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Spring 2022

The Gist
The University of Vermont

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Gist: Spring 2022

Spring 2022

THE Gist

Volume XVI



The Gist, Art 10 [2022]
THE GIST

Spring 2022
Volume XVI

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We hope you enjoy the Spring 2022 edition of The Gist! We are so appreciative of UVM staff, faculty, and students who followed guidelines to reduce the number of positive cases, which allowed us to host in-person meetings again this semester. We were so happy to be back in our usual space in Lafayette, and to welcome lots of new faces to the club.

After a couple years of hosting our annual Creative Arts Expo online or in a hybrid online/in-person format, we were able to bring the event back in full force this year! We hosted live performances by UVM bands, and had artists tabling in the Davis Center with all of their creations. Looking ahead, we hope that the event will continue to grow and the next one will be even bigger as life returns to an approximate normal on campus.

Though we've been playing a bit of catch-up here at The Gist, it is so exciting to finally be able to release this issue, which is, as usual, full of incredible writing and visual art from our undergraduate community here at UVM. This issue is a long time coming, and we hope that it is as fun to read as it has been to put together. We could not be leaving The Gist in better hands than its editing team, an inspiring blend of established members and new faces. Enjoy - and submit to The Gist!

Alessia and Levi, Coeditors-in-Chief

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08202

My mother brings me to walk on frigid beaches
In the dead of winter when the house gets too quiet.
The car rides down the highway, silent too—
Both of us forever with mouths full of saltwater
And stormy minds—sea witch stolen words never reaching each other.
Decades of trips to know even a piece of her—
She always scoffs as she watches me run from the breaking waves;
I wonder how she learned to dive under them.
She tells me to stop listening for a siren song in the storms,
I don't tell her I'm just listening to the way the wind blows,
Don't ask her if she feels the sand scrape her hands too.
Before we leave, she takes a moment to stand before the ocean—
And smiles.
I hope this means that she too has a love for things unfathomable.

Another Life

Collage using magazine clippings, a page from a poetry book and watercolor marker



...good?
...rought.
...God,
...made t... be untied
...arth and sea, ing... light,
...d you looked and saw that it was good.

With spit and a fistful of dust, you made
the first man. Then to make Eve, you took him apart.
You made everything, even the great God

and it's all carnage. A cell cleaves to bite
Before one war ends, the next one will start.
then the next—still looking? Still good?—

and the eyes that weep for spilled blood
are set in a head that plots the next slaughter.
A... Picasso's vexed mirror. O God,

how will you judge the quick and the dead
when the dead include this child for a martyr?
Can you really still look and say it is good?
The monster's in *your* mirror; it's you, God.

Second Year

I think this will be the year I say I ran everywhere
The year I blasted out from a pile of orange leaves
Soaked to the bone
With serendipity
It's a slump in the best sense of the word
A rolling over
A leaning into

I want to be good
Which really means that I want to be
Better
In the way that professors are
When they've read the real unabridged version of *Das Kapital*
And wear tweed blazers in the spring-time

Or
At least
I want to be like those
Big men on tiny bikes
Doing tricks outside of my bedroom window

Big peeling laughter and high-cheeked blush
At once unafraid
Of getting caught
Or eating shit

Hive of Thoughts

Digital



The Story of the Second Moon

In days long past, when magic was not yet gone from the minds nor the hearts of mortals, there lived a little girl in a village.

Every night before she slept she stared at the moon and the sky and the stars with wonder in her heart. And every night as she dreamt, she danced among the heavens with the stars and the moon with joy and laughter upon her lips.

And the moon, especially, she loved to dance with. In her dreams, it was a shimmering jade rabbit, leaping and bounding with her as she twirled in the nebula meadows.

But time passed, as it must, and the girl became a woman. Less and less she stared at the stars, instead seeing the trodden down earth. And the wonder left her heart and the joy and laughter her lips. Seldom did she turn her eyes starward anymore, for her labors left her weary, desiring nought but rest.

And then, one day, war came to her village. She left, and became a soldier for her kingdom.

For seven years she fought, winning glory and distinction among her army, and no more did her eyes seek those celestial bodies she had so beloved in her youth. Her eyes at night were instead drawn to the flickering, inconstant light of the fire, the undulating tongues of flame reaching fruitlessly upwards.

After those seven years the armies clashed in their entirety in a battle unlike any before or since in all of Existence. Nine days and nine nights without pause the havoc went on, until the very dirt was turned to mud not by rain but by blood, and the dead far outnumbered the living.

It was on the ninth night the woman fell. Surrounded by the bodies of her friends and foes, innumerable wounds upon her, she collapsed. As she lay dying, her eyes were turned again at last to the moon and the sky and the stars. As her last breaths were drawn, she again felt in her heart that wonder she had thought long since destroyed. And as the last of her life escaped her lips, all the

stars she had danced with again came to meet her, and at their head was the jade rabbit.

The heavens had missed her, and as her spirit left her body the rabbit led her soul into them once more. Not wishing to be alone again, the rabbit bade her stay with him, and they would dance across the sky together with the stars until the end of all things. Joyous once more, she agreed, and so was remade as the second moon, casting her first light upon the eight who still in that vale stood, weary and distraught among the shades of the dead.

Off-Kilter

My hangers are too heavy
It makes the rack sag
And nothing's hung right
And the shirts are missing buttons
And I have never owned an ironing board

I left my keys in the car

I make myself
Dinner for one
And try to make it as colorful as possible
And use too much salt

There may be
A cat that lives next door
And she's black
And she's tired of her walks

I'm tired of my walks

I left a gap
In the shower curtain
The tiles are too slick

And I'm the only one
Who will slip

of fruits and fiends

think of that afternoon
in the vessel of my youth,
that battered and bruised minivan
you drove me to the Zoo
pointed to the orangutans
and said “tangerines”
our snickers could peel pelt
but wasn’t that always how it was?
you, mistaking the broiling orange of my most primal
for the sweet, tolerant skin of a tangerine

Prom

Acrylic and watercolor on paper



- 14 -

Thea

When people thought of Theodora, they pointed out all the wrong things. She was too stubborn, disagreeable, head so far up the clouds that she'd suffocate. When I thought of her, she was Thea—the firecracker I'd met under the bleachers while the both of us were skipping gym class, who insisted I call her by her nickname, because her actual name made her sound like an old lady who handed out butterscotch candies. I asked her what was so bad about them, and she just laughed, a sweet, tinkling noise.

The next day, in between first and second period, I found her in the hallway, staring at the poster for the school musical auditions. It took all the courage I possessed to walk up to her and hand her the butterscotch hard candy, but it was worth it. Her smile awoke butterflies in me, and she unwrapped the candy and popped it into her crimson mouth with a little wink. It made me feel special, this little joke that we shared with each other.

She invited me to the park, and we skipped the last period to soak in the sunshine, strawberry ice cream cones dripping between our fingers as we tried to figure each other out. The moon had made a home for herself in the chalkboard sky by the time we left, and my parents were worried sick, but I felt as though flowers were growing from me, planted by Thea's elegant hand.

She sat next to me at lunch the following day, and just like that, I was a willing fixture in her life.

Hours in the park faded into numerous other times skipping classes we didn't feel like sitting through, and dinners at Magnolia's Diner, where she'd sneak me multiple plates of cheesy fries, even though employees only got one free meal. She was never scared of getting caught. There were afternoons spent running through the streets and sleepovers spent talking shit about the people who disliked her. Remnants of her were strewn about my bedroom, and her perfume, a rich vanilla punctuated with notes of oak, lingered like a stolen kiss.

Thea had dreams wider than the Tupelo sky, and she never let anyone make her feel ashamed of them. She wanted to escape this boring, old town, make a name for herself among the twinkling lights of Hollywood. It was all that filled her mind after watching *Gone With the Wind*, and she'd claimed the glamorous Vivien Leigh as her idol.

She wanted to be adored, sure, but not like the prom queens her mother wanted her to emulate. There was something remarkable in the way Thea was able to embody any role on stage, and affect people with her performance, because the worst thing she could imagine was only amounting to her beauty. She had to be better than that.

That was what I loved most about her. The moment someone tried to shove Thea into a box, she shoved back, even if it distanced her from people. Only she had the power to decide who she was. She was too much for some, but never for me. I'd walk through hurricanes if it meant she was by my side.

We skipped prom that year. Thea took us to the empty park, where a red and white checkered cloth covered the rotting picnic table. It was laden with not-so-ordinary fruit punch, a hummingbird cake, and a bag of chips. There was also a ratty stereo, and a disco ball hung from a tree, casting flashes of light onto our faces. It was our own private celebration, and I'd never felt so important.

It was also that night, with the cheekiest grin on her face, that she said she was finally making a move. She'd saved up enough money from working at Magnolia's for a plane ticket to Los Angeles, and then some. After graduation, she was getting the hell out of here and never looking back. If Elvis could do it, so could she.

I only wished my heart would stop shattering. All I felt was a dread that coated me like the sticky summer days.

I was happy for her, truly, but as the days slipped from my grasp, I wished time would stop. Graduation felt like the beginning of the end for us, and I wanted to keep filling in the pages before we ran out of ink.

"*Don't forget about Tupelo,*" I said at the airport. What I really wanted to say was "please never forget me," but that felt too selfish, so I hid the words beneath my heart.

“*I’ll come back,*” Thea promised. Her fingers clutched her suitcase the way I wished they would clutch my hand. “*It’ll always be my home.*”

Her eyes glittered so much like stars that I believed she’d plucked them from the sky. It’s my favorite memory of her.

She meant her words, at least for a little while. Any chance she got, she would take a plane down from Los Angeles, and then a bus from the airport. I’d meet her at the stop, she would throw her arms around me, and it would be like we never parted. She gushed over her roommates and some scripts she’d gotten. She’d already picked out a place for her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I’d tell her how boring my college classes were, that Magnolia’s had new milkshake flavors, and how my parents sent her their warmest regards.

The visits became fewer and farther between as she started to prepare for more auditions and attend glitzy events with prominent industry members that could change her life. Each time, she apologized profusely, until she simply forgot. I stayed right where I was, starting to mourn a loss I wasn’t sure how to stop.

Then there were the missed phone calls, until it was easier not to talk regularly. The phone calls became short, until there was nothing to talk about, and all we could do was reminisce over the past. Everything gilded rusts eventually, and soon, dry text messages, sent as an afterthought, were the only indication that we cared about each other.

It was over a year before Thea sincerely spoke to me again. She said she missed me tremendously, and that she was visiting Tupelo, so it would make her the happiest if we met up at Magnolia’s for dinner, for old time’s sake. Her name rang in my head all day as I dressed in my best clothes to mend the emptiness in me.

When she didn’t show up after half an hour, I got nervous. Maybe the flight got delayed, or the bus broke down, or the traffic was horrible, but it wasn’t Thea’s fault. I sat in the seat for two hours, picking at my burger, fiddling with the salt shaker, doing anything to ignore each passing minute that was etched into me. I refused to accept that she wasn’t coming, but it clung to me like a second skin until I couldn’t shirk it, and my bones felt weary under its weight.

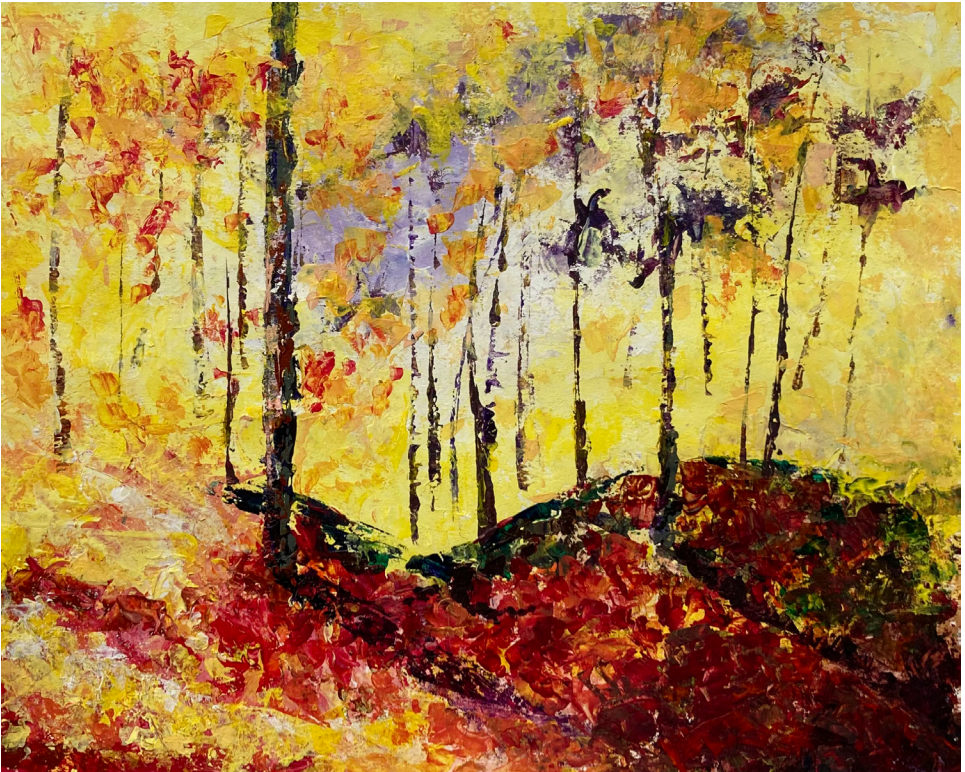
I found out from her mother that she had booked the lead role in a major film franchise, and that was the last I heard about her. The only place I see her now is the silver screen, close enough to touch, but too far away to reach. Theodora's as beautiful as ever, though her eyes don't seem to shine quite as bright.

These days, when people think of her, they do it with pride. She's an achiever, a golden starlet, someone who recognizes the value of dreams. The ones who undermined her the most now throw confetti at her name. When I think of her, I remember butterscotch and stars, and how her laugh echoes through the air, tinged with bittersweet heartbreak.

To grow up is to grow apart, but on the coldest nights, I wonder if she thinks about me, too.

October

Acrylic paint on paper



displacing the i

in reading the 101 notes of poetry in the folder
she has come to notice something peculiar
the i seems to start
a majority of the sentences
and in that she thinks
could i be the narcissist?

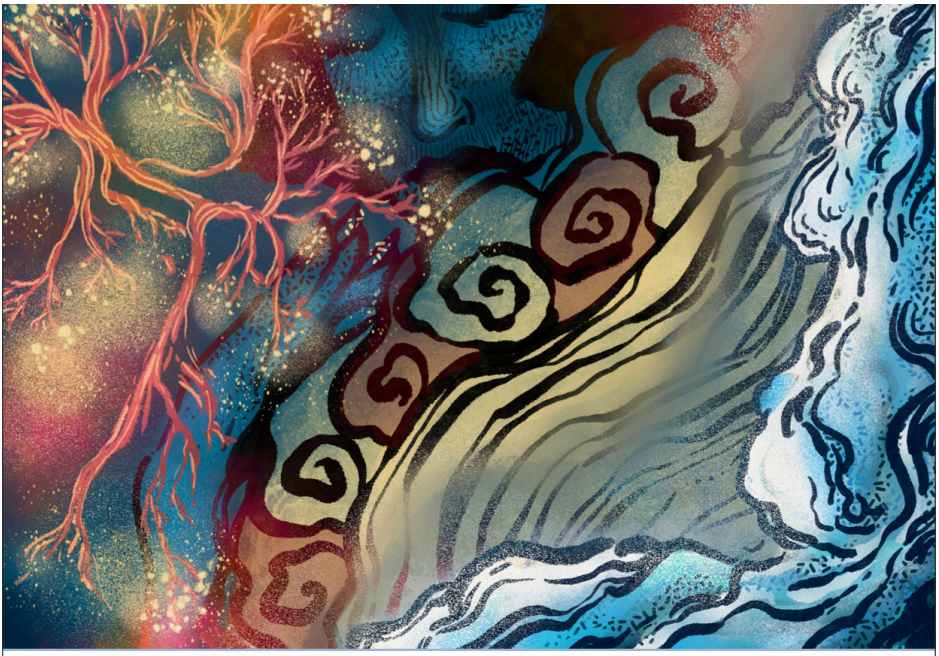
she wants to displace the i
put the i somewhere else
stop focusing so much on yourself (she says)
but what else should she (i) write about

so now she writes a poem
about displacing the i
in order to absolve a guilt
of narcissist tendencies
but in doing so
aggravates the previous

but is she a narcissist (you may ask)
well
most likely not
more likely than not
she is an anxious
self loathing
imposter syndrome ridden 19 year old
worried about the morality of her words
and the possibility she is a narcissist
even if the only clue (which may not even be a clue)
is that she writes more in the i
than in the she

Calmly Balanced in Tides of Change

Digital Painting



Heartspace

In yoga it's called
the heartspace;
That hollow where
Warmth creeps and
Space is made
For new guests

I sense that
Inside the heartspace
There are tiny tables set
And people clutch cups of love tea
And they take their time
Drinking it

Blackberry Brandy

“H-hello? Is something wrong?”

“Sorry if you were asleep. Actually, I’m not, haha. I don’t know what time it is. I’m on the grass right now, and it’s so dark outside right now. Mmm, blackberry brandy tastes so good.”

“Oh my god. I can’t believe I woke up for this. I’m ending the—”

“Wait, don’t gooooo! Do you remember the very first time we got drunk? It was six in the morning, and you wanted to watch the sunrise. The sunrise, of all things. And you wouldn’t shut up about it.”

“I started having no free time, okay? Staying up to watch the sunrise was something I really missed doing. It was the only thing that could actually get me to put alcohol anywhere near my lips.”

“Dork. Haha, I might’ve said it that morning, too. My mom had one of her terrible migraines again, so she was out cold in her bedroom. We stole a small bottle of cherry schnapps from her drawer of misfit alcohols—it’s not like she’d know, she hates cherries—and snuck outside to my driveway. It was soooo chilly, but the drink warmed us from the inside. So did all the giggling. That was probably dangerous, but oh well.”

“It was! The liver works hard to metabolize the alcohol, hence all the heat given off during the process. If we had drank a lot more, we wouldn’t have known how cold it was, and we could’ve frozen to death.”

“Blah, blah, blahhhh, it was my driveway, not Siberia. All we did was watch the sky change gold and red. Just like the Gryffindor house—your house—colors! The schnapps made it even more tremendous. Anyway, I just thought of that. Getting drunk isn’t as fun when you’re alone.”

“Stay hydrated, and pace yourself if you’re going to drink a lot. I’ll come pick you

up if you really need me to.”

“I know, but you don’t have to do that. I’m finishing the rest of this bottle. Byeeee. Love you.”

“I’m bored. Can I come over?”

“I’m busy right now. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Booooo! Okay, fine.”

“Sorry I missed your call. I was out. What happened?”

“I accidentally cut my finger on scissors today, and it bled so much! Like, it was dripping down my hand. Who would’ve known that opening a box is so hard?”

“That sounds painful! Has the bleeding stopped? Is it still hurting?”

“Yes, and no. It’s going to leave a nasty scar, though. Perfect for my collection.”

“Good, but when you say it like that, it sounds morbid.”

“Morbid things have some levity in them, if you know where to look.”

“That’s true.”

“We had that whole show-and-tell with them once, too. Not in a sad way, but with the giddiness of kids discovering that our bodies weren’t indestructible. The scars, painful in the moment that they were formed, are evidence of a life lived, as I like to say. We sat on the yellow braided rug in your room, with the birds outside chirping, and just marveled at the stories.”

“I remember. I showed you the crescent-shaped scar on my thumb, from when I dug my nail in when getting my blood drawn one time. You told me it was perfectly shaped, like my own little moon when I couldn’t see it in the night sky.”

“And you noticed my disgusting knees, and I told you about how I tried to climb a tree when I was eight. I wanted to prove someone wrong, but all I ended up doing was getting a face full of dirt and banged up knees. It was not fun.”

“Yes! I still can’t believe you did that. Then again, you don’t like being told you can’t do something.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve been feeling really nostalgic lately, haven’t you?”

“Sue me. We’re growing up, and it feels like the apocalypse. When everything is crumbling, memories make it better.”

“You’re such a sap. I love you. Don’t ever doubt it.”

“I won’t.”

“Do I need to be dying for us to hang out or something?”

“You’re so dramatic. Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten about you.”

“Yeah, yeah. If you insist.”

“Hey.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen your wonderful face, and I’m really craving some ice cream. Meet me down at Pippin’s—oh wow, my stomach is grumbling just thinking about it—in fifteen minutes?”

“Oh...”

“What?”

“Uh, I’m already here with Mila and Ashleigh, and a few of their friends. They invited me after our shift.”

“You see them every day at work! You don’t see me at all.”

“I can’t only interact with them at work. If they’re to be my coworkers for a few months, then I want to get to know them more.”

“But Pippin’s is our place!”

“You can’t lay claim to a public venue.”

“Okay. Well, have fun with your new besties. I hope they like hot fudge sundaes and banana splits as much as I do.”

“Don’t be like that. I’m sorry, alright? We can go somewhere else later, just the two of us. You can decide where.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need your pity hang-out.”

“It’s not—”

“I know you’re mad, and that’s why this went straight to voicemail. I’m not here to tell you to stop being mad. That’s your thing to work out. You won’t tell me, because you don’t like to talk about this stuff, but you’re scared that I’m spinning away from you. Planets spin all the time, but they don’t stray from their path. You’re my orbit, and I’m yours.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“Please pick up.”

“I love you most of all. I should’ve said it to you one more time before it was too late.”

“Happy birthday to you. Except it’s not happy, and I see your ghost in every little thing, so screw whoever came up with that stupid song. I drove to the store and bought a red velvet cupcake, just like we promised we’d do forever. I’m the last one standing, now, and it’s no fun being alone.

“Every year, you gave me your wish, and every year you asked me what I wished for. I’d never tell you, because that defeats the purpose. But I’ll tell you today. I wish I could hear your voice, your laugh. I wish I didn’t miss your call like a petty little child, because now I’ll never stop missing you. I can’t help but to think I’ve ruined everything.”

“We’re sorry, the number you have reached has been disconnected. If you feel this is an error, please check the number and try again.”

Golden Hour, Golden Friend

Acrylic



The Lost Rower

“Training is an optimistic act. Implicit in every erg workout and weight session is the idea that you can always get better—that who you are today doesn’t have to be who you are tomorrow.” -E. V. W.

Row on!
Blade flexed, pulling onward against each puffy cloud,
your sunglasses reflecting perfect, ethereal skylscapes.
No chance to catch a crab,
no crazy waters. No more pain.
My heart! I look up and see you!

You are frozen in time,
in our kitchen with a beer. Gleaming teeth and a
blue plaid shirt. Inspiring confidence and offering
wise insight. Complimenting the chef, your love,
Karen. And laughing heartily, which is what I remember most and most fondly:
infusing joy into each cherished moment.

If I could persuade you to come back—just for an evening,
I’d be most anxious. I’d ask, with haste, for the stories I’ve forgotten,
or never heard. I’d ask for the memories only you possess, that are
now gone with you.
Most of all, I would get to say goodbye and thank you
and I love you.

I feel your laughter in my laughter.
I still feel you in a Karen smile, a Neil song, an uncouth joke, a great turn of phrase;
just any regular conversation or day or night. That hole in my heart.
Still, your clip is steady, up on that cloud to which I have no access.
What a curse. You up there, us stuck down here. I think I feel just a gust of wind
from your scull!
Row on!

Flower Sale

Sketch on Adobe Illustrator



Jesus Christ 2021 God Bless the Boys I'd Cry For

i'm stuck thinking about just how many people are in love with jesus christ
and just how many people are in love with boys i barely know.
like jesus & camden & me
i joke that i fall too fast, too easily, but i'm in love with almost every tyler i know,
crushing hard on the boys named adam who treat me like i'm holy water spilling
from their hands as they inject epinephrine into my thigh, knowing what it will do to me.
i can't do cocaine but i can tread water for forty-five minutes
and i can walk up a hill (but i might pass out)
my heart pounds when i offer up my body like it's communion or maybe
like it's holy defiling what doesn't belong.
my heart pounds when i see the boy who i laughed with the night i almost died
i don't talk to many tylers anymore.
i don't talk to many boys anymore.
but i'm still stuck thinking just how many people are in love with a man they never met
probably never will
only heard the stories, and who wouldn't love someone who could turn water to wine?
i can't drink alcohol, maybe i'm just not meant to *get* it
maybe tonight i'm thinking i'll get some wine and try to turn it into water
or offer up my body, contorted and defiled as it is, praying *jesus christ let the pain stop*
i don't believe in jesus the way my friends do
i don't believe in g-d like i should— i have a complicated faith
there has to be something better than this, i can't be *that* broken
someone has to love me the way i want to be
but instead *i'm* unrequited,
shoving my feelings under tables and beds—
the monster under the bed is me. the monster under the bed is the history i carry with me
the monster under the bed is the way i question if anyone will ever love me,
until i start questioning if i'm even capable of love

i have a long resume and i also have a long trauma history, which one do you want to hear first?

jesus christ i don't know if there's a way for me to date someone

i admit that i love boys and then i admit that i'm sick, that i'm never getting better

but what boy wants someone who feels half broken half whole?

i'm not a christain and i don't feel so jewish anymore, if only because there's just not room for me

i can imagine a place where there might be, far away and maybe too niche to really find

but somewhere in the midline of people who love boys and people who love jesus christ

there should be somewhere i fit without pity (piety)

that first footprint in fresh snow giddy-type feeling, that first splash in the puddle that you

know you shouldn't jump in— if only to save yourself from getting wet; that cannonball

into the deep end off the dock so wound up after a running start and coming up for air

i wish i believed that there was air for me

cathedral ceilings are the closest i get to church and whispering nachamu when i'm scared

is the closest i get to praying anymore.

half-blooded ashkenazi jew with too many health problems for one person— too many for another person to care (g-d if you hear this prayer, lmk, send a boy who doesn't get scared)

Potraits of an Imagined Memory

Digital photographs



They went together like a game of cribbage and morning coffee. A well worn pair: one never further than a step behind the other. She, his and him, her's.

Lost in a day dream, I press my nose against the screen door and squint into imagined memory. On my last eyelash, I wish to see them again in their respective chairs before the picture window. Coffee in hand, they trade cribs and leap frog points up and down the board.

Card after card until the luxury of a moment fades with Grampa's crooked smile from consciousness. As days become months, remembering is not easier, but remembering relents enough that I no longer hear my father crying in the dial tone of the telephone.

Mom sends me to school with a carton of her garden tomatoes. They live on my windowsill, whispering me awake each morning—

We are not so different, you and I, one day the flies will find you too.

The simple nature of the way the world turns— with or without us or the tomatoes or the flies—so sure of itself. Sure as the road runs and truckers run on turkey commercials.

His sweeties' sweet voice crackles over the CB radio...

"This is Mothertrucker for Lazy J, what's your 10-20? Spaghetti and meatballs at 6.
Over."

He responds, "This is Lazy J for Mothertrucker, I'll be home soon honey.
Over."

No doubt he'll run the road back to her, back through the screen door, back for dinner, back into her arms, back into their respective chairs, by morning's promise of coffee and cribbage.

Back into the imagined memory, just in time for the portraits I never photographed of them.

Payne-ful Death

Acrylic



Tiger Flowers and Blue Curtains

Acrylic



When it started

When it started they used words like ‘danger’ and ‘caution’ and ‘attention’. The poets turned these into ‘depart not without a cover for the face’ and ‘if you can touch a stranger in just three steps’ pace, stand back’.

We were cooped up for so long we didn’t even notice the shift outside. But still it somehow wasn’t jarring when we did venture out to walk down the mostly-empty streets and see men sitting on lawn chairs outside open doors, faces covered by masks, hands covered in blue latex gloves, telling their mothers about their days.

We got itchy, antsy, stir-crazy, but still we were for the most part too scared to leave our homes. Projections got more dire; boundaries shifted. No congregating in groups of ten or more. Okay, just the religious Jews were affected. No congregating in groups of five or more. Families took to cooking dinner in shifts. No physical contact with the outside world. We laughed at the Europeans, their kisses on the cheeks, their embraces hello. Then no physical contact with the inside world. We stood steps apart, like children at school dances, if schools had been open then, only we couldn’t touch even our fingertips to one another.

People joked that the introverts were fine, that they had waited all their lives for this. But they, too, struggled to connect. Solitude was one thing. Not being able to go outdoors, to hold someone’s hand, was another altogether. Airport and bus station signs read like a record stuck. Like after a storm. Canceled. Canceled. Canceled.

Soon it spread, past schools and offices, to coffeeshops and bars and restaurants, to clothing stores and hair salons. Then grocery stores and pharmacies. They set up a call center. *If you need food or medicine, call at the designated time. State your name, your social security number, and what you need. Someone in a hazmat suit will deliver it eventually.*

Things like going to the mechanic or picking up kitty litter moved to the back burner – on the long-list of errands to run when things went back to normal, when things quieted down, when things, whenthings, whenthing-

swhenthingswhenthings. Eventually they fell off all together. But for some they stuck in our minds, a loose seed lodged between our teeth, unneeded and foreign in this new world.

One day we realized there was a list that spanned for days of all of the things we had done for the last time without realizing. There were the usual ones, of course – being held by our parents, or waiting on the phone for a friend’s father to fetch her – but there were new ones now, too, and it was their very ordinariness that was startling. The last time we had opened the freezer door in a grocery store. The last time we had opened a menu. The last time we had stepped up to a store and been greeted by the electric parting of its doors. The last time we unbuckled a seat belt. The last time we skipped a rock on a lake. The last time we picked up a rock. The last time. The last, thelast, thelastthelastthelast.

The simple things became the most beautiful. Because they were so rare, because we could no longer do them. Laying your head in someone’s lap. Peeling an orange to spare your mother’s arthritic hands. Tossing a basketball to your nephew. Gestures like leaving a neighbor a bottle of wine, the things that were so overlooked or commented on so slightly in the old world – oh, that’s sweet! I’ll have to write her a note – were enough now to move you to tears.

Outside we heard the birds, the rustle of trees, and as weeks wore on, the howl of coyotes, inching closer to the cities, barren outside. That was all that we had, after the radios stopped and the humming of the refrigerators stopped and then, eventually, the people making music stopped, too.

We didn’t talk much anymore. It grew so quiet that when something happened – a tree falling, a thunderstorm – we all started. For a few seconds after, we remembered. We wondered when things would go back. But each time those few seconds grew fainter, grew shorter, and eventually we simply stopped.

Even the deaf, who had the easiest time adjusting to the quiet, seemed bereft. Their wasted arms too tired to lift and form words with their fingers. It wore on long enough that even if we wanted to speak to one another, our bodies, our throats, had forgotten how.

In the outside world we were looms half-woven, guitars half-strung, songs unsung with their notes hanging uncertainly in the air.

When it started we still remembered what it felt like to dig our toes under the sand, even if it had been years since we had done so. When it started we remembered how it felt to have someone's fingers running through our hair. When it started we could still call up the sharp jab of stinging nettles, grasping for our legs.

When it started we were unprepared. Nothing that had come before had prepared us.

Pod Gorodam

Oil on canvas



Secret Cocoon

In our secret cocoon, utopia finds us well.
Playful morning dances up the wall.
Sleepy breath works to warm the back of my neck
and more, a bedroom in lue of broken radiators.

Time keeps to last night's forgetfulness:
A scratched record spinning - blip - blip - blip - spinning.
Meanwhile the silent time keeper, pathos, lazily stretches towards sun
only to tire further each day towards those precious hardwood floors
that practically signed the lease for us.

I scramble eggs and whistle with the tea kettle
as hot water sings it's alarm.
She wakes to colors cast through stained glass
upon the coffee table my father built.

In our secret cocoon, I make her breakfast.
For she is never hungry enough to make it for herself.

Donning tattered quilt and mothy afghan,
We indulge in morning.
In our secret cocoon utopia finds us well.

Meningioma or She Likes Cupcakes

When Kathy called and asked where dad was I panicked. Mom always said “when someone calls on the phone and asks where I am or where dad is and we’re not home- don’t tell them. Don’t let them know a kid is home alone.” So when Kathy called and asked where dad was, and dad wasn’t home, I simply hung up. Why did mom’s boss need dad anyway? Kathy was mom’s boss, not dad’s. This was all very confusing. Emma didn’t think so, no, this was concerning. She called Kathy back, then dad called us back. And then Kathy called dad.

Mom had a seizure and mom was going to Springfield now. (Maybe mom would’ve died if she’d been driving home. Maybe mom would’ve died if the meeting hadn’t gone late.) All I knew was it was my fault. I hung up on Kathy. Dad called nana. Nana was gonna sleepover. Mom was getting some kind of scan.

I can’t remember what time mom and dad got home that night, or *if* they got home that night. I just laid in bed confused. What happened to mom? And selfishly, why did this have to happen on Maddie Foley’s birthday?

Dad knocked on my door and his shaky hands made the wood seem hollow. The sound cooed and whistled and rang like a bell. When he called the family meeting and summoned Emmy and me out of our mint and blue rooms, I felt like his knock had to mean news about the strangeness of last night. I was right. We had been waiting for this. Family meetings sometimes meant that we were getting takeout pizza, other times it meant Gigi died. This meeting, I had a feeling, would not be peppers and onions or pepperoni.

Mom had a meningioma. A what? A meningioma. A brain tumor. But it’s not cancer. It’s not cancer. I didn’t know much at twelve but I knew not cancer was good. Dad stumbled and fell over his words, he was trying to work out the jigsaw puzzle of what to say. He didn’t know things about brain tumors. He was just dad trying to regurgitate a wikipedia page that he’d read only some three hours before. And he had to do this without scaring his twelve and four-

teen year old girls. But he was scared shitless. His voice was groggy and tired. I burst out in tears. He didn't make eye contact with me, he couldn't or he'd cry too. And dad couldn't be scared (not in front of us, not in front of mom).

Mom's meningioma had been growing for some twenty years. This was quick math to me: if a tumor that affected personality had been growing for twenty years and if I was twelve this meant that I had never met mom. In fact, mom wasn't mom, she was a version of mom manipulated by this incomprehensible *thing* called a meningioma. Mom was spunky and funny and snuggly and everything I wanted and wished to be. Mom was eating a lot recently, was taking antidepressants, and was telling dad she'd been feeling different, unlike herself.

So, who was my mom? Well in those couple of months mom was someone I had a hard time understanding, someone I struggled to even look at. Her eyes were black and she had staples in her head. She was strong. Said it looked like a headband. But to me, it was all flesh, and blood, and staples. She was tired a lot and we ate lots of lasagna from the neighborhood and the house looked like a florist. I ate lasagna and the shepherd's pies. People always give you things that fit in a sheet oven dish, when they don't know quite what to say.

I hated myself in these months. I was unkind. I wasn't like Emma or dad, our family heroes. And I wasn't strong like mom. I would go over Maddie's a lot. I went to Maddie's the day mom came home from the hospital after a whole ten days because I couldn't bear to look at her scars.

I texted mom the day of her surgery. I didn't say I love you, I distracted myself and asked her a question. Still mom was being mom even as she awaited the eight hour procedure and made sure I knew how to print my 7th grade history paper. I couldn't do the same in my twelve year old-ness, I couldn't take care of anyone but myself.

But I talked to mom, my beautiful, perfect mom in other ways. I listened to the Simon and Garfunkel CDs she gave me when I was learning how to play guitar. I read her journal and cried at the pages she wrote on October 5, 1996 when dad proposed. I thought of her every time I ate chocolate or cupcakes. Or when I opened our cabinet drawers (she always hated how deep they were).

Mom loves pink, and movies, and Denzel Washington and her North Face quarter zip fleeces, the purple one especially. She loves her college friends, and is spunky sarcastic every time she drinks Pinot with Kim. She straightens her hair every morning and firmly believes in watching the news. Her favorite tree is the Japanese maple in our backyard. I think of her every time I dance-mom loves to dance. I've been trying to find a way to say I'm sorry and all I can think to do is give her a yellow cupcake with pink frosting.

Sweet Peas

As Bert rode down the hill on his bicycle, braking, looking out for the bigger stones, he heard Granny yoo-hoo. She was coming off her porch with a small bouquet of flowers. He leaned his bike against her mailbox and started up the drive to meet her.

They were sweet peas from her fence. She had wrapped the cut ends in a wet paper towel, and put them in a plastic baggie secured with a rubber band.

“You give those to Gladys,” she said, handing him the bouquet. “She’ll know what they’re for.”

Bert turned down the driveway. “I’m a little late. Maybe Trudy and I’ll come down for tea tomorrow.” But Granny was already headed back to the old red farmhouse. He tucked the small fragrant bouquet into his shirt and went on.

Bert had been working 6 weeks as the summer hand for Wayne Martin. Wayne ran the small dairy farm along the river half way to town. The farm had been in the Martin family from before the Revolutionary War. ‘The War For Independence’, Wayne called it. His father, Norbert, lived with his wife, Dorothy, in a house nearby. Norbert and Wayne were cast from the same mold – hatchet-faced, lean and leathery, laconic with a glinting sense of humor. Wayne’s son, Henry, was currently serving a hitch in the Air Force. He had no interest in taking over the farm after he got out.

“That’s too bad,” said Bert, thinking of the long line of Martins.

“Aye,” said Wayne. “It’s a hard living. Don’t know how much longer they’ll pick up neither. That’ll be it.”

Wayne had a slight limp from a logging accident years ago when a tree fell on him. He’d rigged a kind of toboggan out of the bark of a birch and Dolly had dragged him out of the woods down to the farm.

Before haying started in earnest Bert had spent many a day with the old man. Norbert was in his eighties. He had some trouble managing the hilly parts of the meadows when they mended fence, but he came into his own when they sawed logs for the firewood that both houses used to heat. The old man

employed a peevee like a lumberjack, levering logs onto the cradle then bringing the reciprocating saw blade down on the wood. When Bert asked about the old sugarhouse up in the woods, Norbert's eyes lit up. They hadn't made maple syrup for a few years because they couldn't find help. Bert immediately offered to help next Spring. He'd be happy to take pay in maple syrup.

"Have to talk to Wayne," the old man said. "I boil."

Bert lay his bike in the grass beside the barn and went inside.

"Mornin," he said.

"Mornin," replied Wayne

Wayne was squatting in his knee-high rubber boots, adjusting a milking machine.

"Granny – uh – Ms Beston – sent these along for your wife." Bert extended the bouquet of sweet peas.

"Aye. I'll take them in when I go to breakfast."

Bert helped finish up the milking. Then while Wayne went into the house for breakfast (he'd been up since 5 – Bert came at 8), Bert led the cows across the road and the tracks to the meadow beside the river. Then he cleaned the barn, shoveling cow flops and urine-soaked hay into the trench that was scraped clean by paddles on a conveyer belt. The manure emptied into a spreader, and was scattered onto the fields every 3 or 4 days. Bert spread fresh hay and then cleaned the 4 milking machines in the milk room. This was dominated by the big square stainless steel tank which sat in the middle of the floor. The tank truck came after the morning milking to collect. Martin with his 28 - 32 milkers was just able to make the minimum amount for the truck to stop. The milk plant didn't like to bother collecting from every little dairy farm any more. There used to be eight or ten between here and Burlington. Now there was Wayne Martin and one other.

Wayne came into the milk room as Bert was putting the collecting pots up to drain and dry.

"Looks like lousy weather," said Bert, liking the country sound of "lousy". "Good morning to get that lower field in?"

“Ayeh,” said Wayne. “I rolled windrows last night. Hay ought to be dry.”

They crossed the tracks to the lower field, Wayne driving the tractor, Bert standing on the step beside him. Bert got down and opened the fence, Wayne drove through and Bert swung the gate closed, latched it and got back on the tractor. But Wayne had switched the engine off.

“Girl loved the farm,” he said. “The horses – putting in the garden with Gladys. She loved to pick berries. Haying.”

There was a pause, then he said, “Antonia’d be seventeen now. Just getting out of high school.” He started the tractor and they went on.

When he and Trudy stopped down for tea Saturday morning, Bert asked about Antonia.

Granny fished the last sourmilk donuts out of the big pot of boiling oil on the stove, laid them on paper towels to drain. She turned the stove off and sat with them at the kitchen table. Steam from their mugs of tea rose in the still air.

“Antonia . . .” Gran had a far-away look in her eye. “She was a little girl about as different as that name too. So pretty and lively. Different from them.”

“What happened?” Trudy asked.

“Oh . . . It was an accident. Train hit the hay wagon and the little girl got killed. I send sweet peas down every year this time.”

Eleven years ago it had been a hot and dry June. The hay grew thick and high. And when it was cut the sun dried it in fragrant swaths. Old Norbert baled hay from when the dew was off mid-morning to last light. And everyone who could be found pitched in to bring it safe and dry into the barn.

They were gathering hay bales from the lower meadow, right across from the house. Wayne was on the wagon drawn by the two Belgians, Prince and Dolly. While Henry, who was fourteen then, walked alongside and heaved bales up, Wayne set them in place on the wagon. By his clucks and “hi’s” the team knew when to move and when to stop. The other wagon, pulled by the Ford tractor driven by Homer Kneeland, had Billy Johnson who lived at the bottom of the hill with his mother, tossing bales up; Homer’s sister, Holly, on the wagon stacking; and Antonia, six, up front jumping around gleefully keeping out of the

way of flying bales.

The cows were in a high meadow, so the gate had been left open up across the tracks and the road, to the barn.

Wayne and Henry had loaded up and gone ahead where one was sending hay bales up the conveyer while the other stacked them in the loft.

Homer's wagon finished loading, the crew climbed up on the high-piled bales and they set off for the barn.

It was about noon, and they knew after unloading the hay, they would break for lunch. There would be a big pitcher of Kool Aid with ice cubes floating in it that Mrs. Martin always made. And peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Homer started up the grade to the railroad tracks when he heard the train whistle. It always blew crossing the bridge below Wainwright's, half a mile away. Plenty of time to get across, but Homer stalled the tractor on the grade. He figured to start it and get across, but made the mistake of looking up again and catching the distant motion of the train. He jerked the gas lever down and flooded the engine. The tractor and wagon were straddling the tracks. As the kids scrambled to get off, the train hit, splitting tractor to one side, wagon to the other, and scattering the load over the meadow. The train had been slowing but still struck at about 30 miles an hour. A long freight. Little Antonia was thrown off and her neck broken. Homer had gotten off the tractor in time and the other two kids had jumped clear. No one even scratched.

It must have been a terrible sight, the freight train stopped there, stretched a quarter mile along the track where it only ever flew by. Cars pulled over along the dirt road. Gladys Martin sitting among the scattered hay bales rocking the body of her daughter. The little girl looked like she was sleeping. There was nothing to be done. The black and white Holsteins cropping peacefully in the high meadow like toy cows. Birds singing their noontime songs. And everyone standing around.

Bert never knew how to bring up the subject of the accident. If Wayne wanted to talk about it. The last time, as they were driving the cows home over the railroad crossing, Wayne had said, his eyes sweeping toward the river, "Hay bails got knocked all down into the meadow."

My Stolen Poem

Bear with me, I've stolen these words;
Stampedes in-between my meter, in herds
if bears were herds and could be in mind-
if my grizzly reader could regard this thief with kind
Words, I'm surrounded by thousands of words,

Maybe millions, some in the tongues of birds
that weigh nothing but half a gram on this earth
while I stand out like a partly-passing slant-rhyme,
Bear with me, as I've stolen these words;

Bear of a lady, mimicking the monologues of lords
whose son's son would fire the shot that changed the world,
facing the sun with all the confidence of Icarus that one time!
Too bold to burn to turn into that pretty bird who stays behind;

My mockingbird, whose wings are not burned, whose company I prefer.
Bird with me, I've stolen these words.

Last argument was yesterday at 10:47 PM

Do you read the comments I leave you in the margins of our conversations?
Deliberate on the weight of our annotated actions?

My condescendence is italic,
Your anger is bold

Tab-out,
Punctuate with periods of silence

Fine.

Talk later.

You always do this.

Cursory evidence of the others' malintent

There is nothing to edit when neither of us admits our errors
Nothing to revise when both of us are right

Prom Isn't Meant for Ugly Ducklings

Digital Art



You Can't Do Your Curl Routine If You're Dead

There was a woman at the check-in desk closest to the doors who gave me a paper mask to wear instead of my cloth one while I was at the hospital. Short, bleached-blonde hair that went a tad past her shoulders. Older. Soft-looking, like she would give great hugs. Probably used the blonde to blend the gray hair coming in at her temples. Blue eyes, light, kind of greyish but the bright sort. She had kind eyes and I think you would have liked her.

I went to the next desk, wove around plastic shields, thought the woman stationed there was leaving the desk and waited a moment before approaching. She asked what I needed. I thought about how loaded of a question that is.

I need an elevator to get upstairs to the floor where they keep the kids who try to off themselves.

I need a hug.

I need something to numb whatever's going on inside my chest at the moment, if that's possible.

I need a sign of life because I haven't seen you since you got checked in here approximately fourteen and a half hours ago and I need to hold your hand and hold you and meet the people who are taking care of you and brush your hair back from your face and tell you it will be okay and that "it's just a sleepover" the way I did last night when that's all I thought it would be.

And when I told the woman I was here to see my younger sister on the seventh floor, she shook her head. I told her that Dad would never be visiting you. I have the code. I told it to her. I'm not your guardian but you wanted me to come. Your nurse had told Mom that I could. She shook her head again and repeated that only parents could visit because of COVID. I asked if there could be exceptions made, and she said no.

I started crying before I got to the same doors where I entered, and when I got outside no one gave me a second glance. I guess people at hospitals see a lot of people crying on their way out. I sat on the ledge of the side fountain.

I wondered if stepping in front of one of the cars careening around the drop-off circle would get me put on your floor, but they would put me in the adult psych hall not the children's. I cried harder in the parking garage and forgot to lock my car doors. I don't know how I made it home, eyes clouded over and tears sticking to the neck of my shirt and an unfolded tampon in my hand serving as a makeshift Kleenex because I didn't have any in my car. I thought about how you'd find that funny—me dabbing my face gingerly with a tampon, of all things, blasting Charlotte Lawrence and King Princess in your honor while sobbing and trying to make too many left turns and not being able to get out of the garage because I missed the exit twice. And I was thinking about how you were probably scared and sad and I could see you sitting on a hospital bed with your knees tucked in and your unicorn cradled between your chest and your legs and your itchy hospital pants that wouldn't stay up and your mask hurting your ears because you have to sleep with it on, Mom said, and your hair a mess because you don't get to do your curl routine when they put you on psych hold.

You don't get to do your curl routine if you're dead, either, and this is the better alternative even if you don't feel that way right now. I'm trying to remind myself that you're safe here.

When I got home I cleaned again. I hugged Mom and she cried again. I looked at the to-do list I keep in the notes tab of my phone and saw all the things I hadn't done again, couldn't get myself to do again. I did your laundry and made too much espresso for one person and dumped half down the sink. I arranged the pillows on your bed like you'll be coming home soon.

This is the better alternative.

This is the better alternative.

Holding On

I pull back
Leave your tender embrace
You frown
Brow furrowed in confusion

Lids shut tight
I cannot bear
Your concerned eyes
Giving blue a new meaning

A tear escapes the floodgate
My hands tremble
How can we say goodbye
so soon after hello

Stars align
Sleepless nights
Backseat at some drive-in
Electricity illuminating the clouds

Kiss me
Through my tears
Hold me close
Like love is enough

This chemical, physical bliss
Characterized by a complete
An utter lack of despair
Defined by your hand in mine

We laugh
I feel your smile
And I believe
That this love is enough

Bloom

Mixed media collage on canvas



Untitled



Upside Down

sometimes it helps
to put your feet towards the clouds for awhile
hair reaching down for the floor
veiny forehead swelling with a blood rush

it helps sometimes
to put your upside down
and your down side up

sneaker scuffs on ceiling tiles
mountains look like w's instead of m's
for a while
grassy sky bluebird floor

then when you come back
and your upside is up and downside down again
sometimes things just make more sense

futility

unfettered repugnance
is all i feel
at the oblivious kids
who care not about
burning a marble.

a moment's mountain
caves inward,
collapsing.
seconds later
the marble changes -

how?

Enjoy the Ride

Acrylic



Sundays

Today I am eleven, after service weaving
Through people
Gathered like bugs in clusters, like glaciers of ice in tea, as
They melt in the sun and pull apart to realign
On glass edges.

After Sunday service it feels like hellfire outside—
Sticky Carolina heat,
A wool blanket of clouds sky-squatting,
Trapping us all under, my nose stuffy
With dogwood and asphalt.
Stale and still, the air screams while a cicada shrieks, and
The blood in my ears pounds in
Even numbers and church pews, and I run
From the sweat on my back
That blushes my dress.
I weave around parents who stand like steeples
And I a bird. And I run
To find Dad; I know
The storm is getting close,

Radar pulled up on his phone.
Some folks stayed up all night to make barbeque
Soft enough to tap with a fork
To divide.
I always conquer the brown beans first—
I like sweet things but hate east-style barbeque sauce.
I pick apart the collard greens

And beans

And barbeque on my plate

So none of them touch.

I like the easily identifiable.

The Too Hot Sink

It's been a while since
I put on music to do my dishes
And sang to the suds in a way that
I hope made them dance a bit
On their way down the drain

I wonder if you sing
To the cadence of
Dish gloves dressing
One finger at a time

Sometimes
Phantom hands on my waist
While I lean into the counter
Over the too hot sink
I think how
You're so much nicer than him

If We'd Stayed

The cabin where we lived
I passed by it toward evening
And remembered our life together
50 years ago
It had been everything, everything there was
Just as this moment I'm writing in
And I saw us clearly, remembered
As it had been
And thought if we'd stayed
Put roots down and stayed
We'd be there still
The cabin was there
(Oh, a second story added)
But still the brook ran below
The road went up the mountain
And if I knocked on the door
You would answer, an old woman
And over your shoulder I'd be
Putting a chunk of wood into the iron stove

The Moon and Sun

Strained hands

sprawl over the crumpled sheets;
only the body of loneliness next to him.

The presence that could only be a memory of her.
The warmth she radiated.
She licked for love like a dog, but it was never there.

He was never there. Never there to appreciate the colourful cats that spotted her nightgown.
Her wiry hair that was whispered with grey. The way her wedding ring started to yellow.

They both craved the light—
but he was the moon,
and she was the sun.

The one that no one wants to look at.

There were no sounds of her light snore. A clock ticked on his cluttered nightstand. Used tissues. A dusty lamp. A dead phone. A forming stubble. The empty grey walls echoed his thoughts. He picks at the fraying words on his pajama shirt-- Brooklyn. Where they first met.

Shallow breathing turns into sobs. The dimple that barely indented her right cheek. The small scar above her eyebrow from ice skating. Empty bottles of pills litter the floor. He needed to get away.

He awoke without sunlight—
as if he did not

see it coming.

Portrait

Digital



The Edge of Rosemont Drive

My feet spit against the hairpin
turns, all the way up
to the barbed
wire, to the tipping
point of my own
grit. Smashed coal
& my jackhammer chest finally
tell me that nothing
collapses until it has to.

I feel like some holy
thing each time
another snarl
of steel wool forms
in my side— nothing
like the bruised knee of prayer
to make me stand up taller,
or to breathe a little deeper,
or to feel more
afraid than ever.

Stupid town doesn't have
sidewalks, so I run
on the broken yellow
line, crossing
my fingers
as that rolling
hearse, the coal barge,

heaves like a stomachache
down
the river.
Its deadened bell
tolls, flat and
bloodless
in my ears.

And just
as my arm brushes
against the gauze
of the rhododendron,
all that bitter
carbon, that unborn
steel, twists
into the air,
grasping
at the sun
and turning the sky
to pitch.

I get faster, or
the coal gets slower.
The road's a dead end.
My bell stops ringing.

43 Across: State of Being Alone

A pen will always go missing the moment inspiration strikes. That's always the way. It never matters whether it's an idea for a book, a quote, a clue, a word, something to remember, or a forgotten grocery item—pens have minds of their own. They sense you need them, and they hide away. Ray has known that for years, but he never buys extras.

“*Christ,*” he says, searching around the living room floor. “Where the devil did it go?”

There are stacks and stacks of notebooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and magazines on every topic. He knocks over a pile of books—a mix of memoirs, self-help, historical fiction, and two copies of the same translation of *Beowulf*—and rummages under a pile of loose pages, torn and crumpled and whole, all scribbled on, fluttering away as he searches. Nothing.

He'd been in the bathroom when it happened, that spark of realization, the *aha!* moment he continuously craves.

He'd been thinking up the perfect word for 42 Across.

Hekate. Greek goddess of crossroads and magic.

He needed the E-K and realized the alternative spelling of Hecate.

Rekmit. *Reknot*. None of them were good enough. Although the idea of “Not again” as a playful clue for *Reknot* had an appeal, he didn't like the word itself.

He lifts the seat cushion of his favorite chair in the crowded living room—and there sits the pen. He huffs and snatches it.

He scribbles down the clue and places the goddess where she belongs: H-E-K-A-T-E.

With the pen securely placed on his notepad, he contemplates 43 Across. Eight letters fit in the spot. An eight-letter word beginning with B and ending in E, with T in between. Potentially an I before the T, if he decides on *Inept* or *Ichor*. It is still early in its creation—the possibilities endless.

He thinks about it on his way to the kitchen.

Books are stacked along the floors against the walls, overflowing from shelves and stuffed under tables. The dining room table has a thick layer of mail, envelopes with red notices stamped across the front. The kitchen sink, heaped over with dishes, releases an odor of sourness and rot that seeps throughout the entire house. The trash is no better. Cobwebs hang in the corners of the walls and ceiling. His answering machine blinks with a dozen new messages.

Ray notices these, of course. But every time he thinks to take care of one task or another, his brain will jump back to the puzzle.

A notice from the power company:

Electric. Wire. Bulb. Edison. Franklin. Lightning.

A letter from a lawyer's office:

Lawyer. Attorney. Paralegal. Objection. Law and Order.

There are rules to crossword creating.

The black squares separating words should be symmetrical across the board and used sparingly. If you were to turn it 180-degrees, the pattern should look identical. All words should connect, all letters should be used for both an Across and a Down, and no words under three letters long. Clues should be imaginative, filled with humor and clever wordplay. Answers should be challenging but not impossible, they should be well-known and referenceable.

Those last rules are what sparked Ray's interest so many years ago. He'd done a few crosswords before, here and there, as a solver. But after taking time off from teaching to do research for his book, he'd started doing the New York Times daily crossword whenever he needed a break. Every day, he'd spend forty minutes doing the newest one, sometimes less time, sometimes more. But soon it wasn't enough—he started going back into the archive, ordering puzzle books, gathering newspapers from neighboring towns.

It was one word, however, a five-letter word for the clue "Ordinary," that drew him in to their creation: *Known*.

I would have used plain or usual maybe, he'd thought. But then, you'd

have to change the surrounding words to fit it.

That was the first time he had thought of the process of constructing a crossword. And, since he loved solving them, how much he would love writing one of his own.

Marion, his wife—*ex-wife*, he reminds himself—used to tell people with a laugh, “It combines all his favorite things: Words, puzzles, and useless facts.”

But there was no such thing as a useless fact. Not to him.

Ray opens the fridge to find a box of leftover pizza. He takes out a slice and begins to eat it cold, leaning against the kitchen counter. He chews slowly, the slightly charred crust tasting bitter, as he ruminates over his options.

Brittles.

Britches.

Bittered.

Bittiest.

Blithest.

Achene.

He’d been trying to work it into a puzzle for months. Dry fruit. One might think *Raisin*, but as it is *dry* and not *dried*, *Achene* would be the answer.

Ray only needed a proper place for it.

Soft music played in the background as he and Marion sat at the table with her wine glass empty, his hand scribbling away at a notepad. Her dinner was finished; only a few bites were taken from his. He could peripherally see her watching him from across the table. He knew her lips must be pursed because he’d brought the crossword to the table—she hated when he did that.

“Why does it take you so long to make them?” Marion asked. “Aren’t there contests to see how fast you can do it?”

He looked up at her—he was right, her lips were pursed. He also noticed, from the way the light was, that she had graying hair just at the roots above her forehead. He’d never noticed them before. Were they old enough already for that to be happening?

He looked back down and said, “I don’t compete in those.” He scratched out a few options off the grid he was working on. “It’s not about the speed for me.”

“You could submit them to papers.”

“I have,” he said. “But I don’t care if they like them or not. It’s about finding the right word, the *perfect* word. The perfect clue. That’s the joy for me.”

Marion stood up from the table, clearing the dishes. “I wish you’d find joy in teaching or writing again.”

There, he thought. Six letters down off the A in *Andorra*, Iberian micro-state.

A year from that night, the lights of Marion’s car pulling into the driveway passed over him at the table, working on another crossword, and shone against the wall with a flash. She’d stayed a few days with her mother. He set the notebook down, laying the pen beside it on the table, and waited for her to come in.

Marion looked assured of herself as she entered, like she’d been practicing and mulling over every word she was about to say—just as he did for each crossword. He admired that. She sat down across from him, and Ray knew what she was going to say before she said it, had known for months it was going to happen eventually.

“Listen,” she said. “I want a divorce. I’m sorry. But I can’t do this anymore.”

Ray said nothing.

“I’ve called a lawyer, just to go over the property—the house, the lake house.” She paused. “It should be quick. We don’t have kids.”

“You’re acting as if I knew this was going to happen already,” Ray said. She laughed. “I know that you’ve known. You had to have known.”

“It’s the crosswords, isn’t it?”

“It’s not the fucking crosswords! They were the icing on top of *everything else* and if you ever listened to me, you’d have known that.” She’d lost the composure she’d started with. Then, she stood up and said, “Goodbye, Ray.”

That was seven months ago.

Basanite.

No, the I-T is at the center, he thinks while pacing the front porch with a cigarette in his mouth. There is a fresh layer of snow, crunching beneath his

feet. His fingers tap against the frozen railing as he passes by.

Baritone.

Belittle.

“No, no,” he says. *That’s not right.*

He thinks of changing the perpendicular word from *Banded* to *Handed* so that it begins with an H. Or, perhaps *Landed*. He could do a phrase, but *Let it be* isn’t enough letters...

“Hello, Ray,” his neighbor Annette calls. He looks over to see her wave, juggling two paper grocery bags in each arm, and he waves back. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

He shrugs. “I’ve been here.”

“Well, I see you out there sometimes from the window,” Annette says with a pleasant smile. She’s an older woman, maybe in her late seventies, with a plump face of wrinkled skin and bright, kind eyes.

He asks, “How’s Jerry?”

Annette’s smile fades. “Oh, Ray,” she says, voice shaking. “Jerry passed a few months ago.”

“*Oh,*” Ray says. “I’m so sorry. I hadn’t heard.”

Annette’s smile returns, quite obviously a mask. “That’s all right. It was good to see you,” she says. She turns, struggling just a moment with the door and the bags before disappearing inside.

Ray stands there in astonishment. How could he have missed the news of his own neighbor’s passing? He puts out his cigarette and goes to the end of the porch, leaning against the rail. He’d only known Jerry neighborly—a wave here, a borrowed hedge trimmer there—but the news of it coming *months* later? By the poor widow, no less.

I suppose that’s something Marion would’ve known and told me about, he thinks.

Marion probably already *did* know. She probably sent flowers.

Levitate.

Latitude.

Habitude.

And then it strikes him.

He discards his cigarette butt and heads back inside.

Gist: Spring 2022

The pen is waiting for him on the notepad. His grid, hand-drawn with perfectly symmetrical blacked-out squares, is half-filled with the words he's been working on, the clues beneath it in order.

He first scratches out the B and scribbles in an S.

He changes the clue for *Sanded* (to "Made smooth") and writes the clue for 43 Across.

The answer: *Solitude*.

Absolutely

She speaks like the whole world depends on the word: absolutely.
Fitted around her imaginary corset is the phrase: "I feel absolutely."
Like the daisies in my yard
are loose with the wind but tight to the earth, I hear her call so truly.
The world feeds us in a multitude of ways; through flowers,
in salads dripping in oil and vinaigrette,
and in sumptuous laughter that billows
your flickering inner fire so unruly.
I can't remember it all, but I know
the past melds into tomorrow
like a cookie in my stomach.
What have we done and where will we do it?

I feel the certainty of my own wind.
Not in my sails, but in my chin,
and in my pocket, where I carry my lint
just in case the dope doesn't win.
We carry copies of yesterday
Skin, yarn, and bits of our hearts
in broken rhythm
like a vinyl being surfed on by a cat.
I like my pockets, and I'll keep them like that.
Presently, I'm finding a space
between monotony
and placement in the fridge,
behind her off-brand
dairy-free milk and vegan cheese,
Which are some of the accoutrements to the imaginary corset
That slides off every night
When she looks at herself in the mirror and doesn't cry.

Adirondack Mountains



What's Left of You

What's left of you?

This morning,
I removed gingerly
a crimped, white, wisp of fur
embedded in blue
fibers of my sweater.

This mourning,
begging the fur to return to your body,
not linger,
on our tiled kitchen floor,
threaded between tufts of carpet,
and marking where you came and went
endlessly

circling the date that you left us on
an owl themed calendar, tacked
to the stale, turquoise walls of my childhood home.
No sadder hue floods the home than
on February 26th
when you took your last breath
alone
on that cushioned table, surrounded by people you'd never met.
You rasped helpless breaths
before it stopped,
before I could even hang up the phone, hands shaking,
tears flooding eyes, nostrils,
and uncontrollable.

Those words—
We're gonna have to put her down
spoken before my roommate could hold me,
They just found out, I'm sure she'll hang on
Before I got the chance to go
back, down to Jersey on a Thursday evening
I'll just see her tomorrow
But tomorrow has gone and passed,
And you,
shaking,
restless on my phone screen was the last
I'd ever see

of you.
I could have made it, I know it,
Could have cried to your sad umber eyes
one last time.
But here I am, eight hours too late,
driving down Interstate 89,
sky exploding into a vast, pink sunset,
like the color of your soul—
I think I saw you leave.

What's left of you? Again

This morning,
I removed gingerly
a crimped, white, wisp of fur
embedded in blue
fibers of my sweater.

This mourning,
begging the fur to return to your body,
not linger,
on our tiled kitchen floor,
threaded between tufts of carpet,
and marking where you came and went
endlessly

circling the date that you left us on
an owl themed calendar, tacked
to the stale, turquoise walls of my childhood home.
No sadder hue floods the home than
on February 26th
when you took your last breath
alone
on that cushioned table, surrounded by people you'd never met.
You rasped helpless breaths
before it stopped,
before I could even hang up the phone, hands shaking,
tears flooding eyes, nostrils,
and uncontrollable.

Those words—

We're gonna have to put her down
spoken before my roommate could hold me,
They just found out, I'm sure she'll hang on
Before I got the chance to think, I'm driving
back, down to Jersey on a Thursday evening—
creeping dusk outside my windshield,
threatening twilight as I leave my car,
slammed the door behind me,
I ran up to embrace you as I should have
the last time that I left
when I
slammed the door, rattling plexiglass
as you stared back at me
with those sad umber eyes
I was so sure you would always be
right there, waiting for me.

But just this last time, I felt your soft head
wedged into my small chest
tail wagging, and
body swaying with every gentile sweep of your tail.

Ivan's Shoes

Ivan forgot to wear his shoes, so he says.

He says he forgot to slip on those decades-old sandals with the Velcro straps that no longer stick. They were tucked away on their specific shelf in the shoe closet, a deliberately remote location too hidden for his tired brain to remember.

He says he was too set on his quest, the detail of shoes must have slipped out of his old mind. He was determined to return his library books before they became late- a race against time is nothing to take lightly!- and he motions to the tote bag stuffed with hardcovers as though giving proof of his honesty.

He says this, but the books on his shoulder are already months overdue. They swing heavily at his side as he takes barefoot steps, urging Ivan toward the library in vain- for despite all their words they do not say the very ones that could convince Ivan to return them to their home. He walks deliberately to a remote location too hidden for the greedy librarians to discover.

Walking in this way, eyes on the sidewalk begin to make stories about Ivan. Too poor for shoes, a bag stuffed with his belongings, what a pity an old man doesn't have a home! They watch as he takes steps over jagged rocks beside a construction site, flinching when one hits the tender part of his sole. This is when the ones with warm hearts approach him and the ones with warm coats offer the skin off their backs. This is when Ivan smiles and says he forgot his shoes back in the home that he has, pity of his old man's brain.

When he says this, they close their lids slightly as though mimicking the smile of a mouth, teeth and all. Ivan does the same, since eyes are the only things you can see nowadays, but beneath the fabric on his face Ivan doesn't make full effort to curl his lips into that old gesture. His old brain learns new tricks quickly; it is not as tired as he says.

He notices how it hurts less today than it did the morning before. He notices how the skin of his soul is growing thick with time. Despite what he says, Ivan did not forget to wear his shoes.

The Butterfly Effect

imagine his soul breathing in the air from the trees and stretching to reach the sky
a blackbird spanning its wings in flight
feathers stamped against a cloudless blue

I want to tuck him in my pocket and carefully bring him through the world,

here are the woods where I like to walk, notice the lichen growing on the bark, watch how the sun tucks behind the shivering leaves, listen to the way in the stillness every small thing becomes significant

I trace my finger through the notches in the spine of earth, dig my toes into the soil, bury my face in the moss, becoming still and stiff until I am no more no more no more because why should I be more when

eyes should never lose their brightness

the planet, as it spins, should not take away

why bother spinning, why bother growing a body from the ground and forming his legs arms face and placing a hand upon his head, when he cannot stay

oh the beautiful sun and the flowers / our mother with her gracious fingers

could she ever paint such a beautiful sky and dip the brush into a lake

so I may float among the dregs and watch the way life drains

to the stars, wondering if he is still there, somewhere,

where I am not allowed to see

I want to carry him on my shoulders so he may enjoy

the places I have been and feel the wind across his cheek once more

gladly, I would hoist him upon my body and climb the tallest mountain, I would swim him across the ocean, I would go my life with my hands cupped gently around his eyes

if it meant he could take one last glance

at the only place he knew as alive

now he is in the wind as it blows across crow country and in the wag of a tail of an eager puppy and in the hips that sway to a rhythmic song and every beautiful thing and tragic thing and just everything because how could he not be / how could anyone not be / when we continue to grow older and they stay forever young

can't you see it? he swept his wings and now I cry to give him the world

it is the butterfly effect / it is all connected/ because no one is ever

truly gone.

Cancer in the Water

Oil and acrylic on canvas



PART II

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a winter away from home

in a winter away from home,
the hour of sunlight that hits my room
is my only saving grace.
I inch myself across the floor,
tango with the beam of light
as it dances its way from tile to tile.
before the sun dips below the clouds
I press my cheek against the glass
receive a golden kiss.
but even still,
the ice against my skin
is too cold to withstand;

only six months ago
you and i were sleeping under the stars
running half naked through the waterfalls
just to cool off.

my frozen eyelashes beg me to book a flight
to take me back to that moment.

I miss home.
I miss you.
I wouldn't dare tell you that.
but this cold is bringing me
so close to madness
that i think i just might

Coordination and Constructions

Markers and Ink



Even After

Driving uphill, I feel the weight of my belongings in the back of my car as it stutters over the potholes in the road that are fixed every spring and appear again, unyielding. To my left it still feels desolate, too bright, too exposed.

They built a development here, starter castles as my grandma would call them. They've been here for about four years now, and they'd blend in better had they not cleared every tree. The trees that stood looming over my seven-year-old self as she walked to school.

Everyone else in the neighborhood lives in continuous shade. Trees too old, too protective to climb. These houses have no protection, I don't look at them, yet I feel that empty space, caressing my shoulder like whispers of smoke, unfamiliar. I have to squint my left eye to finish the drive up. Turning left at the top of the hill, I pull off on the side of the road and turn off my engine but keep the battery running. I turn the music down, pull my legs up, and let the memories melt into consciousness.

I feel a sense of relief, knowing it hasn't become one of those starter castles. Relief I can only measure in silent sobs. It still feels like mine, I only left it a year ago. It's unbelievably lifeless. This isn't true of course, I've met my replacements, the girl that now sleeps in my room. She'll walk the same path to my elementary school in a couple of weeks. The trees will have changed their hues by then. She might not even notice. She'll probably have the same teachers. I wonder how she changed my room. I wonder if she knows how that would break my heart. She's seven.

The walls fall away. It fades back in moments too quick to grasp, in snowflakes that melt before the photo is captured. The beige carpet that I used to lay face down on when my stomach hurt as its bristles imprinted a map on my cheek. It wasn't super soft. The amber of the kitchen flooring, scratched up by a dog long gone, warped under the leaking dishwasher.

The shimmering green streamers my parents would hang from my bedroom doorway on my birthday. I was told they matched my eyes, but they darkened by the time I was old enough to care about them.

The cherry wood piano in the living room where I used to take lessons but quit after three years, having decided I could teach myself the rest and never did. The piano bench that concealed sheet music from my mother's childhood. I'd try to play it in my teenage years.

The dining room crystal cabinet that echoed its fragility when someone dared to step too close. The basement storage room where my mom's wedding veil hung in the corner. The same basement where I had three sleepover birthday parties, one of which I yelled at Lily for spilling iced tea all over my phone.

The backyard where Bandit would sit in the planter box and smile, as much as a dog can, refusing to come when called. The Tiger Lily field my mom planted that bloomed every spring. The tiny wooden cross that lay buried and broken under three inches of dirt, marking where my dad and I laid my hamster Nibbles to rest.

The wood on the deck, splintered, that scorched my quick stepping bare feet when I underestimated how long it would take to water the hanging plants. Pink and yellow flowers dotting the yard, the hydrangeas that bloomed too early according to my father. The monotonous woodpecker that really liked the outside corner of my bedroom. The hum of the leaves, rustling fifty feet up in the wind. Protective.

The closet of photo albums that I only discovered when we packed up the house. Full of weddings, a trip to Italy, times before picking up a camera to cement moments in time was the last thing we wanted to do. The spare oxygen tank that lay hidden in that same closet, no longer necessary.

The Gist, Art. 10 [2023]

My parents' bedroom that was obscenely yellow. Where I slept some nights to keep my mother's side warm for her return. Even after. The door frame I kicked when I told her I hated her. I was seven.

Their bedroom window, shaped like a rising sun, close to the ceiling. The morning I looked through it and prayed for more. The stillness of the trees when she died the next day, empathetic. The memories I can only conjure up when sitting across the street.

It would be weird if I stayed too long, I don't live there now. I can't take any more. I turn the engine back on and cement my feet to the present.

Flâneurs

There can be no shame in walking.
Our soles punch the pavement and our breath
clouds cold in front of our eyes,
billowed puffs that cling to our lashes
and freeze over.
Corpses of last-remaining leaves dangle
from skeletal trees, useless in the wind.
Down the road, there'll be time
for a dozen half-glances at passersby;
And in the presence of a stranger comes the promise of a dream.
In the bliss of unknowing, in that mutual fog of wonder
I can make a space for my what-ifs,
imagine your cigarette smoke trailing back
to whisper in my ear, to envelope my skin.
Your eyes may slip away just as easily as they found me
but the thought, the thought remains.

Reflecting

Acrylic paint



Limber Pines

In the middle of nowhere in Utah lies a natural wonder.

Out of a mellow forested expanse appears a canyon
of red, orange, and brown miles wide.

Tall spires of weathered rock reach up to the sky,
their bodies covered in rings from the caresses
of wild water and wind.

On top of these hoodoos, you will find limber pines
clinging, weathering each storm and time itself.

These pines, like myself, are trying to thrive in
dramatic places where the sky goes forever.

Resiliency isn't a part of its description -
it is encapsulated inside its being.

These pines don't know how to do anything but grow
in these harsh but brilliant places.

For all the storms weathered,
when the sun comes to rise and set,
the light cascading over walls of molten stone,
these conditions are worthwhile.

The limber pines know how to hold onto
what makes them feel alive:
the balance between creation and destruction.

As the centuries pass,
more of this canyon will erode,
taking these pines further into its mouth,
and placing them closer to the infinite sky.

January

Listen to the whistle
outside the window,
I wish the world would
not moan so but here
I am. Get the frost off
my shoulders and quit
leaking at the edges
you worthless watcher,
I'm freezing in this room
and you don't even care,
quilts aren't loving
unless my mother made
them and yesterday I
found a hole in my sock.
It's so cold here. A thin
sliver of the lake has
turned silver and mirror
shards wash up on the
shore, remnants of a
great shattering rustling
in the water and against
the snow with a soft
shushhhhhhhh go to sleep
sweetpea you'll be warm
in the morning.

Kitchen Haircut

Pen and watercolor



The Pee Tree

My little sister took a shit behind the Pee Tree in the yard when I was 9. This was a traumatic time for me; two bumps were beginning to grow on my chest and I was concerned about not being able to see my feet around them.

What would I do if I couldn't see my feet? I wouldn't be able to run anymore and my life would be ruined, of course; everything hinged on vision of my toes and slowly I was losing it. I was drowning, grappling with the growths on my sternum and facing the possibilities of a future without feet, and then my sister took a shit behind the Pee Tree.

Tremendously horrible, and frankly inconsiderate.

The Pee Tree was a lilac bush in the far left corner of the yard, and despite its given function it was fragrant and delightful. Long days of galavanting in the grass begged for bathroom breaks, and this sweet lilac supplied; the blooms were my favorite color and the leaves looked like little green hearts, and though they were poor toilet paper they fluttered so kindly that I loved them anyways. The rules were simple; pee only behind the Pee Tree, and any other non-liquid bodily movements could not be orchestrated anywhere in the yard (including the Pee Tree).

For a long time we lived in harmony, my siblings the Pee Tree and I; my feet were slowly disappearing beneath my chest but I lived my last days with them to the fullest, ran through the wet grass till the dew dried in the sun and waved to Ophiuchus every night when he slipped into sight away from the streetlight's leak. In the dark we unzipped and ran around the house bare moon to the moon, whooping and hollering in the warm dark so much bigger and better than the womb, but Ophiuchus took notice of my new growth too; the Serpent Bearer wanted to show me his snake but I hid behind the Pee Tree, took solace in the lilac blooms and green hearts. Nothing behind the Pee Tree mattered except the privacy and the fluttering heart shaped leaves.

But on one fateful day my sister violated the most important rule of the Pee Tree, and released a solid so much more devastating than its unusual scent and size. She tried to play it off as the neighbor's dog; nobody bought it, for obvious reasons. A dog, no matter the ownership, is not capable of taking a little girl sized shit, and my mother knew right away. The Pee Tree—in all its comforting glory, its captivating privacy, its kind heart shaped leaves—was ripped from my grasp.

That was the summer I lost my feet and started peeing in the toilet, and I don't think I will ever recover.

Bone Dry

Acrylic on canvas



Perch and Ponder

35mm black and white film



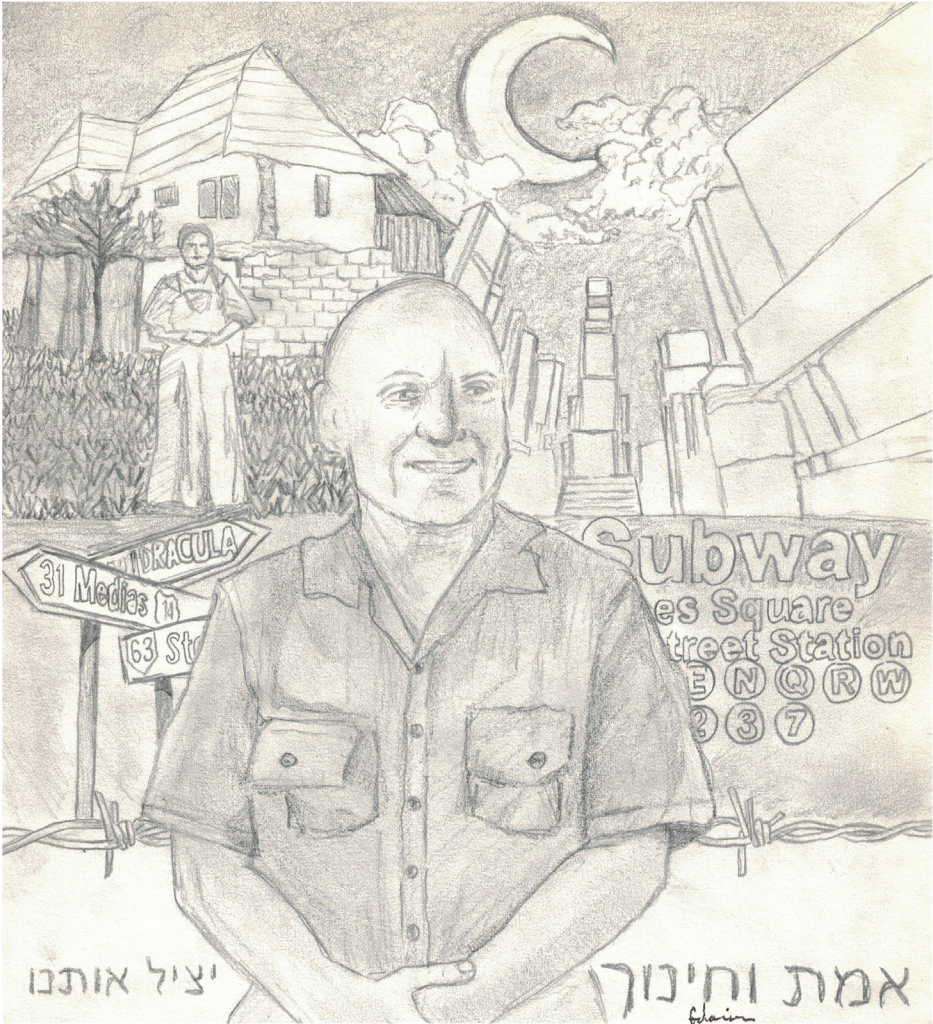
how did alice ever make it out alive?

this morning i shattered a mirror,
shards of liquid light at my hands
and laughed,
my mouth a gaping wound,
palms streaked a sour cherry burgundy
from the trees i used to befriend in the summer,
before the stars got a little further,
and gravity was too much to bear.
because what's seven years bad luck
when you've convinced yourself
to be a tooth's edge away from tragedy,
one fatal step,
and it was tumbling down the rabbit hole,
tearing skin & muscle,
cracking porcelain bones,
only for it just to be a rabbit hole.

so i light the candles,
stuck in a grocery store cake
just to let them burn out,
hot wax melting away heedless wishes,
the ghosts of every stranger i'd brushed shoulders with,
whispers of walls i've haunted,
every shoulder i've laid my weary head on
turned to dust
like the white roses that used to decorate my room,
scorching memories of sour cherries & summer afternoons,
& stars that filled my head.

once the flames have run out,
i pick up the shiniest dagger
and cut a slice.

Sami Steigmann



The Runner

One day I'll run.
It won't soon end, as it's only just begun.
I'll run far and wide, won't stop 'til I find it.
I'm not sure what it is but I really don't mind it.
I'll run towards cobblestone streets, towards green hills and golden skies.
Towards tea parties and biscuits, and strawberry pies.
I'll run 'til I can't, where my legs choose their place.
Only then will I cease, I'll end the great chase.
I'll run towards my future, pass my past on the way.
But I won't stop to reflect, I simply can't stay
In many small moments I may sense what's around me.
It's these small treasures that make me so free.
My aching limbs, my burning lungs, my awfully dry throat.
A hurricane, a wildfire, a long forgotten moat.
But alas, it can't last,
'I've got to keep running,' I'll say to myself.
I simply can't stand to be back on the shelf.
Along the way, where I cannot stay
I'll meet plenty of people, good, bad, ugly and sad.
Some bright and joyful, others grumpy and mad.
Soon they'll all leave, or rather stay in their place,
I'll keep going, away on my race.
Maybe one day I'll notice some steps in my stride.
Right next to me running, beaming with pride.
There you'll be too, in all of your glory.
To run alongside me, and to share the same story.

What The Willows Saw

When I was little
Tiny enough to fit into my favorite pair of ladybug rain boots
We had a garden.
It stood beneath two willow trees, two motherly
creations of nature
So beautiful I was sure god made them specifically for me to admire
Every saturday, when the sky was glowing and
the grass swayed in hello,
My mother and I would walk down to the garden
Gravel swished under my toes
The wooden support systems of satisfied life
There was even a frog
Mr. frog who stood on his high pedestal lilypad and croaked orders
The willows looked on and filled the air waves with bubbling laughter
I ran through the beds, Freeing! Playful! Alive!
My mother only thought about how I would fall
And
Scrape my knees
The willows had no such worry
My mother could not understand what the willows saw
How could she?
Clouded vision, lingering fingertips of past fright
One day, that would be me
Not now, now I am a willow branch
In my ladybug rain boots
Laughing through the garden beds.

Down By The Water

Acrylic paint



Shipwreck Blues

Two ships converged slowly in a storm. It was dark in the cabins and dark on the bridge so they did not see each other coming in a nautical dark age without radio. One of the captains was a great overthinker who had decided to use this storm to try and sit calmly and let the world pass by. The other was a determined layabout who had newly dedicated his life to an extreme focus on the cello to make his mother proud. The weather, of course, did not care why no one was watching, waiting for another ship to come sailing out of the fog. No one looked and that was all it would take for them to collide into each other.

The Cat Caller Can't Make the Pussy Purr

He flashed a smile rimmed in salt and lime like it,
could simply chase away the bitterness
stinging, from his fondness for my tits.
Slimy shadows prayed I'd slurp their "compliments"

down, sticky to the soul, like slushie's in heat.
But his tongue curdles with the sour swallow
of my "FUCK YOU". Crawling back to obsolete
and tucking in between his legs, bravado

smear'd by shame—he shrinks. Invincible
summers with noses kissing scents of swirling
green and mom's cream, were stained. But biblical
bolts of pepper spray, caressing my bra's lining,

slap his stubborn gaze. Praise our holy hips
in flight, sparks of girls dancing to the wind's lips.

Play Time

Necklace made using porcelain baby doll parts, stealing silver wire, antique lace, and small plastic babies



The Forbidden Garden

So gentle are the breezes that sweep along the flowering trees
So quiet are the bees that hum on an exploration for pollen
So delightful are the flowers that adorn the garden floor

Oh how this sight allures you
How it entices you to take that step, into the unknown nature
But you stay

And yet it calls to you
Just to you
You have taken her there many times
She has seen nothing
But you always saw something
What was it that you saw?

Take that step, your mind protrudes
It cannot hurt
How could all this beauty be so dangerous?

You expect a crunch, a large sound to ring out as you step forward
Something to warn you, to make you turn around
Silence is the only company to greet you
Can you test your horizons more?

Touch the flowers, you mind begs of you
Silk, is what you feel, have they made these of silk?
Run your hands through the fields
What will she say?

You bring her

It's just a garden, a closed off beauty of nature
The flowers don't seem any different to the ones in the fields
What does she want me to find?

She steps forward
Do I follow?
She grabs my hand, her palms feel of silk
She is radiant, the most engrossed I have ever seen her
I follow
Silence

What could be more beautiful? They wonder together
Silence
Silence together
Silence together in the heart of the forbidden garden
How could anything so beautiful be forbidden?

GoGos!

Acrylic on Canvas



Joseph's Dreams II

Last night I was trying to find a place to confess and I wound up at your door. I stood there for a minute, God's breath puffing cool and thick onto my stunned skin, sliding through the fibers of my ratty coat, making my bones ache. After three knocks you came, your eyes sunken and red.

It bothered you to see me there, bathed in the murky night and dripping trails of shadow up your front steps. I came to tell you about a dream I'd had where we lived in a version of Berlin still separated by the Iron Curtain; we walked down grey streets with bruised fruits dangling from our fingers, half-eaten and browning. I woke up eviscerated by longing.

You told me to get lost, that you were tired.

I told you that there were angels in the dream and their forms ghosted alongside us, soft and solemn. We moved languidly, you and me and those heavenly companions, all the way back to our tiny apartment with our big drooping hound and the whispers of the street seeping in through the window.

You stood there for a minute before slamming the door, my idiot prayer left unanswered.

A Letter for My Best Friend

It's been raining a lot in Burlington recently. But "April showers bring May flowers!" as school emails promoting events like to remind us. I have actually always liked the rain anyways. Some of my favorite days at camp were spent inside, sheltering ourselves from the unforgiving Vermont summer showers. Or walking home from school, jumping over puddles as my umbrella flipped inside out and trucks splashed water on me while I waited to cross Port Boulevard.

You always seemed impartial to the rain. You refused to go to the backyard to pee and curled up in the shower at the first sign of thunder, but you never turned down a walk. "You don't want to go on a walk right now," we would tell you, "It's gross out." We made you wait for the sun to come out, but you didn't care; all you wanted was for one of us to put on a jacket and some boots and bring you outside with us.

Maybe you actually hated the rain for the days it made you waste waiting for the sun.

It was raining two weeks ago when, after helping me with a midterm paper, Dad told me the news. I have cried a lot since then, but I have also been angry with myself: angry that I wasn't feeling your loss as much as I believed I should. I would tell myself, "She's not here anymore. You're not going to see her again." I so badly wanted to cry for the hole you left, to convince myself that I could feel it from 300 miles away.

Today, as I sat on my bean bag and rain fell a foot away on the other side of my window, I cried for home. Tired of schoolwork and monotony, I cried for the freedom of home, for the use of a car that I don't have here, for a house and not a dorm. Today, I hated the rain. All I wanted was for someone to just put on a jacket and some boots and bring me outside with them.

When Isabel visited me last week, she told me about how painful it is to open the front door now. Suddenly, today I was crying for you. I no longer wanted to go home. I no longer wanted to walk into my home and not be greeted by you, to walk into a house that I have only ever lived in with you and finally face the hole you left behind in it.

When I returned home for spring break this year, you greeted Mom and me at the door with your usual affection. For a short moment, I was confident in your health. Dad had told me that you stopped drooling and your wheezing had subsided since I had last been home. I told myself you were getting better, but the instant I laid my hand on your back, I knew that I was wrong. I could feel every vertebra of your spine and the way your hip bones protruded from your body.

For the next week, I tried to convince myself that I was single-handedly nursing you back to health. When Dad would express frustration at his not being able to make you eat, I grabbed a bowl of bland, boiled chicken or a spoonful of peanut butter and sat on the living room floor with you until I felt that I had succeeded.

She just ate some chicken! Oh, um, I don't know how much. Ten pieces? Yeah, I would say the pieces were pretty small, but, nevertheless, it's something, right? Right?

I would then vigilantly watch you for 30 minutes, waiting for the first sign of discomfort. It almost always showed, which is when I would quickly usher you outside to save our rugs from yet another mark of your sickness.

The last day I saw you I laid on the ground with you, taking in the comfort you have always brought me.

Last summer I laid with you like that after a bad dream the night before. I used to be so good at writing down my dreams, but I couldn't bring myself to open my Notes app that night. I was afraid that by putting it into physical words, I would write the dream into existence. Of course, what I dreamt was not something that could be avoided.

I now wish I had written down that dream. I know the gist: what made me break into tears the moment I awoke at four in the morning and then run downstairs and lay with you when I woke again at nine. But I wish I knew more. I wish I could know how my fear manifested and how it compares to my reality.

I had another dream about you more recently. I told Isabel, and she said she hadn't dreamt of you yet but hoped she would soon. I would have rather not had this dream though.

Isabel spoke ill of people telling her that she is lucky she didn't see you at the end, that it's really a blessing that she can remember the good times and didn't have to witness the bad. "I'm still going to remember the good times," she told me, "I just wish I could've seen her one more time." And I agree. More than anything, I wish Isabel had made it to New York one day earlier.

But then again, I'm afraid that your bad times will take possession of my mind; my ten years with you will succumb to the total six weeks of the illness in which I saw you.

For the last two weeks, I have been telling myself that my grieving is wrong. I'm going about my days too easily; I should be feeling more. But I'm slowly learning to mourn for you in my own way, and as I finish writing this, it has stopped raining for the first time today. I have both your good and bad moments with which I can remember you, and I'm grateful for them all. It helps, though, to know that while it was cloudy and raining in Vermont that day, you were at home, not waiting, but instead sitting in the sun one last time.

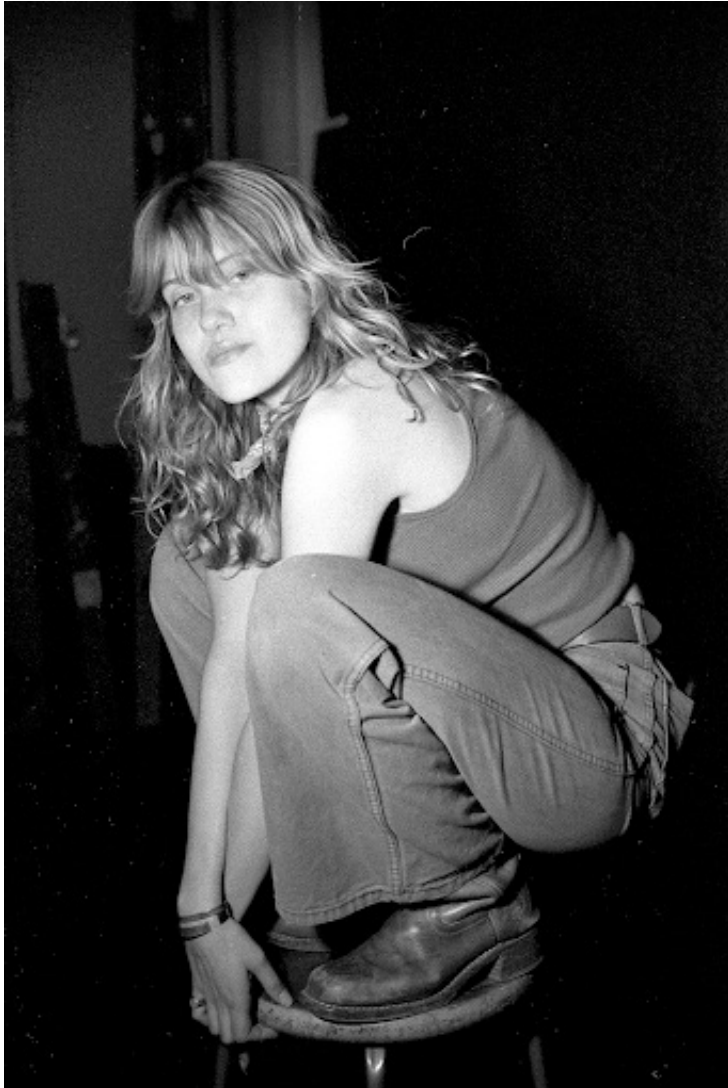
Ace of Scales

Posca Pens on Multi-media Paper



Carolina

35mm film B&W



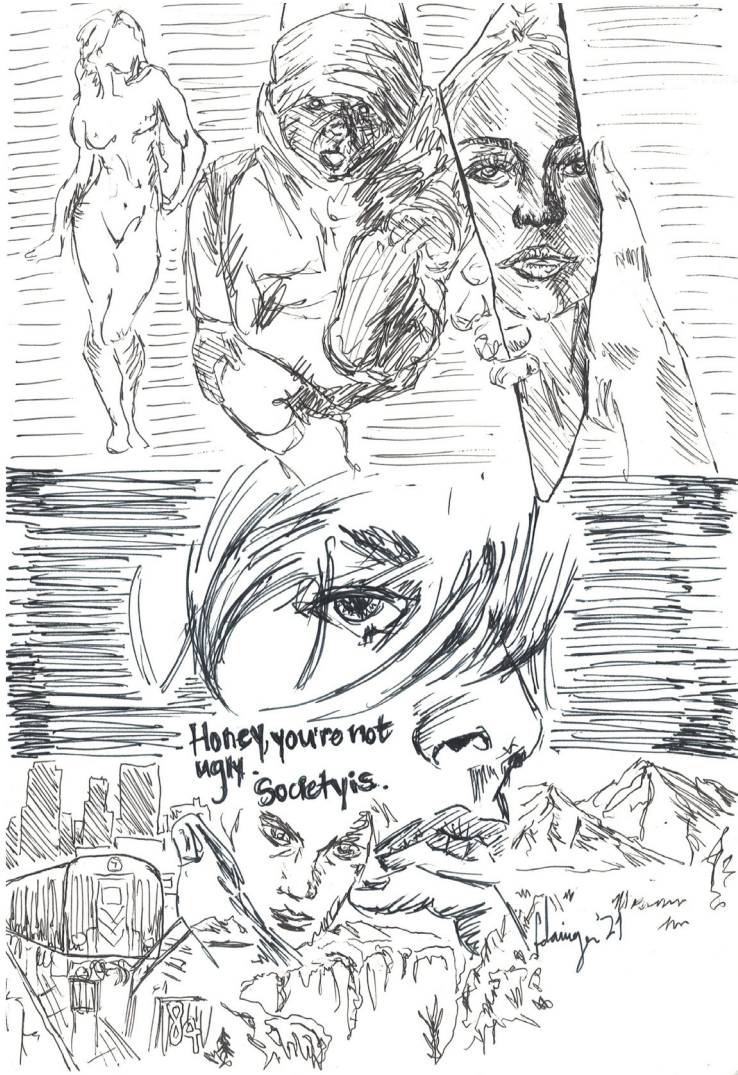
speckled alder

How excited I was
to find you,
for no other reason than that
you are you,
and I know you
even in winter—
when they say
to love in action
and in truth,
this is what it means

untitled god song

i don't remember my first communion
but i remember you, delivering
the red jam of your bleeding heart
on to the tip of my tongue. & that
was as close as i've ever felt to god.
& i thought of how she sculpted you
with those honey pot eyes & venom swollen
lips & how you act like affection
is your stinger. one planted kiss
when provoked is your protective
suicide. when the cicadas came out
that summer you swore it was the plague,
our punishment. the blaring chatter
of their wings; a thousand prayers
for our forgiveness. the hollow shells
of their youth; a thousand ghosts
of our sins. they'll be dead by fall,
i said. you shook your head,
they always come back.
i hope that when you do,
you won't treat my hand in yours
like a stake through the palm. my love,
i confess i owe you nothing
but my perfect sunday.
& you confess to that dark nothing,
all of the things that make you unholy.

Untitled Random



Forget-me-not Boy

forget me not
when you read the book I once gave you
lines tattooed with ink; littered with pieces of my inner monologue like the kisses you left as you
read them – one by one, I fall apart
forget me not
when you see your hands as simply a necessity and fingers an extremity instead of the statuesque
features my artist eyes molded as I held them in mine
forget me not
boy with eyes that hold the moss-covered-forest-floor we used to lie on as we let our dreams into
the air like pipe smoke; entrails snaked up my arms
forget me, forget-me-not boy

for I can't forget the forget-me-nots you littered my body with when you stayed

Forbidden Fruit

Abstract, pastel on paper: cut outs



I Am Not a Real Poet

An amateur, sure
Unpublished, unpolished, unacknowledged
Page adorned with red ink, “please abolish”

But head uncrowned by white bandana,
No sepia shades, or ma anathema
(Ok, a touch, not more than I need
Or no less, I’m no Sophocles)

No sordid assortment of secret stress
I’ve got cash, not penniless
My words are not immortal fossils
If I die, they won’t close the brothels

Hands untrembeled by DT shakes,
Eyeballs white as frozen lakes
By addiction, unafflicted
Future eviction, unpredicted

In sleep I've never had a dream,
Of demerol or benzedrine
Chemical romance hardly looms
Tongue untouched by blues or 'shrooms

Normal, boring, somewhat lazy
Not exactly driven (or) crazy
Express depression not in writing
But in tears and pillow biting

Manic magic mammoth ones
We rise and die with different suns
I'll write one thing, as I know it
I will never be a poet

Decanter

Acrylic on Canvas



love is so short, forgetting is so long

what no one tells you about remembrance is that it's a carnivorous thing. it lies within your ribs, rattling its gilded cage. it has no end and it has no beginning and creates a black hole ache that threatens to collapse you. a poison with no antidote. if you aren't careful, you could mistake it for a butterfly. but butterflies don't have teeth, and they don't slice into your heart with the familiarity of a childhood friend. the blade doesn't waver. the wounds are always the same.

but it finds a way out. it always does. those pretty bones never stood a chance. and they shatter, releasing the one thing you spend your nights trying to ignore. it gnaws through tendons and muscles and skin, hoping to soothe the emptiness that exists. your veins spill red all over the floor. it won't quite disappear. and when the blood runs out, it still remains.

because remembering is a lot like being torn apart.

Focus.

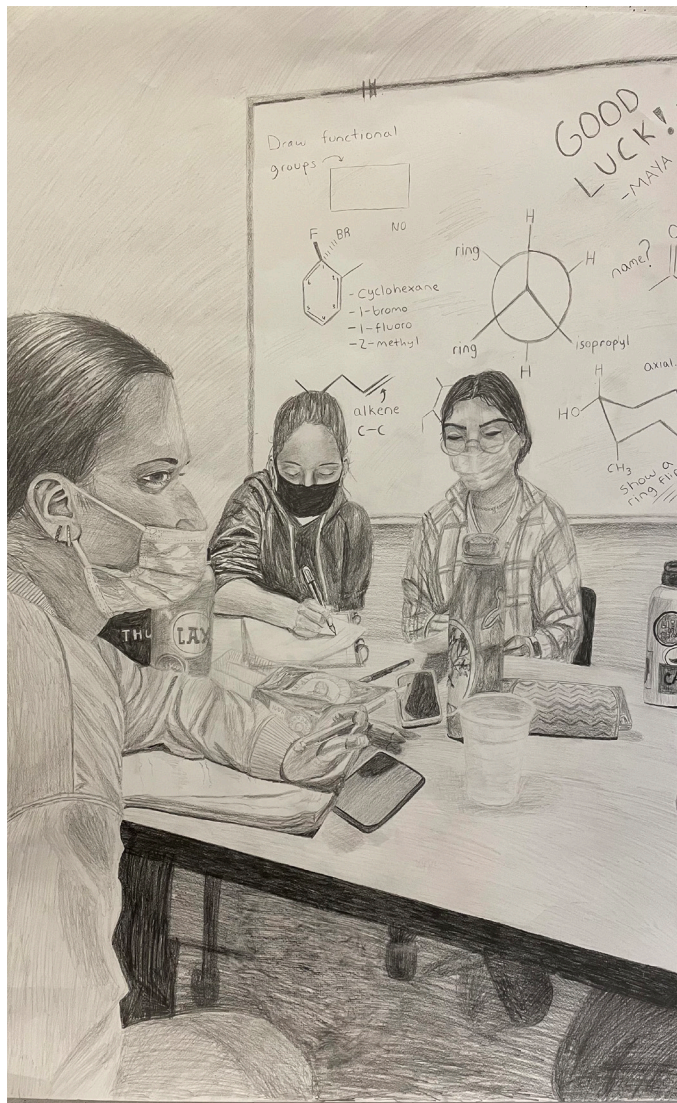
Focus. Focus.

*I am reading about law today,
it twists my mind in little pieces,
so I hardly remember the first or the last thing,
I swear someday I'm going to break the law
because I can't remember the checks and balances
for the Supreme Court, or was it Congress? Fuck. I lost it. The...
thought. See my mind is butter in the pan, always cooking,
frying bacon, French toast, buttermilk pancakes,
sausage and the delicate innards of an omelet
until it all becomes so messy, so jumbled
I can't think I can't think I can't—*

Focus. Focus.

Students During a Pandemic

Pencil



Wafaring

Maybe, had it been summer, you would've called—

I drove through the Adirondacks with eyes half-shut, seeing
Everything white where there once was green—
Salt falling from pick-up trucks, crooked lane lines,
Birch trees stubborn in the hard earth.

I wanted to want to tell you how I felt
That sudden roadside compulsion to revisit my balmy apartment—
In my mind, if we weren't there,
Someone must've been,
Peeling her shirt off and sitting in front of the box fan,
Flushed face a frequent visitor to the freezer.

The lake, too, would be impossibly gleaming,
And someone else would be wading in it;
The putt-putt course would be open all night, and
The Tuesday night bluegrass music would never fade out.
A stranger would skip slate into the creek,
And I would pass through those gates again.

Maybe, had it been summer, I could've found it within myself to stop.

a dream.

I wish to live in a little house with shutters, preferably green, preferably by the sea. There will be a forest of firs and spruce behind, bringing with it the smell of dirt and ferns when the wind blows from the west. I will have a garden, a field of lupine, and a pantry filled with boxes of tea.

My life would be simple, maybe you would be there, but it's okay if you're not. For my heart is at peace in my house by the sea, though I loved you a lot. I wouldn't look out at the ocean, waiting for something that'll never come. I instead would sit in my garden pulling carrots from the ground, my mind as green as my thumb.

My dog would live there too, named Morton after the salt girl in the little yellow raincoat that tastes as if I'd swallowed the entire ocean if I poured too much. We'd chase the seagulls together, I'd caw and laugh, I'd twirl with my face to the sky and my hands to the ground, I'd fall in the sand, but I wouldn't care.

I'd be free.

There'd be something untamed about me, maybe wild, maybe crazed. My hair would curl from the salt in the air and my eyes would return the same glint the sun always offered to me when I asked. People write poems about girls like me, the ones that live in the world of where the wild things are, captivating, feral. I'd be like a drum circle out of beat, a fiddle untuned, a teacup with a chip, but most certainly, I'd be me.

we all live in dreams, don't we

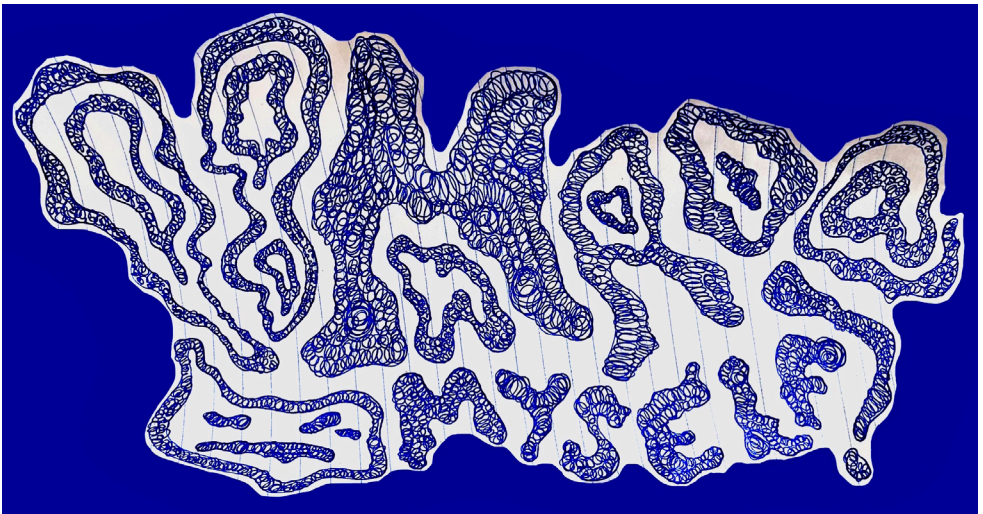
In a hovel

You were standing in the corner;
I was drinking in your skin.
The light was gone save for a lamp;
You struggled with its switch.
In a lifetime of imagining,
your image still persists.
You stood, somberly waiting,
ever the ritualist.

The sun melted like butter
in a hovel for a day.
I dreamt we slept on lumps of straw
and woke up often to pray.
The sky was red as blood
after the last time that we came
And I faithlessly departed.
You were left out of the frame.

I'm still dreaming of that summer
when you shed your second skin.
When you stood naked before me
and I could hardly take it in.
You were like a holy angel,
a thousand eyes filled with scorn.
I must have seemed ungrateful
when I scampered out the door.

Madness



Shroomy

Collage on canvas, acrylic paint and magazine



Self Portrait, March 2022.

35mm black and white



Dear Kevin

Dear Kevin,

I don't believe in resurrection, and I don't really believe in heaven or hell. But on the off chance you're floating in the ether, wondering how you got there, I decide to write you a letter.

Do you know how you died? It was so sudden. You died at the intersection where Old Post Road meets Route 1 in our hometown. You were delivering someone's DoorDash order. You stopped at a red light, like you were supposed to. A man just a year older than you – a boy, really – came barreling down the street at one hundred miles an hour with an open can of beer in his cupholder. He crashed into the back of your Subaru Forrester, and you died.

That was on a Sunday night. I found out on Monday. My mom and Shagun both sent me the same article on Facebook messenger. I can't believe I found out you died on Facebook. I called Shagun and sobbed, then I called my mom and Clara and we all cried together. I scoured every article I could find, hoping one would say that they misidentified the body, that you're not dead. But they all said the same thing: "Son of Retired Firefighter Killed in Car Crash."

The rest of the world kept moving, somehow, but time stopped for me. I didn't shower, or eat, or move, or smile, or sing. I stopped listening to music and I stopped drawing in the margins of my notebook. I lived in bed for a week. I drank vodka for dinner. I skipped class and I skipped work. I cried until my body went dry, and then I went numb.

We had no warning. You weren't diagnosed with cancer months ago; you weren't seriously injured and rushed to the hospital. You just died. You were alive one second, and you were dead the next. I wondered – I still wonder – if it was quick, painless. If you were scared. I hope you weren't scared.

I tried (and failed) not to be angry at the journalists and reporters, who wrote that you “loved your family.” Of course you fucking loved your family. Almost everyone loves their family. How could they not know you? How could they not know that you loved not just your family, but you loved music, and working backstage during high school theater performances, and smoking, and reading? You were so smart. You were one of the only people I could really talk to about politics and language and society.

I scrolled through our last messages. You had responded to something I posted on Snapchat, and we had talked a bit, casually and without emotion. That was four months before you died. I read as much as I could, and then I read it again. I could hear your gentle nasally voice reading every line. I called your cell phone, hoping you’d recorded a greeting, but you hadn’t. I browsed my photos and videos, hoping to catch a glimpse of you, but all I had was your blurry profile picture in my contacts list. I searched my bookshelf for year-books to flip through, but they were all back at my mom’s house. I needed you, suddenly, and you weren’t there.

Even after I began getting out of bed and eating and smiling again, I couldn’t shake my self-hatred. How could I go four months without speaking to you? Why didn’t I ever tell you how much I loved you, and what a wonderful person you were? Why will you be stuck at twenty-one forever, and I get to keep growing? Why am I allowed to live, and you’re not?

I talked about you with Rachel. I know you weren’t close, but we all went to elementary school together, and everyone loved you, just by knowing you. She mentioned that, in fourth grade, when her grandparents’ barn burned down and the donkeys died, you sat with her while she cried after class, even though she was the new kid and you didn’t even know each other’s names yet. You were such a comforting presence, drifting through life making people smile.

When I think of you now, I close my eyes and see the honey gold light-bulb hanging from the ceiling in your basement, where you softly brush my hair out of my face and tenderly kiss me. I see your Subaru, the same one you died in. I see you in the driver's seat, me in the passenger's. We're parked by the pond – I told my parents I was “going on a walk” – and we're blowing smoke out of the windows into the summer night. You're making me laugh, like you always did. I don't think to be grateful, and I should've.

Now, when I'm home, I fight the urge to send you a message. We always smoked together during my breaks from school, and it feels foreign, eerie, to know we can't do that anymore. I hope there's good weed in heaven, if there is a heaven. I'll try to enjoy life, even without you, because I know you would have wanted me to be happy. I'm sorry I didn't tell you I loved you when I could. I'll see you on the other side.

Love,
Levi

The Fare (Constructions IV)

Gouache



In shades of spring

I see you in shades of spring,
Never in the vibrant lilac
Of lavender blooms,
Nor the piercing green
Of fresh leaves on maple trees.
I see you in the exhaust-blackened snow
Piled up along the curb,
In the rain puddles that swirl down grated drains,
And in the pollen dust that coats my lungs
Causing me to gasp for air.
I see you in the oak limb,
Splintered and broken
From the early April rain storm,
And in the baby bird lying on the ground,
Wings broken from jumping too soon.
I wish I saw you in the scent of roses.
In the song's sung by sparrows in the morning,
Or in the dew-coated dogwood blossoms.
Instead I find you in the goosebumps on my skin
From late snow showers,
And in the longing for summer,
Who's just out of reach.

Gone Home

Gouache paint



Face Flip

Acrylic on Canvas



Picture This

Picture this: I'm 76 and you're 79 and we're ancient lovers flaking away on the front porch. We never had kids; my mother always wanted another baby in the family but by the time she died I convinced her to cease craving. This doesn't mean we don't still have sex though, we're animals in the bedroom, two tortoises keening in the act, the top ranked position for the elderly is missionary and nobody knows it better than us.

Your skin is like a soft swathe of fabric wrinkled to the core and I cradle your hand in mine, so close to gone you are sweet and gentle and the essence of ephemerality. We'll die in two months and I can feel it in my left elbow just like you can predict the weather in your right one. It'll be a tuesday in may, my elbow says, and yours responds; it will be a sunny tuesday in may. It is so easy to smile with you.

They'll bury us beneath a willow tree, and you always wanted to be by the river too but the funeral home told us no, that's a biohazard; you settle for just a willow. So it will be, a sad sweet willow wilting over our headstones, pollen favoring the divots of our names and roots punching through the coffin walls to wrap up our brittle bones. I had anorexia when I was young; my bones will crack first.

Awake and Alive and Knowing It

I am weak
in the morning. My eyes
slump toward the window
and watch
as the great canvas
is repainted, again. Black birds
slip against the bloodless sky
like hockey pucks flying
across ice;
freezing shreds of heaven
litter
their endless path
to anywhere.

In that pale light,
I can see God's
hand
on your face. Your dreams
pace back and forth behind
your eyes like the running
of a videotape,
and it is just like
when I was a child
and I held a hatchling sparrow
in my hands, gazing
into something alive and unknowing
and unafraid. Your lips
part, barely,
and the whole
morning
spills out.

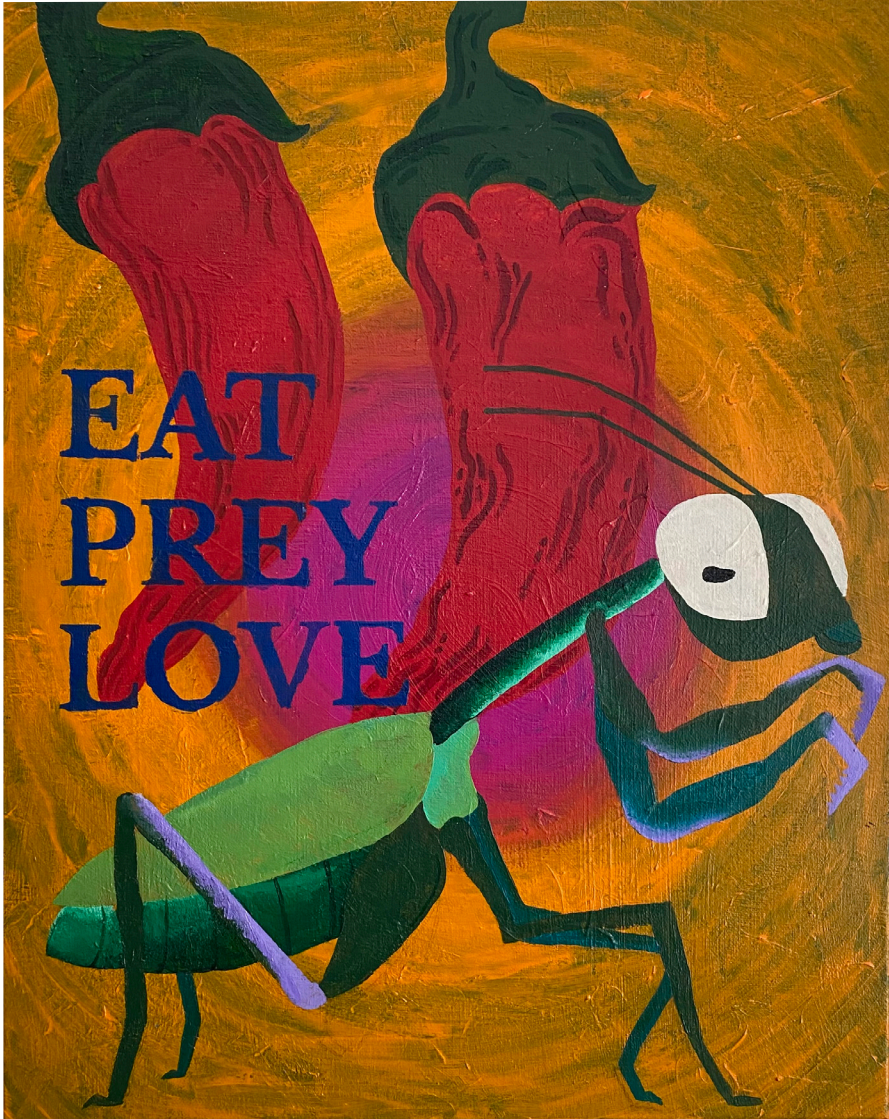
The first in a series of compromises.

My mom had always wanted four kids.
My dad wanted two.

Of their three children,
I am the most argumentative,
and probably more than they bargained for.

Eat Prey Love

Acrylic on Canvas



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All works must be titled. Art submissions should detail the medium. There is a 2,000 word limit for prose and a 150 line limit for poetry.

Any questions? Email us at submissions.gist@gmail.com.

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