded windows. He's looking for a silver Fiesta with a dent in the passenger side door. He had put that dent there, about three weeks

ago, right before he'd put the spyware on her cellphone. She casually mentioned, while they were smoking in her car, that she had gone to a party without him.

"What the fuck?" he said.

"It's not a big deal. You were still at training in Bullis, and I was bored. It was Saturday night, and it's been forever since you took me out."

"Who was there?" he said around clenched teeth, and his hand gripped the door handle for support.

"Just some guys from the platoon. Pelu was there. I mostly hung out with him."

"What the hell were you thinking? The only woman in a group of nutjobs like that?"

"They're not nutjobs. And what am I supposed to do, Daniel? All my coworkers are male. You can't just hide me in the apartment for the rest of the year."

He'd yanked the door release, cutting his hand on a piece of errant plastic plating, and slammed open the passenger door. The door launched into the cement pole.

How could she not understand that those horrid dogs wanted to sink their teeth into her ass? How could she do this to him?

She is blind, grasping in the dark, feeling her way through life, but that's all right. He'd be her eyes. He'd be her guide, her savior.

He sees it. Her car, the Fiesta. With terrible judgment, she had parked it on the main drag through Kismet. Daniel finds this ironic, meeting in Kismet for the first time in three weeks. He cruises into the parking lot, which has a beat up passenger van beside Nora's car. The diner's front is mostly windows, and he is smug, pleased even, when he sees Nora sitting in a booth—on display.

She must have planned this. She is waiting for him. Everything will be fine.

Daniel grabs the heavy drawstring bag sitting on the seat next to him and steps out of the truck, stretching. His smile all teeth. His hands shaking.



Ruby is eating eggs and cheesy potatoes, watching the family at the long table next to her. The kids are wild, shooting paper straw wrappers at each other, knocking over their chocolate milk, and being rowdy. It makes her smile. The mom and dad look tired, probably on their way to or from a family vacation.

Ruby envies them, despite the purple bruises under their eyes. She had hoped to have a few young children by now. She was almost thirty. She had always wanted a big family. The time had just never been right. Maybe the time will never be right.

Someone slides into the booth, across from her. She freezes, over-easy egg slipping off her fork and plopping onto the table. She feels sweat break out on her face, heat rise in her chest. She had worried but hadn't truly thought he would follow her.

"Nora," Daniel says. His face is so earnest.

She wants to punch him square in the jaw.

Automatically, she says, "Don't call me that."

"I had to drive all night to catch up to you," he says, frowning.

Ruby forces herself to keep eating even though the food now tastes like ash and her throat is so dry. She doesn't respond. Her eyes escape routes. He is between her and the door.

"I just want to talk," he says.

"I don't want to talk. We already talked, and you are a liar and manipulative."

She takes a bite of egg, gnashing her teeth.

Daniel places a thin hand on his chest.

"Liar? What are you talking about?" he asks.

Ruby drops her fork with a clatter. The father of the family next to them glances their way.

"Who lies about being a recovered heroin addict? Who lies about being raped by their uncle? And don't deny it. I had an enlightening conversation with your mother and sister while we were in Alabama." She is hissing at the end, like a cat with an arched back.



Daniel's face goes blank, then he smiles. Those fucking bitches, with their loose, flapping gums, always gossiping. He opens the drawstring bag and reaches inside.

"I only wanted you to pay attention to me. You've been so busy," he says, voice gentle and sweet, but his heart is sprinting in his chest.

Her nose is halfway in the air, and he hates that.

He continues, "You act like you never need me, Nora. You always go out without me. You never need a shoulder to cry on. You're never vulnerable. I just want you to love me the way I love you."

"I did love you," she says in a low voice.

Daniel chooses to ignore that. He wants so badly to touch her, but he has to keep his hands under the table.



“You put spyware on my phone. What kind of crazy person does that?”

Daniel’s smile is white and cloying as he says, “After the party, I was just so worried about you. What if one of those guys made a move?”

“Yeah, what if they did? You should trust me to handle it.”

Daniel snorts. She glares.

“You never heard the way those guys talk about you,” he says, leaning forward. “It’s disgusting.”

“I don’t believe you. Why would they say anything to you?”

“They don’t always know I’m listening, or they make snide comments to me.”

Ruby crosses her arms.

She always knew her platoon mates had tempered their wilder senses of humor around her because she was a woman, but she never censored them. She swore, she wasn’t a prude, she sweat and bled and didn’t cry alongside her squad, but she couldn’t believe they would reduce her to whatever Daniel was implying. They never pushed the limits she had set when she first arrived at the unit.

“Bullshit.”

The mother at the other table shoots a glare at Ruby for the cuss word, but her kids are getting loud again, so she doesn’t say anything.



Daniel’s hands are trembling, but he keeps them under the table. Those fucking kids keep screaming. This isn’t going the way he planned. She should be falling into his arms, like she always did after their little tiffs. He knows there must be ugly splotches of red on his pale, freckled cheeks. Nora put them there, and he hates her for that. Nora narrows her eyes and says, “And even if none of that mattered, you know what you did is unforgivable.”

Daniel knows nothing of the sort. It’s not like he hit her.

“I’ll fix the hole in the wall. It’ll be fine.”

“You threatened me! You almost gave me a black eye, or a broken jaw!”

Nora is yelling, and finally the kids are shutting their goddamn mouths, gaping at Nora.

“Nora,” he murmurs, trying for calm.

“Don’t call me that fucking name,” she screeches.

The parents at the table are definitely concerned now. The mother is signaling for the waitress, but the father isn’t going to wait that long and goes to get someone. The kids have already lost interest and are fighting over a tablet. Daniel grinds his teeth.





Ruby suddenly feels a calm steal over her.

“I already filed the divorce papers. I can serve you now if you want me to. Otherwise, I’ll send them to the apartment,” she says quietly.

Daniel becomes as still as a predator on the hunt.

“So you were serious,” he says.

“Deathly serious.”

“Well, come to the motel with me. To... say goodbye,” he says.

She raises an eyebrow.

“I’m not going to have goodbye sex with you,” she says.

Daniel sighs and leans back in the booth.

“Are you sure?” he asks.



“I’m positive,” she confirms, force behind her words. He believes her. He believes her so much that he takes the gun from under the table and points it at her chest, but keeps it close to him so she can’t take it.

The kids don’t notice, and the parents are talking to the manager at the host desk.

Nora glances at the gun, and her eyes go wide. It’s the Glock, the one he keeps on the nightstand. She shakes her head, a little back and forth, like she can’t believe what’s happening, but it’s her fault. She did this. She’s making him do this.

He almost pulls the trigger, but she looks into his eyes and all he sees are the soft, stupid eyes of the doe frozen in his headlights.



Ruby opens her mouth to say something, anything, but Daniel holds up his other hand to stop her.

“I love you, Nora. And I want you to know this is your fault,” he says. He points the gun under his chin and pulls the trigger.

Daniel, or the body of Daniel, slumps over in the booth. The restaurant is silent, just for a moment. Ruby touches her cheek, where she feels a hot wetness. Her fingers come away covered in bright carmine.

Ruby never thought she would get PTSD after she left the military.

Then the kids are screaming. The parents are screaming, and she is screaming, and she doesn’t think she’ll ever stop.



# A SONNET TO COLORADO HIKING

MARK JONES

Colorado hiking is a joy for

me. Fresh morning air. My boots feel sturdy.

The cool sunny sky. The pines make the floor,  
their needles freshly fallen from the tree.

Climbing easily round the rocks, the vistas

opening before me. The mountains rise

with snow on their tops. The moon and Venus

just over the peaks. The blue of the skies.

Reaching the top, I slowly descend. Hot

and sweaty. Feet hurting in suddenly

tight boots, blistering my feet. Knees are not

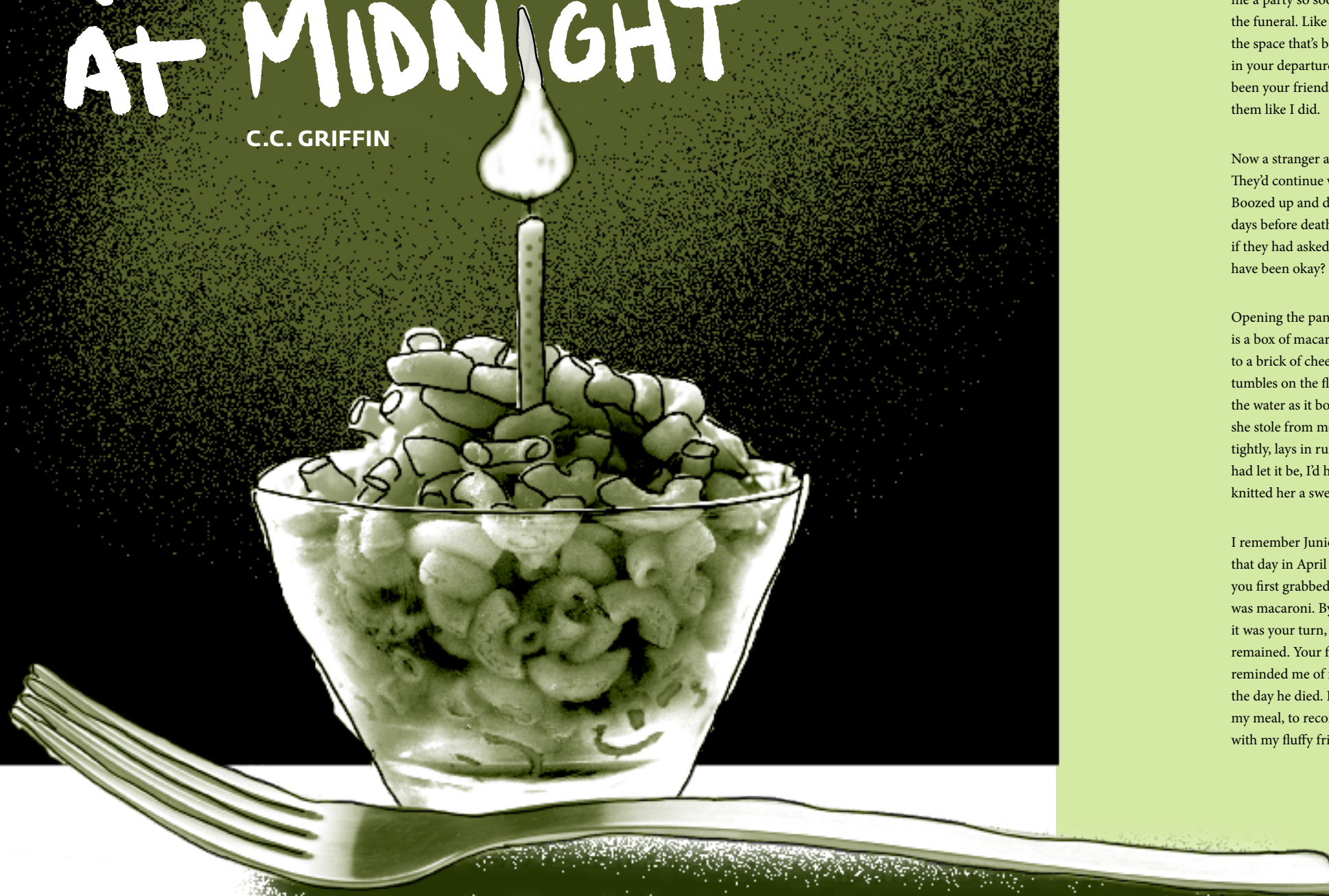
feeling well, descending on rocks and scree.

Clouds coming in for afternoon showers

I'm cold seeking shelter underneath the firs.

# MACARONI AT MIDNIGHT

C.C. GRIFFIN



There's nothing like walking away from your own birthday party. The ball of yarn, stolen from Kevin's apartment, was my only gift. I won't go back to ask if it was meant to be mine.

It seems careless, throwing me a party so soon after the funeral. Like celebrating the space that's been opened in your departure. They could've been your friends, if you'd seen them like I did.

Now a stranger amongst friends, They'd continue without me. Boozed up and drunk as a wasp days before death. I'd have stayed if they had asked. Would that have been okay?

Opening the pantry, there is a box of macaroni, next to a brick of cheese-melt. Our kitten tumbles on the floor, mimicking the water as it boils. The yarn she stole from me, once coiled tightly, lays in ruin. If she had let it be, I'd have knitted her a sweater.

I remember Junior High, that day in April when you first grabbed me. Lunch was macaroni. By the time it was your turn, none remained. Your face reminded me of my bunny the day he died. I offered you my meal, to reconcile with my fluffy friend.

Over a decade together, you managed to teach me what it meant to be loved. A love paid in blood as you sought solace through the fifth-story window, leaving me to piece together what could have been if you'd shared your struggle instead of forcing a smile.

I'm left to piece together the pathway to this reality. Had I not lost my bunny, I wouldn't have found you. If you hadn't taken that leap, we'd both be cooking now. If I hadn't relinquished my lunch, I'd have recognized my friends tonight.

Who knows what may have been had I gone with them and not you. Kevin may have continued college. Jerry may not have gone to jail. You might have lived. Or,

I'd have joined them. I would be broken, addicted, dead. I would be at my party as the clock strikes midnight;

"Happy birthday to me!"

The cheese has melted; the pasta is tender. Pondering won't change the past or the present, but maybe it'll help me move forward.

# Red

ISABELLA NIELSON

She pulled the thread through the red fabric.  
The needle pricked her finger but she ignored it.  
The hood was almost finished.  
*Grandmother will be proud, she told herself.*

The needle pricked her finger but she ignored it.  
It's cold and the woods are dangerous now.  
*Grandmother will be proud, she told herself.*  
*I will bring grandmother biscuits and bread, she sang.*

It's cold and the woods are dangerous now.  
Mister Wolf will try and lead her astray.  
*I will bring grandmother biscuits and bread, she sang.*  
Dark mysterious woods are no place to play.

Mister Wolf will try to lead her astray.  
She was told that a red hood would protect her.  
Dark mysterious woods are no place to play.  
She must leave while it is still day.

She was told that a red hood would protect her.  
The hood was almost finished.  
She must leave while it is still day.  
A shiver runs down her spine for she thought she was alone.

The hood was almost finished.  
A knock is heard at the door.  
A shiver runs down her spine for she thought she was alone.  
Now she must hurry.

A knock is heard at the door.  
The needle still at work.  
Now she must hurry.  
She pulled the thread through the red fabric.



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