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SAGA Vol.85 / 2021-2022

Sarah Luepkes

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Blake Traylor

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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SAGA

art & lit mag
2021-2022 vol. 85

SAGA

volume 85

2021-2022

When we are young, the words are scattered
all around us. As they are assembled by ex-
perience, so also are we, sentence by sen-
tence, until the story takes shape.

–Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*

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about *SAGA*

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

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

Submissions are open exclusively to currently enrolled Augustana students. All submissions are sent anonymously to hired genre editors and their volunteer student boards who have selected the pieces published in this issue.

We are proud to present this year's selected pieces in *SAGA vol. 85*.

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letters from the editors

I'll start with the bottom-line: Be proud. All of you who worked on this year's SAGA. All of you who considered submitting to us, and all of you who did. All of you who have been published, and all of you who will be. All of you who bugged your friends/students/whomever to come our way. All of you who know a name or two (or maybe more) in the credits page and across the magazine. Be proud of what you're holding. This neat little bundle of altered sheets was conceived and carried to light by student minds and student labor. Its ours, and its yours now, too. Whoever you are.

A little me-talk is obligatory, I guess, so bear with me. Even before I stumbled my way through the activities fair as a first-year, I was out walking up and down the slough drafting poems about the greenery—and the smell. You know the one: it comes pluming up off the water every now and then. I thought “corpseflesh” was a good word for it at the time. Uh-huh. Green little fall semester me didn't yet know that dramatic writing isn't always equivalent to effective writing, so here I am again, scratching my head at my freshman poems (vol. 83). But I'm proud of them still, even if I don't like looking at them much. You take pains to put roots down, and out from dirt comes growth. The kind you can sculpt but can't predict. The only kind, really.

And I'm happy with what I—better yet, we—have managed to sculpt so far, especially now that we're all gardening with the help of other hands. I mean my friends, your friends. Peers, professors, people you may never meet except by way of our paper trail. And what a trail that can be, as long as you take the steps to make it. That might mean taking art classes. That might mean going out talking revision with other open minds. Hopefully, that means publishing someday. SAGA's a great start, not just to a career but to a life in art among artists. Big kudos for all this year's lovely staff, from my fellow co-editor-in-chief Sarah to all our editors and coordinators and board members and contributors and advisors and...well, everybody. We're better makers when we make together.

I know I said the bottom-line would be “Be Proud.” But there's one thing that should always follow pride: gratitude.

Thank you.

It was a struggle, and it was fun, and it was at all because of you.

Blake Traylor

Co-Editor-in-Chief

Maybe I should get all sentimental. Maybe I should talk about the time I have spent sifting through this year's submissions, the papercuts and cups of coffee my body has taken in while putting SAGA's 85th volume together. Or, I could tell you a story.

I hated Blake when we first met. It was orientation before our freshman year here at Augustana, and I was bright-eyed to the point of being blind-ed. We sat next to each other to select classes for our first semester and I was disappointed to hear that this guy would be in my first-year seminar. He seemed pretentious and self-assured in a way that made me feel pretentious and self-conscious. During welcome weekend, he kept to himself and listened while others spoke, because (as I would grow to appreciate) Blake is quiet and kind. Still, it frustrated me as men in our cohort spoke to him, my quiet counterpart, instead of me when they wanted an English major to look at their paper. I was prideful. I didn't know why he seemed to catch and keep my attention back then.

I saw the good parts of myself in Blake and assigned him the bad parts, too. It would be months before we would write with each other, work into the late hours of the night together, and call each other friends.

A few years down the line, I trust Blake with my writing more than anyone else. The sappy love poems. The dumb, half-joke limericks. The embarrassing and poorly-written poems, too.

Being a writer is not about nursing a glass of whiskey alone at the bar. It's about nursing a glass of whiskey with a friend. I'm being glib, but I genuinely believe (read: know with confidence) that you will become a better artist/writer, critic, and person by forming these bonds within your community.

Literary citizenship leaves the workshop with you. It's something you carry in the back of your mind while you attend readings, support authors, buy books. It's the same driving force that makes you help the artist at the easel next to you when they can't get the picture in their head onto the paper.

You can write well alone. Or, well, you can tell yourself that you write well alone. But it's not until you're in a workshop or writing with a trusted critic that you really figure out what you can do. The same goes for art. The same goes for personhood.

Be changed. Make changes. I did, and that has made all the difference.

Carly Davis

Production Editor

Jack Beemsterboer
collateral damage



Madeline Young

To coreopsis and goldenrod pollen

To coreopsis and goldenrod pollen
or the trees of heaven falling together in clumps,

each cloud a wisp of watercolor,
red maple leaves tinged crimson by
the softening of summer.

My body moves through the water.
I am covered in dust.

Fall together
young saplings, before the winter comes
to strip you of your skin.

Bloom outward
coreopsis, join your brothers
in their withering.

Cry
dear maple, weep sap for
all the leaves that you have bled.

We are all meeting at once, briefly touching
without ever reaching for one another.

It is a turning, where my body is the water
the water is the coreopsis, the goldenrod,
the tree of heaven, the red maple.

It is all moving so quickly.

The Gold will soon be Brown.
The Dust will soon be Dust.

And we will find ourselves in silence, unbroken.

Carly Davis

Happiness Runs

Matthew makes me a drink while I read. This is the routine.

We had closed the store for the night and gone back to his place, where I now settle into the couch. He hangs up his jacket and I kick off my shoes. He asks if I want a beer or would rather he make something for the two of us, so I ask him what he wants, and he says he just bought a muddler. So I tell him to make me a drink and he disappears into the kitchenette.

Upstairs, Joel and his brothers are laughing and splitting a case of beer in the living room. They were going to be out at a show tonight, Matthew had told me, but it must have been canceled. “We got kicked out for being drunkards,” Joel yells down the stairs.

“It was rescheduled,” one of the brothers says.

“Damn,” Matthew calls from the fridge. “Again?”

“Fuckin’ Covid,” Joel says.

“Fuckin’ Covid,” Matthew says.

The posters on his wall make a loud, crowded picture together. In the corner, the Beatles shrine is alive and well with a new George Harrison banner he must’ve grabbed from work at the end of summer. I avoid eye contact with John Lennon, as usual. There’s a running joke about my dislike for the guy, where both of us acknowledge that I have no idea what I’m talking about but act as if he wronged me personally. These days, it’s because his son with Yoko is making NFTs. Sometimes, it’s just that he has an annoying face.

I’m only here for the night. I drove up from Rock Island to see him between tonight’s evening shift and tomorrow’s opener because that’s what you do. I could measure my love in gas money.

Matthew returns from the kitchen with two old-fashioneds, but he doesn’t have the right type of glass. He’s got them in Lakefront pint glasses from the place in Milwaukee, the modern type that isn’t all distended at the top. This means he can toss a whole orange wedge in the bottom of the glass, the kind you’d get in a pair on an elementary school lunch tray. Like always, he offers me a choice of the two and I take whatever’s closest. Sometimes, I mix it up and choose the prettiest company logo, but I’m tired from the drive up and I’ve spotted his copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* on the desk.

It's the copy his dad gave him, I know, and he kisses me on the cheek as he hands it over. "I thought of you when I was rereading it this week," he says. He's quieter now, not trying to compete with the guys upstairs yelling over the radio. "There's this seminar, and the professor is talking about the right way to teach, or to go about learning. It turns into this whole thing about reason and understanding the world, but I really liked this first bit. And I figured, you know, you can bring that college perspective." He smiles when he says it and it changes the shape of the words. "And you've always got good thoughts on things. I wanted to hear what you think about it," he adds. I take the paperback happily and bend it a little in my hands.

So our routine continues. Matthew goes to roll a blunt at the table, and I sequester myself on the couch to read and drink quietly.

The guys upstairs are loud, but I don't mind it much. They say something about the band and Matthew laughs to himself, interrupting what I've been habitually calling his arts-and-crafts-time when he takes a while.

"They're just being goofy," he says. "This is the third or fourth time the concert's been canned." He's tapping his grinder onto the tray as he talks. Upstairs, the guys keep shouting over each other. "It was originally scheduled for spring of 2020, but well, you know." He gets back to work before I can heckle him for taking his sweet time, and tells me to pick a record to put on.

That's the whole point of these visits, to sit around and listen to music and let the world go by. I've got this tote bag filled with albums I've picked up since I was last here, new releases and pre-owned vinyl and online orders and one I found right off campus and put on my credit card without a second thought.

I pull it out with uncharacteristic decisiveness and hold it up while he walks over. Matthew's socked footsteps are quiet on the yellowing linoleum as he sits down next to me. The couch breathes. "Shit, girlie, where'd you find this?" He asks, opening the gatefold. There's some art in there I hadn't seen before, black and white with liner notes about the album's production. Things Matthew almost certainly already knows. Still, it's a novelty to see an album that we can't find at the record store where we work. I had to bring this all the way from Davenport.

The stairs to the lower landing creak as one of the guys comes down and slips into the bathroom, tucked behind a shelf overflowing with CD's. It doesn't cover the doorway at the top, though, and the guy unzips his fly and starts pissing without closing the door. Matthew glances over from where he was pouring over the album. He's choked up by half-embarrassed laughter when he shouts, "I've got company down here!" at whoever it is, and then

there's apologizing and zipping and flushing before the tap starts to run.

Joel doesn't walk out from behind the CD shelf, but it's a man just like him. He's that red-cheeked type of older guy, with a salt-and-pepper beard and baseball cap. He looks at me sheepishly. I wave.

"John, what the hell?" Matthew asks and he's not actually mad. Usually, that amused kind of exasperation is directed at me.

John takes a seat at the table before he starts talking. He's got a beer in hand and is eyeing the stash jar politely. "Sorry," he says. He's got a smoker's voice, or maybe he's just an old guy. I like him. When Matthew puts the jar back on his desk, the Ziploc tucked politely under the lid, John frowns for a second before Matthew hands him the blunt he'd rolled earlier. He pushes aside his beer to grab a lighter from the table.

I'm reading again while John and Matthew catch up and make some jokes about the canceled show. Matthew was right to think of me when he got to this part—it's all up my alley, the way the guy is talking with his students. All about reason and why we care about learning. It's something I've rambled out before and will inevitably ramble about again. He'll ask me about it later, but for now, I'm watching him put on the record while John lights up.

When the needle hits the groove, I have to stop transcribing a line from *Zen* to listen. The album has that way about it.

"She's got quite the voice," John says, listening as the singer lilts out the first few notes. "Is she Irish? Welsh?"

Matthew smiles. He's watching the middle distance while he fiddles with the receiver. "Vashti's got the voice of an angel. She's one of the undiscovered gems of the sixties. She was produced by the Rolling Stones' manager, actually. Here," he says, picking up the gatefold and swinging it open to show John a picture.

"I like her," he says.

I nod. This must be how Matthew felt when I first fell in love with the album, all warm with pride. It feels good. I don't think either of us needs someone to say the music we enjoy is good stuff, but watching it affect someone else is like being the box a match is struck on. John closes his eyes and hums a low, appreciative note while he listens.

Matthew leans over to turn up the volume on a track, smiling at a phrase. "That's a great line there. They had a green car called Happiness Runs/Friday comes and Happiness runs." He recites it like a poem.

"Out of petrol, and everyone gets out to push," I say from the couch.

Matthew grins. "That's right, girlie."

John coughs. "So it's a car or something? And it's called Happiness."

“Exactly,” Matthew says when he reaches back over towards John to smoke. “Right on the money, my friend.” The two of them return to quietly talking. I grab my drink from the ground where I’d set it and bring it back up to my mouth.

I know Matthew well enough to tell he used diet soda instead of water and sugar when he made it, muddling the orange instead of garnishing with it. It’s these little specifics that make me want to remember them, to jot them down in the margins of my journal next to the lines I like in *Zen*. I’m doodling the logo from my pint glass when the conversation over at the table goes dark, their jovial tone turning sour. John’s sounding melancholy and Matthew takes pauses before he speaks like he’s trying to buoy the conversation.

I figure it’s bound to happen when your plans fall through over and over, built on falser hope each time. It wears on you. I’m trying to keep my notebook on my leg while I draw, balancing my drink on my other knee while their talk turns from the pandemic to far less tangible things. They’ve moved on to how painfully short life feels when I give up on my drawing entirely. I was always the kind of person to get existential while dead sober in the middle of the day. It’s strange to see the other side.

Smoke drifts in the air between them while they talk, catching the light and twisting it. “There’s always hope, right?” John asks. He nurses his beer. I look down at my half-finished drink and push the straw aside with my fingertip, sipping straight from the edge.

Matthew leans back in his chair, taking a hit and looking at the record player over his shoulder. “Ideally,” he says. He speaks slowly. “The hard part is just seeing it sometimes.”

He looks over at me through the smoke and smiles softly, tapping his foot along to the music while the three of us sit in silence. John murmurs his agreement, seeming to mull it over in his head. I raise the last of my drink to a slowly-sitting-up Matthew and finish the glass, pulling the orange into my mouth and pressing it against the inside of my teeth until it bursts.

Blake Traylor
Gone Bad

Unspool me in your teeth like fruit
by the foot and spit the stretches
you don't want between the planks

down to the hell of seagulls bobbing
knifefights over leftover droppings,
condiment dribbles, the odd rain

of whatever happens to come
unstuck from everyone's shoes
and feather down like another

dollar thrown at the heels—do birds
have heels?—of the moment's mortal
enemies, Bonnie & Bettie snapping

vertebrae at each other because
this struggle is all they have besides
their incredible boredom, the ocean's

illiterate dance music pulsing the same
dependable beat, but you can only kick
your feet to the same tune so many ways

so many times before you have to make
new, and nice is getting old, and darling
I'm starting to like the way you shape

your mouth when you tell me you want
to slam your foot through the boardwalk
and hobble toward heaven along the beach

with or without me, whether or not our bones
poke through our jeans when we break them
after the fall, whether or not the birds peck at

the new meat, already spoiling.

Christopher Ferman
strange days



Sloane McIlrath
full body

i was driving on 7th
then it was the middle of winter
on the way home from
lifeguard training.
wet and burning.
empty stares at the snowflakes
and brake lights.
i could even hear the music,
feel my fingers tapping along.
my body traveled first, my head
eventually followed into the wormhole.
my eyes,
then my ears,
then my nose.
i was back in the dead of winter.
i feel like january and wet hair.
i feel that empty pit that used to occupy my stomach.
i feel my eyes travel down to my stomach and
wondering why there was such a big gap
in my jeans.
i wonder why that song makes me cry,
not the lyrics,
by association.

i found the exact playlist.
each beat matches the hallucinated snowflakes.

a strange comfort falls from the sky instead of white.
a cloud covers the moon.

i am on 7th avenue.

Lainey Terfruchte

The Golden Apple



Sarah Luepkes

Sliced Red Apples

I think I fell in love with you the moment I saw you wearing your oversized yellow sweater with your hair lazily tied up, struggling to open a bag of sliced red apples. You kept turning it in your hands, trying to find its weak spot. Eventually, you just jabbed your finger into the plastic and wormed it around until the seal was broken. You smiled at your handiwork. Success never tasted so juicy and so sweet.

I loved you in that moment, I know I did. I imagined all of the ways to introduce myself, but none of them seemed enough after your amazing performance. I settled on just observing – for now at least. Every day is the same, and I can guarantee that I'll see you tomorrow at the same time, as well as the next day and the days after that. You are inevitable. A predetermined constant, really. I can count on you to always be here, struggling with your apples. There is something romantic about that, but I can't pinpoint why exactly.

Every day, I watch you conduct your routine. Some days your hair is up, some days you're wearing a dress, some days you work on homework, but every day, you wrestle with your bag of sliced red apples. I think you take pride in your independence, perhaps too much, though, because you end up looking ridiculous anyway as you struggle with your plastic bag. I admire you for that. You could get help from anyone, but you're too reliant on yourself. I imagine sauntering over, stretching out my palm to you, and you understanding exactly what I am offering. You'd consider me very heroic, and it'd be a perfect introduction.

The dynamics change, though, when your good friend, the blond one that wears bright blouses and has a tongue piercing, begins to sit across from you. I guess after you spotted him standing alone in line, you invited him to your lunch table. Where was he even sitting before? Where are his friends? I guess, maybe, he didn't like sitting with his own friends. You would think, though, that if he had abandoned his friends for you, he would at least shower you with attention, and some days he would talk to you, but most days he was doing homework, probably before the very class period it was due.

He's kind of an idiot.

I don't understand why you like him so much, but I get why you pretend that you don't – and it's not very good acting if I'm honest. I see the way you look at him, the way you blush when he looks at you, the way you laugh at everything he says, the way you ask for his help opening your bag of sliced red apples. You

know you don't need the help, and I know you don't need his help. Your good friend isn't reliable enough for such a task, but you seem to think otherwise. He once said in passing that he likes your hair up in complex, beautiful braids, and ever since, I've noticed your hair up more often. You are too obvious with your feelings, but maybe transparency is a good thing.

Your good friend with the bright blouses and tongue piercing who routinely opens your bag for you gives you a tiny glass bottle, smaller than your fist and full of sand and pebbles and glue made to look like water. There is a tiny paper boat inside with your name scrawled on its edges, sitting atop the glue-water. Your name's too small to read from here, but I overheard him call you Angelica. I caught you smiling quietly to yourself, as if your name was meant for his mouth, and it was almost as poetic as you are.

He made the same gift for everyone but with their own names, of course. This didn't bother you as you were giddy to receive anything at all from your good friend. He sure was the artistic type. Every so often, he'd turn his sketchbook around and show you his drawings of you, and you'd blush and tell him he's too kind as well as too busy to be spending his time on capturing your likeness. He'd shrug and tell you he always has time for art, which was never the answer you secretly hoped he'd give but had known to be the truth.

Your good friend with the bright blouses, tongue piercing, and affinity for art didn't like you, but he opened your bags of sliced red apples with precision and routine – and perhaps that was enough. I steady myself and walk over to your table. I will meet you, my sweet predetermined constant, and maybe, you won't have to struggle on display anymore.

Lainey Terfruchte

Dandelion Seeds

you walk alongside her among the sunflowers,
she comments on the weeds that grow and kill the sunny buds,
but you prefer the dandelions, though you can't articulate why.
maybe because they are shorter, they don't tower like golden guards.
you take a dandelion in your fingers and blow the puffs out into the air,
on and on and on they fly like feathers.

you sit next to her on the front porch.
she runs a hand over her dog's thin scalp,
and he turns his milky eye on you.
and neither of you notice as the crows steal buttons
from the clothesline.

she ignores the fact that you cut five inches from your hair,
the way it hangs in a jagged curtain.
your mother ignores your sleeping body draping off the couch in the
middle of the day.
you ignore the heavy feeling on your lungs.

you help her paint the shed ocean blue.
it is stuck in your memory unfinished.
whitewashed wood and strokes of blue, blue, blue.

you feel like a bird in a cage.
you feel like a bird in a cage.
you feel like a bird in a cage,
and you ignore the feathers you find on your pillow.

you don't remember any sounds,
any voices or footsteps or sirens.
but there are people hovering over you,
obscuring your crumpled body
hung over a pile of vomit.

white walls and beds and thick syrup
that tastes like nails.

but you don't care about this.
you care about one thing.

why?

but she wakes you up in a pile of feathers,
and you won't ever really know why.

Lindsey Johnson
Cecropia Moth



Hallie Weis

the reckoning

there's something about that moment once night falls, where something suddenly overtakes you and the world feels so large it could swallow you whole. where life grabs you by the heel and dips you in the pool of sorrow, where the sorrow seeps into your skin and your blood and your bones and into your heart and you want to just rip it out of your chest.

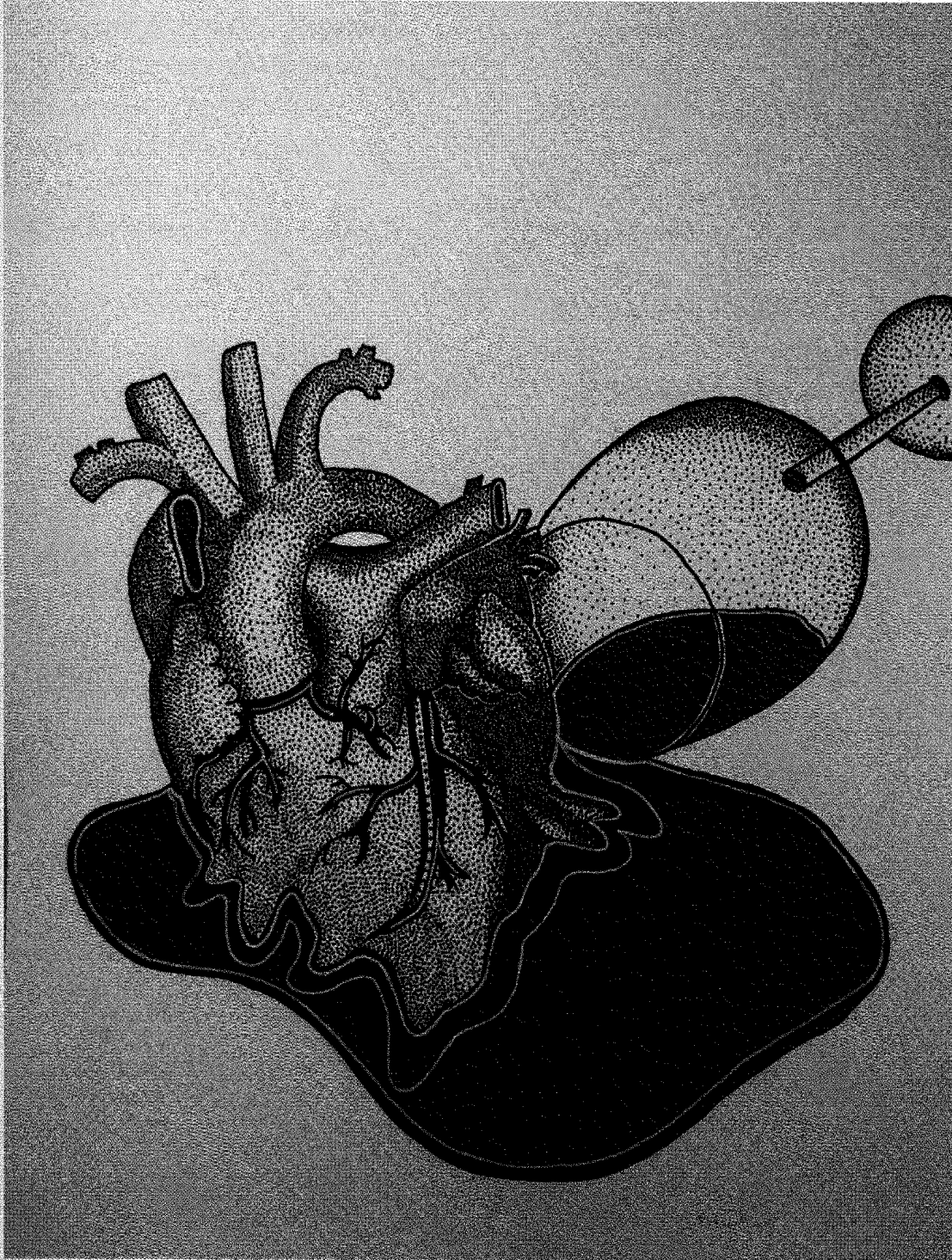
there's something about the absence of light in that moment, the way you feel the light has died and soon you will too, and maybe it would be easier if that were now, if your heart stopped its incessant beating of the sorrow into your veins. then maybe when the artist at the mortuary put on your makeup it would go on more smoothly, your tears having dermaplaned your cheeks.

there's something about the change. in the day you can live and smile and the smile can be real. but once that moment comes, the muscles in your face melt away like the wicked witch of the west and your head is but a void for your skull, protecting your brain— heaven forbid your thoughts escape you at all. in the day you can feel that life is as it is and be at peace at the very least. you can drink a coffee and feel your heart beat like a butterfly and think, she's finally free from the cocoon and she has evolved. but once the night falls you realize perhaps it's just a wasp buzzing around in there, and the caffeine has turned to venom, and the venom doesn't even sting, it just breaks you down. the hope dies with the light and you don't feel like it ever existed at all. it's all different once night falls.

there's something about the way you start to dread it. you know it's coming and you know it's inescapable. you know no one can help you. so you just have to wait. you fall into the mouth of the world over and over again, night after night, and every morning you think of how silly it is. the melodrama you approach it with under the guise of literary genius. maybe if you're self aware of your pretension, you can pretend it's not as bad. maybe if you say "you" instead of "I", people will understand.

Paige Sheppard

Melt My Heart



Sarah Luepkes

force-fed

coax carnations into my
mouth and down my throat,
watch them bloom in my belly.
the acid walls lined with daffodils
and chrysanthemums,
marigolds filling up the empty space.
sakuras flowered as lilies blossomed
in my teeth,
between my molars and canines.
plush petals gnashed into nothing,
i smile to reveal my handiwork.
at a grandiose funeral,
lavender roses and you
weep.

Cassidy Wiltjer

whiskey sours

grieving isn't pretty
sometimes it is peeled fingernails
swallowing every sickly-sweet memory,
now sour in your mouth
whiskey and wine on your tongue
feeling foggy and faded,
seeing a stranger in the mirror

Carly Davis

Punch Drunk

I see two young men stumble out of a bar
And fall into each other
Like marionettes made of
happy limbs and raucous laughter and
I wonder how many times they've done this
hands missing hands, clasping shoulders
a smile turned laugh turned something swallowed

They crash into the street
Crumpling into each other, strings cut
Smiles loosed from eyes, space
Between hands, hands, hands
The strings don't quite run through and
There's something slipping, something
Slipping, something slipping

Missed hands, shoulders, strings
Pulled through and one trips, rights himself
Says I know I love you drunk
I don't let myself love you sober
Tongues like anvils tied together
By happy, happy limbs
And laughing, laughing

Happy, it's happy, it's mouths that taste
like blood like beer like spit
And a fist connects with a wall
Here meets the back of a shirt
To pull back, push forward
And say I've got you, man
Man, I've got you

One slips towards the other
Spit, blood, beer, biting through drywall
I watch two young men and one trips
brings his friend down with him
They're laughing on the ground
Tangled up and the strings don't matter for shit
They're happy, happy, happy

Carly Davis

Because Dreaming Costs Money



Lauren Dickinson

Free

I know the way back by heart so I turn off my phone and kill the car radio. It's 3:38 am. As I make my way down the only main street between our houses, I can't help but imagine my town as a living breathing thing. With street lights as a pulse with the timing of their change. It breathes a mix of sea air from the beaches miles to my left and smog, pulled from LA miles ahead of me. As I survey the town I grew up in, I notice every street light, as far as I can see, is green. No other cars clog the road, just green for miles. It's as if the whole town is saying: "Go. You're free. You did it, now go."

And I will. I am. And the reality washes over me like the current of a stream.

Twirling, bending, streaking past me, never breaking. Not for miles.

"Leave it all behind. Go."

"Live."

Sarah Luepkes

Dressed in Yellow

In grade school when it was a student's birthday, we were allowed to bring in birthday treats and pass out birthday invitations. The catch was that the treats had to be store-bought and the birthday invitations had to be given to everyone in the class (or at least to everyone who shared the birthday student's gender). That way, we avoided health hazards and hurting other students' feelings.

When I was seven years old, I tried to pass out invitations for my birthday. I was throwing a pool party at the YMCA, and I held my twenty-four cards, dressed in their crisp, yellow envelopes, in my tiny, excited hands. Before class had begun, I approached my teacher and her aide and proclaimed that it was in fact my birthday. They held their excitement in better than I did, but maybe that's because they weren't excited at all.

"My momma made the cards," I boasted to my teacher as we stood in front of my fellow peers' mailboxes outside the classroom. "They're so pretty and neat."

"Mmhm," she nodded. "Very."

I was proud that my mother made nice cards with good penmanship and crisp envelopes, and loved me enough to make all twenty-four for me. Beaming, I handed my cards to my teacher with a flourish. I felt important handing over my big stack of yellow-dressed invitations, so important that I wasn't even offended that my teacher didn't trust me to slip the invitations to my peers by myself. Nothing could ruin my day – especially when I had another special day in store for me.

With great detail, I proceeded to rattle off all the plans for my birthday party to my teacher and her aide as the two of them – carelessly – inserted the cards into the mailboxes. "And my cake," I said, "is gonna be half vanilla and half chocolate!"

"Mmhm," my teacher said. "Sounds wonderful." She stuck several cards in, accidentally bending their corners and effectively dulling their crispness.

"Yeah, because some people don't like chocolate and some people don't like vanilla so my momma made both for everyone."

"Sounds like you have a wonderful mom." More cards go in, demolished.

"Oh, I do. She's so nice and kind, and her hands smell like soap."

"Mmhm. Sounds wonderful." Another corner bent.

"It is! She is!" I gushed, a dreamy smile in my eyes.

Before I could continue babbling about my birthday and my mother, my teacher said, "All done. Back to class now."

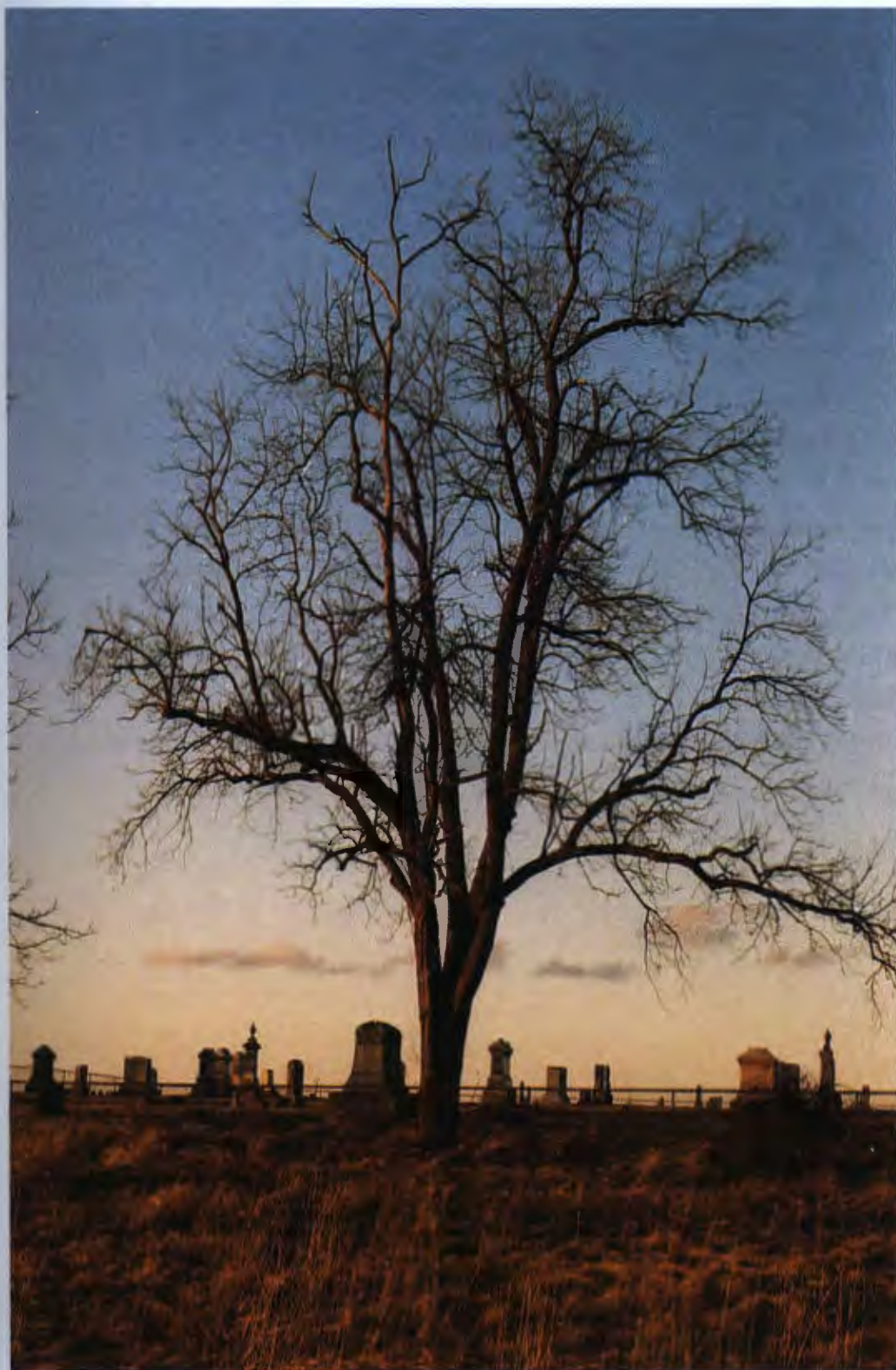
I had stolen one last glance at the twenty-four envelopes laying, as though they were resting, in each mailbox slot. The shadows beat down on them and, with their crumpled corners, I had realized that they were never yellow, just a really ugly tan.

Aubrey Lathrop

Bouquet for Cynthia



Jack Beemsterboer
eden



Carly Davis

Elegy at 30th & 18th

Back when he still taught, my English professor had a least favorite street corner “where Ugly Street met Stupid Avenue.” The intersection boasted a gas station, a bank, and a strip mall with an Anytime Fitness (which closed and was replaced by a liquor store where you didn’t need an I.D. or facial hair to buy a forty).

The pavement around and through the intersection had cracked and shifted and overflowed with Swisher Sweets wrappers and broken glass. Most of the time, the stoplights worked.

Jason, a professor who looked like Sam Elliot and talked like a keynote speaker, knew a man who frequented the corner. “He must be dead now, I guess,” Jason said halfway through a lecture, “but he was my favorite homeless guy in town.”

He would stand where Ugly meets Stupid and flip off all those buildings, Jason explained. The guy would raise his middle finger towards the bank and say, “Fuck you, Wells Fargo!” Turning to his left, “Fuck you, 7/11!” Again, “Fuck you, Smokin’ Joes and KFC! And you too, Checker’s! You garish son-of-a-bitch!”

Jason dropped his arm back down to the podium. “I can’t blame the guy,” he said. “A place like that isn’t made for living people.”

Jack Brandt
July 4th

Dear peach
I'm sorry I bought you
and left you to rot
Now you are cold
in the back of the fridge
and your skin
is wrinkled
At least you still smell good
Though I don't know why
and again I'm sorry
I didn't eat you

Sarah Luepkes

For June

For any moment that my mind goes blank,
your laugh paints it, breathing life back into

my daydreams, where neurons fire quicker than light
to capture your twinkling eyes, alight with mocha

and caramel. And my eyes glaze over to entertain
a figment of you with curled hair and an imprisoned

heart, lifelessly waiting for autumn. My fingers reach
out to caress your chin, but you, like dust, dissolve,

fizzling into forgotten bones and unkempt curls.
Your lips part, only to whisper worthwhile silence.

Blake Traylor

Misgivings

If this were a movie written by some hack in need of compensation, or even if it was a real romantic moment, which is always too dim by comparison, our hands would have touched as he handed me the present. We would have blushed and let our fingers linger together for a moment too long, it would have felt too short. I would have unwrapped the paper delicately, as if even that meant too much to me and just as much to him.

Of course, our hands didn't meet. I took the box by the edge held out to me, grabbing with just the tips of my fingers. It didn't even cross my mind to think about where Truman's hands were. They must have been clasped right around the middle, as if he might reach me there. He was probably already blushing, all by himself. I know the only red in my face was in my eyes. Tired. Of what, I wasn't sure anymore.

I did take a moment to try to appreciate the wrapping. The paper was trite, one of those cheery patterns with tubby reindeer and squat little elves grinning their faces out. And every here and there, a big red dot trimmed with fuzzy white: the big man himself, Santa Claus. Every year, he seems to get bigger, rounder, all the while losing weight. The weight that counts. But maybe he was only ever an expanding balloon with nubbin limbs, floating further and further away into a dreamy arctic where there is somehow more happiness than anywhere else. He floated pristinely there, in Truman's careful wrapping job, bound up in multicolor ribbons. Green and red, in keeping with the season. You would think there would have been white, too, but it wasn't snowing that Christmas anyway. There hadn't been any snow at all that December. Just a lingering misfit sun.

I looked up at Truman. He was blushing, but his eyes reflected something older and heavier than seasonal joy. Nevertheless, his face glowed almost as obnoxiously red as the Santa onesie he was wearing. The same one he had slept in the night before. And the night before that one, too. It seemed to me, at the time, that he hadn't worn anything else since Thanksgiving rolled over. As if one of those early winter nights, while he slept wearing it, he would inflate with enough mirth to follow the Real Deal up into that fantasy arctic that would never melt. He must have thought we would go together, into the Great White Never. But the Rudolph onesie he bought for me was still hanging in the closet with the tags still on.

My attention sagged back down to the present. Where the ribbons intersected, a bow flowered stiffly up like a frozen poinsettia. Truman had tucked a tag under its petals, marked with an amateur attempt at calligraphy. My name and his, set awkwardly beside each other.

I plucked off the bow and the tag, then tore into the paper. There was a cardboard box inside. Plain white. The kind of box that only ever has clothes in it. Clothes that seemed to fit you, in someone else's head. I pried off the lid.

It was the ugliest amalgamation of fabrics and patterns that I had ever seen. If there were any target themes struggling to tie the mess together, they were Red and Green and Festive. The real effect was Headache. I fumbled around in the box, trying to feel out a way to unfold the disaster inside. Eventually, in the midst of so many patches, I found the sleeves and held the thing up to the light. On what must have been the front of it, there was one of those oddly-specific slogans:

"I like to spend my holidays wearing ugly sweaters and watching Hallmark with my boyfriend."

I lowered the sweater. In the time it had taken me to make out what the slogan said, Truman had been able to put on his own matching "Hallmark-boyfriend" sweater. As well as produce two mugs of steaming hot cocoa, each topped with sprinkles and a bobbing marshmallow heart. He must have gotten up early to make them and left them sitting out on the stove. I hadn't noticed them there.

I blinked at him. I could feel time passing, but I couldn't be sure that it really was passing until I saw Truman's smile start to falter.

"Well," he started, then stopped.

"Well," I echoed.

"Aren't you going to try it on?" he asked.

I made something like a smile at him, I think. "Maybe later," I said. I wadded the sweater up and stuffed it back into the box. I guess he thought I needed another layer. It was cold in our apartment, but I had resigned myself to it. All I had on then was a wrinkled white T-shirt and faded boxers. No socks, no sleeves, no pants. Just numb soles and stiff limbs.

Somehow, Truman was still smiling, just a little. He set one of the mugs down on the coffee table in front of me. Then he didn't do anything. He just looked at me and took a sip from his mug. Then another. And another.

It took me longer than it should have to catch on. I shuffled into the kitchen and dug around in the drawer under the sink. Truman would have wanted me to pull his present out from under a real christmas tree, but I didn't want to deal with all the needles it would shed, so we didn't have any tree. Instead,

we had thickets of tangled LED lights strung around our apartment that I couldn't say anything about because we both knew I had to let him have that much, at least. No matter how much they got on my nerves.

I ducked under a gnarl of LEDs as I rounded the kitchen counter with Truman's present. The goodwill in his face dwindled when he saw the brown paper bag, bloated with crumpled tissue paper. No tag, no card. Certainly no ribbons or bows. I had the sense to put his name on the side of the bag, at least, though I scrawled it in black permanent marker, so the whole affair came out looking about as personal as carry-out from a sandwich shop.

Truman took it about as graciously as he could. Tissue paper rasped around his fingers as he dug his hand into the bag. Then rasped some more, as he felt around for his gift, finding only more sheets of tissue paper. I went a little overkill trying to pad out the bag, as if overstuffing it with tissue paper would enhance the impact of the actual gift. By the end of it, he had both hands in the bag and an avalanche of paper drifting down over the couch onto the floor.

I could tell when he found his gift because there was a change in his eyes, a twist in his expression that he tried to keep from forming. But his face said it all. His smile was gone.

My face changed, too. Up to that point, I had been grinning at him like an idiot. But he wouldn't try his gift on, either. Wouldn't even pull it up out of the bag for both of us to see. Because of course he didn't want to put it on. It was too cold for him to even think about wearing something like that: the kind of thing you put on just so someone else could take it off you.

So he bit his lip and kept his head down, wincing as the tissue paper whispered hoarsely in his fingers, as he set to burying his gift back under all its thoughtless wrapping. All without so much as a "maybe later." Because Truman never said anything he didn't really mean.

I got up from the couch and went back into the kitchen, leaving Truman to grieve alone. I needed something to do, so I decided I needed something to drink. The hot cocoa—at this point, nothing more than a marshmallow heart dissolved in tepid chocolate—wasn't going to cut it. Coffee would be better. Excellent, helped with a generous dose of Bailey's. So I rummaged around the cabinets, hunting out that bottle that I wanted to believe we still had.

Once I gave up on the Bailey's, I noticed that there were voices cutting into the quiet of our apartment. All that divided the kitchen from the living room was the counter, so I could see that Truman had turned the TV on. The Hallmark Channel. As always.

I plunked my mug—emblazoned with what but the Hallmark logo, a crown

hovering under a string of dots like a bed of nails—under the coffee-maker and pressed a button. The machine squealed darkly at me as it spat out my coffee.

Hallmark. The great titan of the greeting card industry. Champion of the wholesome made-for-TV movie. Truman's favorite entertainment year-round, but an obsession during that interim between Halloween and the New Year (with a potent outlier cropping up mid-February). I could avoid his fanboy enthusiasm most of the year, but once October fell off the calendar, any scrap of sanctuary leapt out the window. Our apartment bloomed into a desperate holiday warzone, a red-and-green siege peopled with eyeless gnomes wearing stiff hats and limp-legged elves commanding the shelves. And, of course, the uncannily radiant faces of that year's Hallmark cast, beaming as ever like boring will-be angels. Holiday season was siege season in our apartment, and that year Truman delivered his ultimatum to me on a sweater: "Sit and watch with me. Be tempted, like me, by another batch of half-baked cookie-cutter feel-good fictions. Stuff the sockets of your clipped wings with cotton candy and watch mediocrity fly"—and flounder, and drown in oceans of syrup. Because he held out hope that I would fall in love alongside him, sitting on our ratty couch, gazing at shot after shot of obsessive close-ups and smoothed romances. Everything smoothed, sanded down so there wasn't any grit left. And I was so sure that grit was all there was to truth, and love wasn't love if it didn't give you splinters to run your hand across it. All that sweetness made for something else. Something overdone, in every sense.

But as I burned my tongue on my coffee and winced, I saw something new:

A gay couple leading a Hallmark movie.

And god, they even looked happy.

I let out something like a guffaw, if you rolled it around in an oil slick and took a match to it.

"Bullshit." I sneered. "Even worse than usual."

"It's not that unrealistic..." Truman spoke into his mug.

"Oh, yeah?" I sneered. "Since when are we ever that happy?"

Truman stayed quiet.

I swear I saw something ripple in his mug.

I know I didn't care, at the time.

Lainey Terfruchte
Winter Flower



Cassidy Wiltjer

Sunflower Bag



Kath Neubauer

Suite: Blue Heavens

I

I drove home from your place
with the radio off and heater on
mouth burning from the morning wind
and tired kisses traded in your bed
where last night I told you
it doesn't mean a thing, and tonight
I said I don't want to make it a habit, but
you thought it didn't matter
if it hurt; it's going to hurt anyways
so why refrain from pressing
our smiles against themselves
the way I've already lined my body
up against yours, it seems
we fit together so well, but
I tell you anyways when I get back safe
that it's a starry, starry night
in my corner of the woods
and these stars like distant
campfires form families of things
shocks of light that flare up
in the cold, reaching dark

II

I draw a bath to force myself weightless
while I scrape my nails down my back
and look at the gathered
pieces of dead, white skin
in the corner of the bathtub
I watch as a spider with shaking legs
tries to keep itself above the waterline
things come out of the tiling
when I heat the water too much
but there is skin to get rid of
little crescent moons to drop into the water
where they will dissolve and
I will pretend they were never a part of me

III

I'm learning that sometimes
you snore and it's not the worst thing
it's taught me to press my hand against
the plane of your chest so you'll wake up
to murmur sweetly in my ear
I've got you all figured out
I have this and other untruths
that I trace into the pool of
your collarbone to make you
lose your train of thought
when you stumble into
your usual melancholia
I'm the trickiest bedfellow
on this side of the Mississippi
all it takes is me crossing the river

IV

Thank you for everything
you have given me in bursts
of post-pay-day magnanimity
breakfasts and records and
bottled water because you think
it's gross when I drink from the tap
but I'll take it, the little gifts
of "Do you want the other half
of this candy bar?" while you sing songs
you've written me and I sing what
I've written you so that when I run
my fingertips over your pulse point
the callouses scratch skin
and you say all sorts of lovely things
I convince myself I ventriloquize you
when I'm laying in your lap
struggling to say the right
and least-painful thing
but I settle for, "Tomorrow,
let's make the trip up to Waupun,
where they've got the statue
they based that Beach Boys album on
in a cemetery and you'll press kisses
to my wind-burnt cheek while I drive."

Christopher Ferman
parallel dimensions



Carly Davis

Portrait of Neil Gaiman



Lainey Terfruchte
Birthdays

After I left for college, my parents turned half of my room into a study. They didn't expect me to be back before the end of my freshman year. My childhood home was supposed to be a temporary place, their way of trying to push me back out into the "real world".

My eighteenth birthday occurred the summer before I went off to college. I was hopeful, then. In my head, the next summer would be full of late-night walks around campus, watching the fireflies buzz around the dimming street lamps. My summer course load would be difficult enough to keep me focused but light enough for me to enjoy myself, to be able to take off on my birthday and spend the day lounging in the dorms, or maybe going for breakfast with friends who were currently faceless unknowns. This was my vision, and I was going to will it into existence.

My nineteenth birthday was spent working the concierge desk at a nursing home. No one there knew it was my birthday, and it was simple unluckiness that led one of the residents to die that day in a traumatic fashion. I didn't see it, but there were whispers about a fall down the stairs and heart problems and it felt even less real than the passing of time. Nineteen. I spent the day pondering the number instead of doing my job.

At the end of the day, my parents told me they had bought a cake and I acted grateful but threw it up that night. The cake sat in the fridge for weeks, mocking me with its electric blue fondant that stained the inside of my mouth, its too-sweet frosting making my stomach ache with just a glance. One day I came home from work and the cake was in the trash and, for some reason, it made me sad. Like I had failed someone, or someone had failed me.

It wasn't a good start to my nineteenth year.

Weeks passed, a note appeared on the counter asking me to pick some things up from the store. It was my day off and I was excited by the idea of leaving the house in something other than my uniform. I threw on a t-shirt and a pair of denim shorts and stuck on a ring my mother had given me for my birthday, oversized turquoise that only accentuated my bony fingers.

I didn't look like someone who was nineteen. I looked like a child, but this made me feel better. When I was at work, everyone assumed I was older. Twenties, once even thirties. Not yet, I thought. Oh my God, not yet.

I took my little gray sedan to go haunt the supermarket. The sedan was supposed to take me to bars and on road trips and wherever else my dad envisioned when he bought it for me. Instead, it was taking me to a place I had

known since I was a kid, the route basically a part of my blood. My mother's reusable shopping bag hung limp on my shoulder as I stepped inside, list tucked into my pocket. The cool air gave me a harsh greeting and I grabbed a basket to put my things in. The handles were sticky, so I tried another one but they were all the same.

The lights in the store made my eyes water. Everything was so bright in there, the speckled floor and freezer lights and shiny carts. Food always looked so unappealing in supermarkets. Everything was overexposed. You could see the little flecks of orange carrot skin, the bruised red of overripe strawberries, the gory marble of raw meat. Only the food tucked into boxes looked edible, with the deceptively perfect photos on the front.

I walked along the aisles, avoiding employees and other shoppers while dumping food items into my cart. A can of green beans, four boxes of cereal, a carton of milk, ham wrapped in plastic. I tried not to stay in the cold food section for long because it was freezing. As I walked away I realized it was cold in the whole store. And everyone was wearing warmer attire, jeans and light jackets and sneakers instead of sandals. I didn't know what the month or day was. I couldn't even guess.

I checked things off the list obediently, trying to be quick but still pick out the best avocado and find my mother's favorite brand of chicken noodle soup. Every now and again I liked to pretend that I was a functioning person, that I was good at the normal sorts of things. I could go to the supermarket. I could go to work. I could do all of it perfectly fine, that was the act. The only bad part was the truth of it: how difficult an act it was to uphold.

My basket was filling, the list winding down. And then I spotted a girl, or maybe a woman, now, that I had known for a long time.

Simone was all tumbling dark curls and cherry-red lips and gentle limbs. She picked up an apple with her slender fingers, examined it from all angles before placing it carefully into a plastic baggy. Her basket was full of bright foods, all the ones that were supposed to be good for you. Pre-made salads with wilting leaves, artisanal bread decorated with seeds. Simone was a functioning person.

She was my friend since elementary school, a friendship bloomed out of proximity. I could run across the street to her house, step inside like it was my own, slide my shoes off, greet her parents, stay for dinner if I wanted. We spent hot summer days in her basement reading Nancy Drew, trying to see who could guess the answer to the mystery first. The fan turned on high, swiveling to blow around our hair and cool the pieces stuck to our foreheads with sweat. We watched TV in the evenings, cartoons out of order but easy to comprehend. We tangled our legs together on the couch and ate snacks that left crumbs.

Now we met in the frozen foods aisle of the supermarket, goosebumps on my skin and a basket filled with food I barely ate. I hadn't brushed my hair before I left the house. This thought came to me as I saw Simone and her glossy curls. She would make a great advertisement. She was in college now, still in town but doing something productive. She used to want to be an actress, but I heard she was majoring in Biochemistry. I liked science in an abstract way, but I could never apply myself. I would rather work in the nursing home forever than take difficult science classes for four years. Way less stressful.

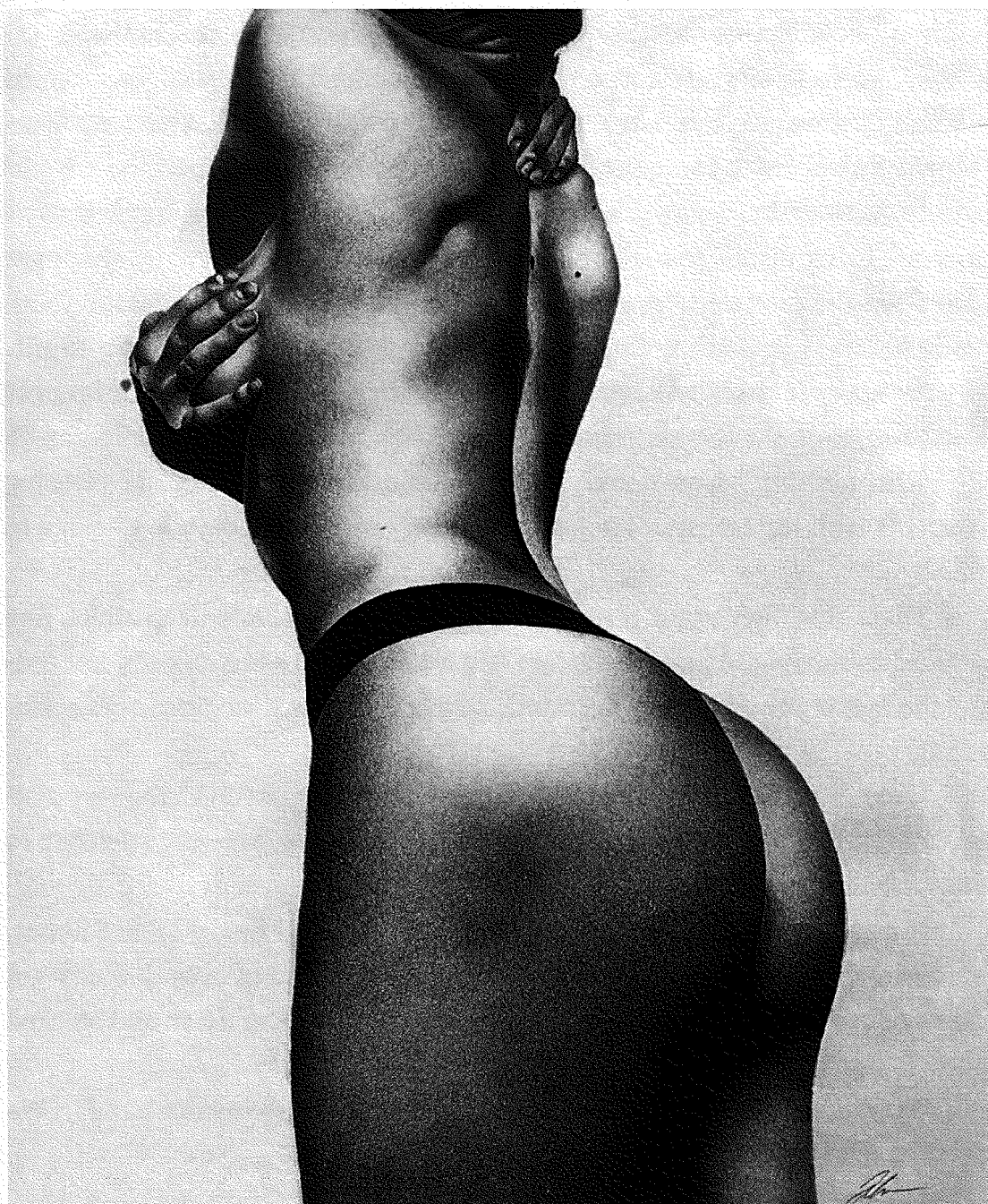
Simone grabbed one of those sugar-free ice creams and turned to put it in her basket. I was right in her line of sight, and rather than deal with this I ran out of the frozen foods aisle. I didn't know if she saw me. I hurried to the self checkoutcheck out, list complete enough. I scanned items in a daze, the stupid beeping noises ringing in my ears. I didn't remember leaving, but then I was back in my car and the groceries were in the passenger seat.

Paige Sheppard

Portrait of Trixie Mattel



Lindsey Johnson
Untitled 1



Zach Blair

Destruction

The sky was dark, except for the streak of the approaching, burning light. That didn't matter to me, though. Under the moons that Amber seemed to create, I could see everything around me. Together, we were sitting on a swing set enclosed inside of an old, rusty playground. The wood chips surrounding us served as the dirty sea to our private kingdom for a night. I was thrilled; I was free with her.

Even though I wanted nothing more than to gaze upon her beauty, I couldn't bring myself to look at her. I was always a meek boy, and she knew that from the moment she met me. Still, the blaze was coming and we both knew it.

"What's so special about your shoes?" Amber asked. I somehow could sense the smile she was shooting at me with her question.

"Uh, nothing," I stuttered, unable to muster any sort of ear-pleasing concepts with my tongue. "It's just that I can't seem to believe it all came to this."

There was silence for a moment, followed by Amber's deep sighs. She seemed to inhale the pain of the last few months with every breath, not hiding the fact that we both felt betrayed, slighted, and as if we were being punished.

"Yeah, I'm there, too. The shenanigans didn't help anyone," she responded, dejected. "I mean, how could we have screwed it up, brought attention to things that didn't even matter?"

"I just...don't know." As Amber finished speaking, I finally looked at her. My heart shattered at the sight of the salt falling from her eyes. I slowly got closer to her, turning in my seat to face the chains that hung down and blocked parts of her face. The tears wouldn't cease in their tumble.

"Hey, it's okay," I gently spoke, wiping her face with my dry hands. "We don't have to be alone for this."

Amber turned her head to me, delicately grabbed my face, and kissed me. Her lips were gentle and salty. She stopped after a few seconds, then put her forehead to mine, her breath smelling of minty gum. Turning away to face forward, she clasped my hand with hers.

We teetered in our seats, embracing the serenity of everything, and gazed at the deserted school buildings in the distance. There were a few birds chirping. I wouldn't have been surprised if they knew what was to come and were

lamenting. Nature always appeared to be conscious of its whole being, all its capabilities, all its possibilities.

The fiery streak was even closer now, blocking most of the stars in the night sky – yet we continued to silently sway back and forth.

There were so many thoughts, so many things to say. But with something like the bright orange light, how were you supposed to choose the right words? In that way, I think both Amber and I had already come to the same conclusion.

Suddenly, far away, there was an earth-shaking boom, which rumbled the dirt at our feet. The chains began to vibrate. Amber tightened her clutch on my hand and whispered, “No.” A wave of gleaming brilliance loomed nearer. Eventually, the fire swallowed us, and we were gone.

Lexi Golab

The Color Green

Seafoam in the early morning. Freshly watered grass, or sprouting trees in April. St. Patrick's Day parades and shamrocks that shimmer with pride. A toddler's disgust for that first bite of broccoli, and deep envy when a friend finds love, but you do not.

I found that enviable love. I was resented, yet desired.

She changed the way I viewed the world, and she created my role in it. Everyone always said we were meant to find each other, that we were soulmates, and that we would be together forever. I believed them. Our love was as solid as a diamond, and even more beautiful than the glittering emerald engagement ring in my pocket. Our love was going to last forever.

The shade of her eyes.

It was the last color I saw before the car flipped.

The beckoning forward of a traffic light, and the luck that follows the search for a four leafed clover. Leaves of a fresh fern, or Christmas trees newly decorated with twinkling lights and shining ornaments. Pain associated with a prickly cactus, and fear that comes with drinking a fairytale poison. The color that kept me paralyzed in horror, when time froze and her heart stopped.

The color that looked at me apologetically only minutes earlier as we frantically raced around our tiny apartment. Why did I hurry? I ignored the moment of laughter as she realized she almost forgot her favorite book to read on the plane. I rushed through our morning coffee talk, a content tradition that formed through the retellings of our scattered dreams from the night before.

A speeding ticket on the way to the airport. Arguments in our old Chevy Impala. Bowie on the radio. Regret when she is silent. A long flight ahead of us, made even longer with the knowledge of my expectant family waiting for us, with their endless barrage of questions and criticisms.

We had all the time in the world.

Until we didn't.

My impatient sighs and tapping foot were necessary instruments in the orchestral events that followed, from my frustration on her procrastination, to my heavy foot on the gas pedal, to the moment of stillness that followed our crash.

Blinding pain in my head. "Space Oddity" echoing. Flashing lights, red and blue blurring my vision. Burning rubber and skid marks. Sirens blaring. Her eyes, losing their emerald luster, acted as a reminder that I could not win back this lost time.

Her favorite kind of tea, sweetened with citrus. Key lime pie for every dessert. The geckos and frogs she would spot during our warm summer walks. Granny smith apples and sweet pears at our picnic table. The ten dollar bills she left with every musician on every corner.

Her eyes are everywhere, always watching me. I cannot escape them and I am not sure that I want to. The need to see her again fills every fiber of my being at every minute of every day.

I think it is time to see her eyes again.

The eyes of the color green.

Aykeem Spivey
Lindsey



Moreen Akomea-Ampeh

Container

My black face fades
My identity hidden
I am lost in the middle of nowhere
They say it's because I'm too dark

My identity hidden
But did I ask to be born black?
They say it's because I'm too dark
I may have to be cautious of where I tread

But did I ask to be born black?
Did I get to choose which container I came in?
I may have to be cautious of where I tread
Because my black face could be mistaken for any black person

Did I get to choose which container I came in?
Why then give me the burden of being born black?
Because my black face could be mistaken for any black person
Tell me, why should it be this way?

Why then give me the burden of being born black?
I am lost in the middle of nowhere
Tell me, why should it be this way?
My black face fades

Alison Lawrence

Ambulance Confessional

Come to me in the dark.
Swaying straps and trailing cords
listen to you in our unorthodox box,
the beeps, a bell,
counting the tolls of your heart.

Pastor cannot see it,
but God and I can,
the sacred peaks and valleys, electric.
Tell me, what's on your heart?
What's in it?

Come, child,
let us lay hands on you
as a congregation might.
Will they press hard enough
to stop your bleeding, as I do?

Allow me to anoint you
with the breath of life,
baptize you in holy oxygen,
such that your lungs are as full
as your heart of hearts.

Tonight, neighbors fall on their knees for you,
their clasped hands less a prayer
than my push
that keeps the blood
of the Lamb flowing.

What other hymn
produces wails that part the seas?
Who but Moses and I
artifice a safe passage home?
Your ark, in the heavy rain.
The forgotten priests drag their own flesh
through the ash for you,

deliverance from the flames.

This is my body,
given for you.

Do this, for the remembrance of me
in that zeroth hour,
my gloved hand in yours, a covenant,
my eyes, an oath
to bear witness to you,
and only you,
as the heavenly lines converge
and flatten.

The truest form of priesthood
is action and witness.

Maggie Talbott

Elegy of a Hallowed High

I wonder how the high would muddle
the cat-scratch of getting a tattoo
needle pushed into your skin
(leaving behind an eternal masterpiece).

I wonder how long it took the artist
to look up into your feverous, hazed eyes and
give a knowing smile, because they've
definitely done the same before
(—I mean, God, they listen to the Grateful Dead).

I wonder if they sat down with their
morning cup of coffee on the cold and
cloudy day your obituary was in the newspaper,
saw your picture (the last good one before the
highs hallowed your already gaunt face),
and read in loving memory of.

Charlie Roiland
Healing

It hurts.
No matter how long its been,
It will always hurt.

But little by little,
The hurt starts to fade.
Life begins to become life again.
The sun becomes brighter,
The colors slowly seep back.

All of a sudden,
You'll begin to notice sunsets again.
You'll feel the soft breeze on your face,
Catch a raindrop on your tongue,
And smile.

One of these days,
You'll dance.
You'll dance for everything you've overcome,
The long nights,
Swirling thoughts,
The times you didn't think you'd make it.
You'll look back,
And you'll dance.

Because you're alive.
And no matter how much it hurt,
You've made it.

Christopher Ferman

the cursed moon



Carly Davis

Something Borrowed

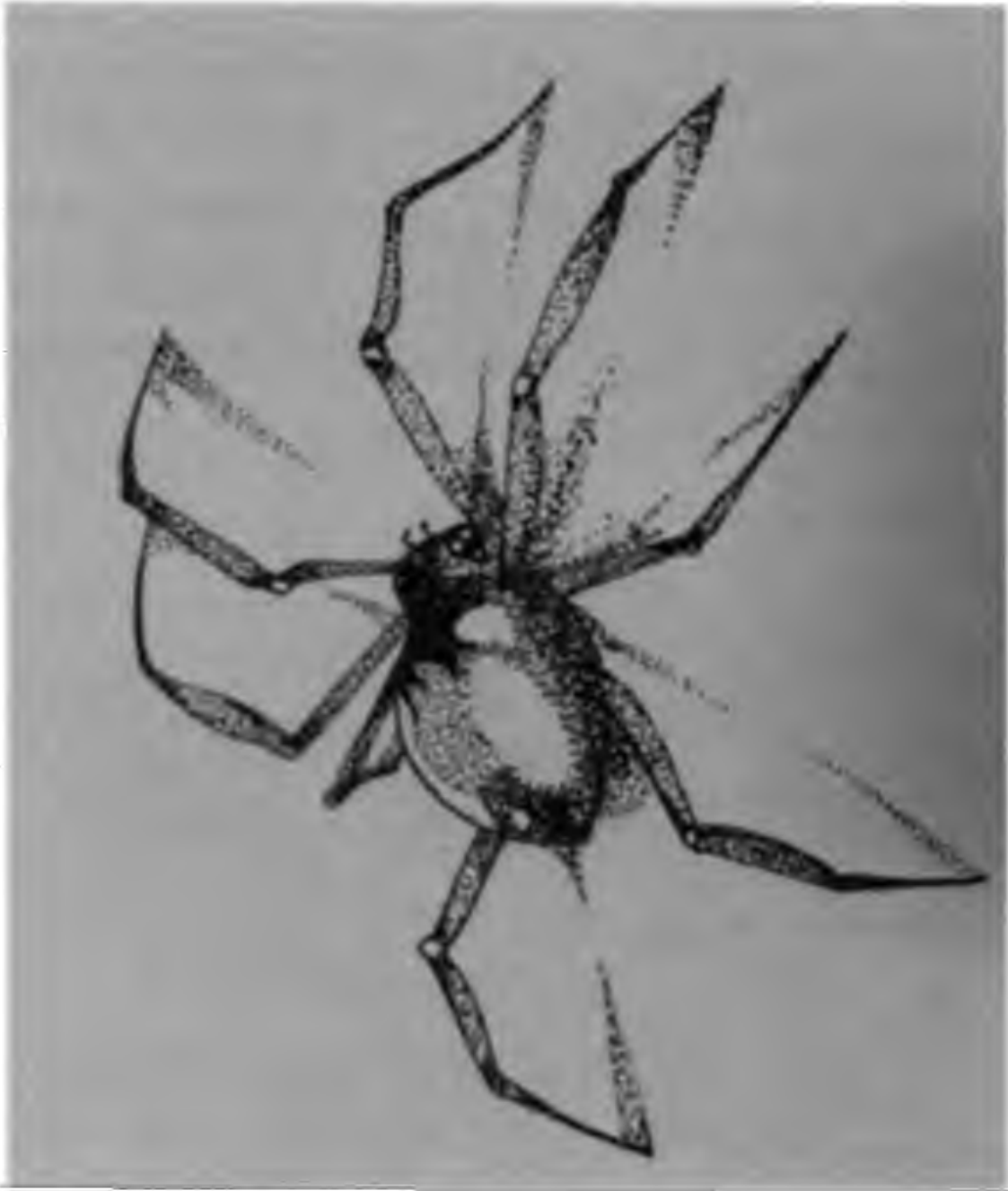


Jack Brandt

Speciality Crop



Charlie Roiland
spider



Lauren Clarke

Nighttime Car Ride to Iowa

the backseat window is still fogged up
so the lights outside
look like they have rainbow halos
and the rings glow
red
yellow
blue

snow bathed in light
rushing past at
60 miles per hour
with all the banks
identical homes
fast food chains
insignificant

open signs unlit
closed hours before

fields with no crops
frost creeping into the pane
although the heat
is on blast

the light blurs
and you think of when
you wouldn't wear your glasses
as a kid
and everything
melted into one another
it's the same now

music is playing
you don't recognize the song
you aren't really listening

all you see are lights
and snow
and you notice that
the moon has turned
rainbow

Carly Davis

Shrimp Soup



Zach Blair

Something Tasty

Outside the windows, Armageddon made itself known in spectacular fashion. Hellish landscapes decorated the skies, while I sat in a simple café in Paris. Splashes of blood spat at the building. A shaky waitress came to my table. I was the only customer.

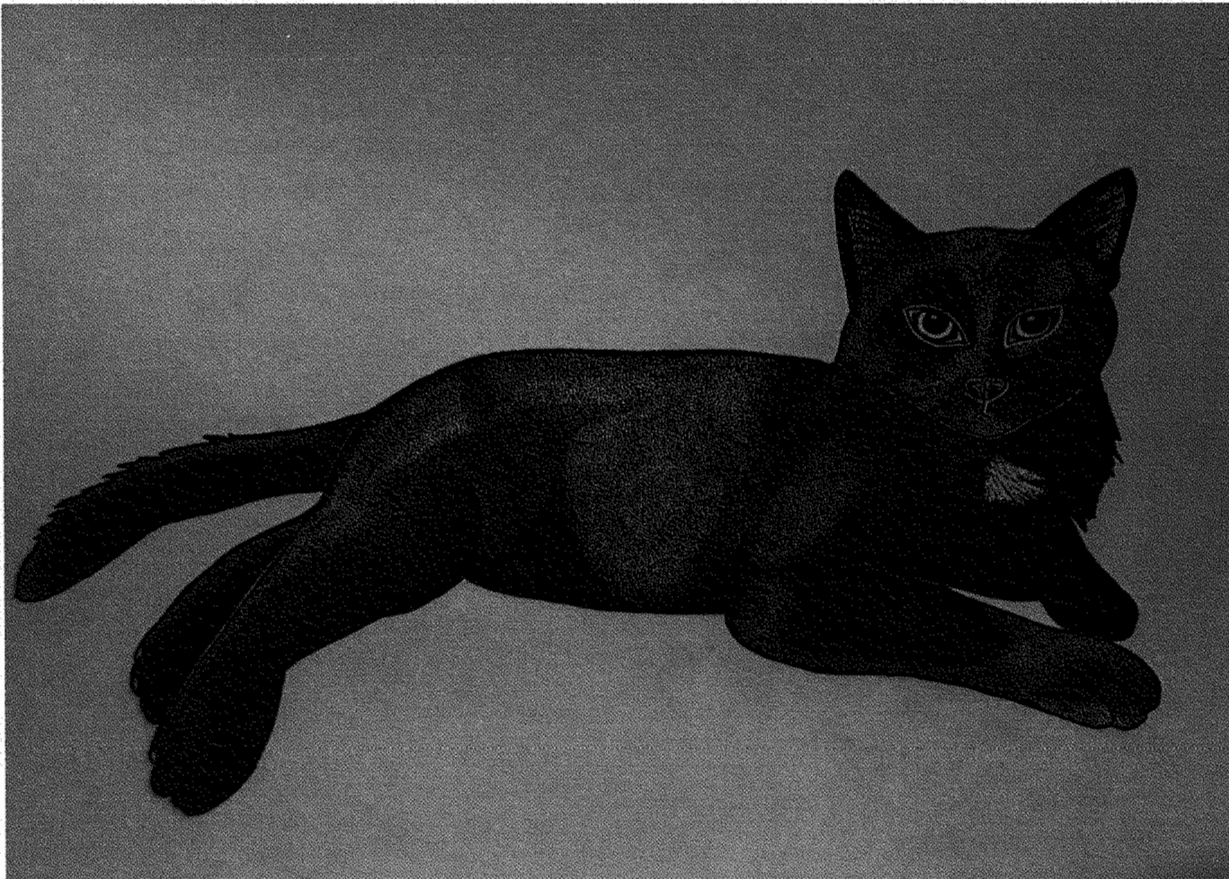
“Would you like a parfait, sir?”

“Oh, that’d be delightful.”

Charlie Roiland
stink bug



Paige Sheppard
Black Cat



David Snubbert

Love in the Ashes

Sex at the crematorium.

Sex on the roof of the dead crematorium.

The “abandoned” crematorium.

The local forbidden place
where the rowdy locals go.

Schlong as long as the looming smoke stack—

Intentions as passionate as the
building was dead—

He led her up rank rusted stairwells,
oxide orange and orangizing.

In their cellphone’s flash:

darkness below,

moonlight above;

an infini-dick prophecy

spraypainted ’pon the ruin walls.

She grabbed the

denim peel of her own promised fruit.

He jerked,

then consumed her

as fertility festered in ink before them.

Now,

up the ladder,

onto the roof:

a spring night, a spring Moon

dicked in the face by the phallus of Death.

Consummating upon the sight

of beer cans and sinners

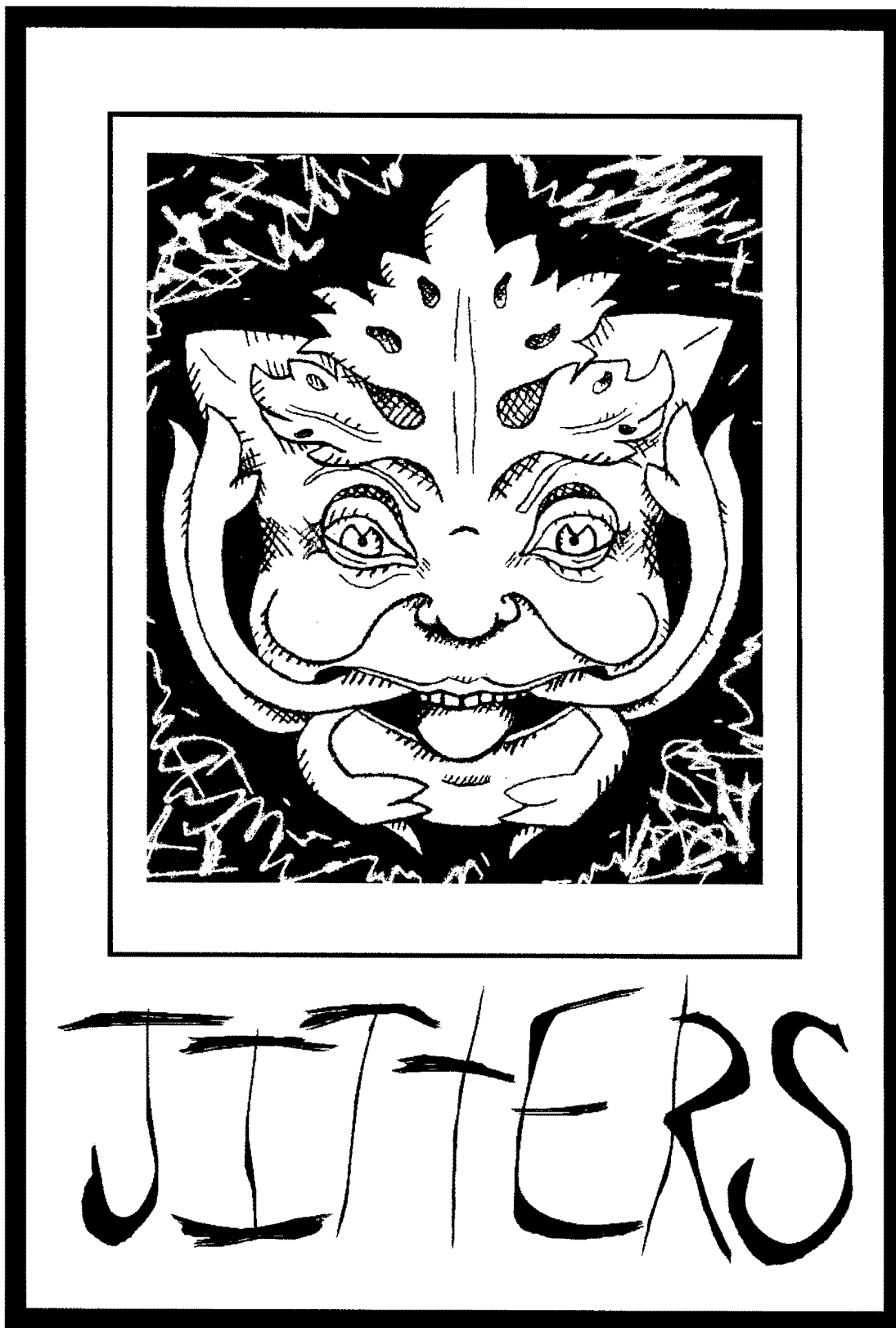
hard-bent on life.

They make love as a prank on death.
They make love because someday
they must die .
They spawn friction
in the face of entropy:
the morbid swelter of
slicken clay on kneecaps,
bones 'n debauch'ry,
engenders there the impregnable sense
of promised immortality;
!
but yo boy pulls out.
Flings his half of the
God-child
upon the stones...

Bosheth.

David Snubbert

JITTERS



Justin Runde

The Ballad of Johnny Maclean

There's an old dirt road near Tucson
With tracks cut deep in the land,
Where carriages ran and highwaymen planned
To rob from Johnny Maclean.

Maclean was from old San Domingo
Where he'd found a fortune to bear
He flaunted his wealth with good irish stout
And he planned on not working all year

But thieves, liars, and gamblers
Heard of Maclean and his wealth
So they planned a stop on the north carriage route
To relieve old John from himself

But Johnny had them all beaten
He knew of their plan in advance
From a friend who had passed by the thieves bandit camp
And warned Maclean in a laugh.

The Bandits never saw it comin'
He swept through their camp in the night
He slit all of their throats and took all that they wrought
From their years out on the lamb.

So if you're on an old road near Tucson,
And you're looking for blood on your hands
Just turn away, cause you can't run away
from the trickster named Johnny Maclean.

Kaitlin Jacobson

she used to be a poet

little girl
born a poet
lived in daydreams
riding bicycle horses
with wheels as legs
fighting tree monsters
with sticks for swords
embracing her prince charming
with the lips of a pillow
writing stories sparked with
creative illustrations
generated by her young
naive mind

little girl
born a poet
losing her words
as she grows

creative illustrations
became frightening realizations

the seat of the bicycle
became too small
as her bottom grew big
making her
desirable for princes
other than her pillow
the princes grew tall
and became the monsters
the trees used to be

little girl
born a poet
shredded her poetry
and forgot it
existed

Charlie Roiland

cat



Cassidy Wiltjer

Patchwork Bag



Kath Neubauer
Claremont #3

I'm laughing into the pillow
When you pull down
The collar of my turtleneck
To press kisses down my throat
Because you tried earlier
And I gave you shit for it

You love the sound of me laughing
Told me that you like it even more
When I'm giggling against
Your mouth because I think
My own jokes are too funny

I don't need my ego stroked
As much as I need you to
Comb through my hair with
Your cautious fingers, finding
The places where the dye didn't take

But I like when you call me funny
And laugh loud and unabashed
At my mean, little jokes and
Draw me in so I can feel your
Whole body shake with the feeling of it

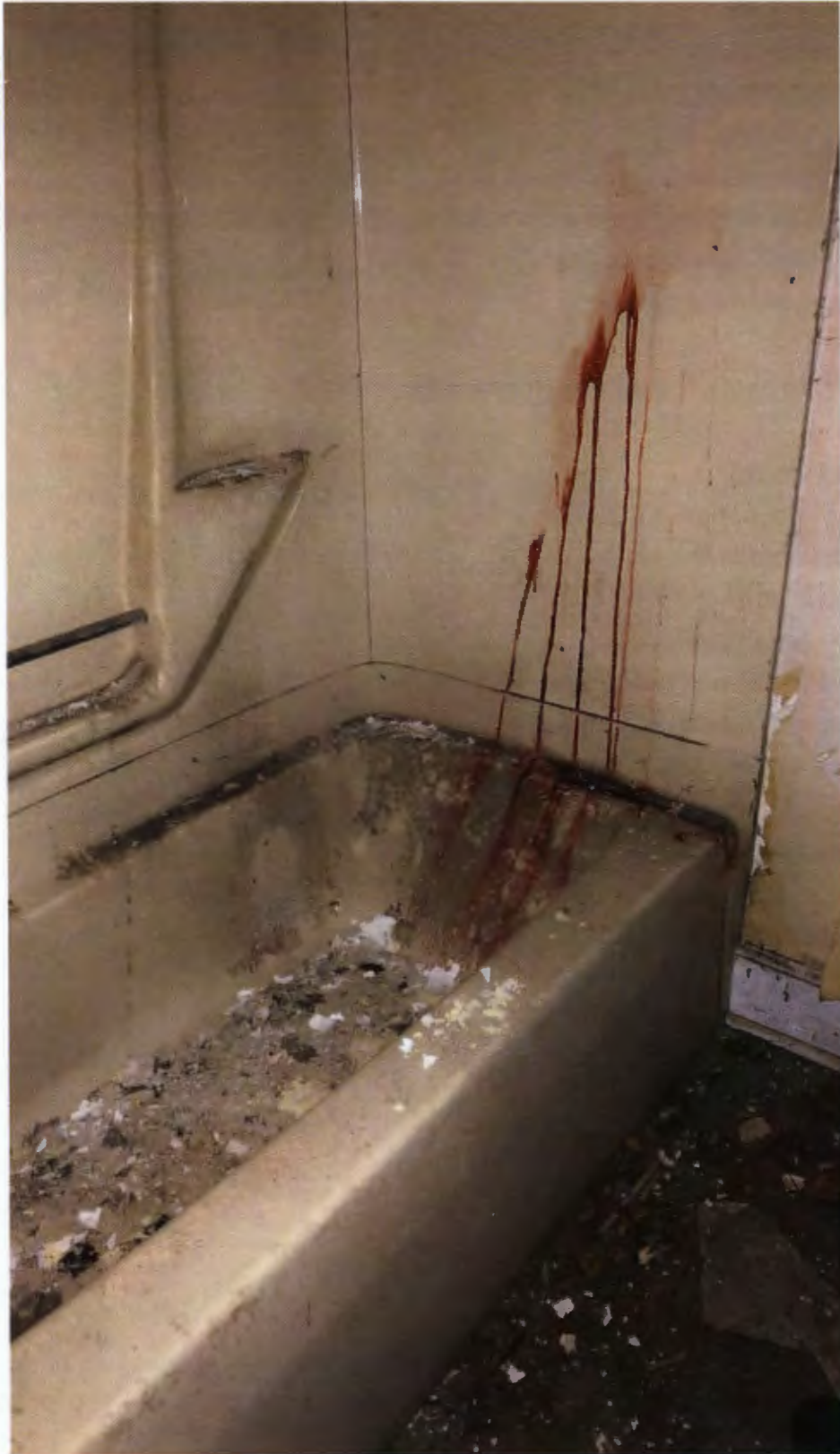
Aubrey Lathrop

Blooms at Dusk



Sarah Luepkes

Christmas Eve in an Abandoned House



Lauren Clarke

White Woman Tears

Each drop streaking
down your face
your hurt feelings
stain your cheeks pink
You are too afraid
that I'm poised to attack
You can see the bloodstains
on my hands, my last victim
just another burnt bridge

Who lit the match? And who fanned the flames?

You can see my
barbaric ways, harsh words
pushing against the grain
because I am the villain
and you are the hero
a knight in shining white armor
weapon ready, tissues prepared
to preserve your status quo

Is your world really this black and white?

I do not need to be reminded
that my fate has always been
in your hands, in your ancestors
the majority always wins
you never stopped to ask
if the blood on my hands was mine

It is. Why are you attacking me?

My words are drowning
only the nice ones will keep me afloat
I don't want to keep fighting
I just want to be safe
I just want to be treated equally

What have I ever done to you? Why do I have to keep fighting to exist?

Cassidy Wiltjer

cars, gardens, rivers

I

please slow down
your pace is much too much for me
i can't figure out how to tell you
you hit the brakes on action
but slammed into the gas with your words
and my neck can only handle so much whiplash

II

my stomach can't take this emptiness much longer
you see,
i thought i liked these butterflies
thought they were a sign of life
but i didn't realize that the whole time
they were eating my insides and making me starve

III

i am terrified of hurting you
your kind words waterfall
cascading into my empty spaces
filling me up like an ocean
but my oh my
i can't keep drowning like this

Jack Beemsterboer
reckless abandon



Carly Davis

Dovetailed

Here we have our venerated dead
And what are we going to do with them?
Our social bandits and faith healers
Who come to us in troubled times on
Flower petal paths, feet that never touch
The ground, but we will wash them nonetheless

We cannot bury our own bodies but I will die trying
To shovel grave dirt like my mother tucking me into
A warm bed, and as a child I would push
The drying sand over my older brother with
Freckled skin and sun-bleached hair, laughing
Until sand broke from his chest and fell in his mouth

Here is the haunted thing, my knotted
Hands clasped in prayer, willing
These saintly fingerbones which
Tore through roots and leaves
To tangle themselves into any holy shape
Clutching something warm and light
Between them like a baby bird
In this little tabernacle

Blake Traylor
Diving Song

A letter-opener's delicacy is lost on me.
I'll gladly take a fingernail to the side,
A polished tooth to the crease that keeps
The correspondence secret, the skin
That makes the whisper sweet. Lull me

To sleep in your costumed palm, dig me
Into the furrow that fits me best—the heart
Line never resonated, never kept its shape,
So lay me down in the rut of Solomon's Ring.
We have always been magicians, pretenders,

Footprints speared on the wrong prong
Of the fork. We have always been drifting,
Submarine, along the world we could
Never visit—eeling through a dream sealed
By the river's laminate curve, bending forever

Toward the asymptote. All we can ever do
Is learn to toe the drowning ballet, learn
To work the body into an elegant utensil.
All we can want is to eat with our hands,
To sit on the floor we'll never reach.

awards

Pat Bereskin & Brad Bisbey

Art Awards

Pat Bradley Bereskin is a native of Bettendorf, Iowa. She acknowledges her sight and artistic ability as gifts from God. The direction and encouragement that she received from the art teachers in the Bettendorf public school created a life long dream to share her gift. In 1977, after graduating from the University of Northern Iowa, she entered the teaching profession and has taught art to children in grades Pre-k through adult. For 15 years she and her family lived in Hinsdale, Illinois, where she studied with Caroline Catalano and Nina Weiss. In addition to creating and showing her own artwork in Chicago and the Midwest, she has been teaching art for 28 years. She has worked with community school districts, bringing contemporary artists and art to inspire students. She serves as an educator for the special needs community artists. Besides spending the summer teaching, Pat has been studying in Italy each summer for the past 17 years.

Three years ago she moved her first gallery from Davenport to an 8,000 sq. ft. building in downtown Bettendorf. It hosts a gallery, an art academy, STEAM lab and studio spaces, which allow guests to view regional artworks and the artist at work in person. Along with the 35 stable gallery artists, she represents a featured Midwestern artist, or two, who are exhibited each month.

Brad Bisbey began drawing and painting at the age of 9 and decided early on to pursue a career in fine art, particularly painting. He graduated from St. Ambrose University with a B.A. Degree in Art. Brad also studied with renowned portrait painter Daniel Greene in Chicago. An oil painter for many years, Brad developed an allergy to oil paint and solvents and had to find another medium in which to work. Acrylic paint was a possible solution. After getting used to the acrylic, Brad wouldn't return to oil paint, even if he could. Brad lives in Moline, Illinois in the same house in which he grew up. He exhibits, teaches, and works with Bereskin Gallery. He also maintains a website at bradbisbey.com.

For me, painting is a personal journey, a kind of visual journal of life around me. Anyone and anything is a potential subject, so I try to stay awake to everything around me. Whatever the subject, I want first to be competent with the process and the materials, but I am equally concerned with communicating how I feel about what is before me. I am always looking for that balance between reason and emotion in my work. I must first have an emotional connection with the subject because I know that if a subject touches me, it may touch another person as well. In the final analysis, my painting is both a search and a means of communication.

First Place:

Carly Davis
Something Borrowed

“Exquisite use of ink in this illustration – masterfully done. The delicate management of darks and lights allow for an emphasis of the title. Not only for the craftsmanship, but the artist has created a timely piece that speaks volumes about our current times.”

Second Place:

Lainey Terfruchte
The Golden Apple

“We wondered if this was inspired by Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations. It looks like an Alice in Wonderland illustration. Very illustrative in its depiction of the subject. Great use of images in space. The title contains color, yet the illustration is black and white, yet very commanding.”

Third Place:

Jack Beemsterboer
eden

“The symmetry and composition led to support of the title. The warm and cool colors (and lack of bright colors) gave a harmony to a cold subject matter. Good eye and imaginative correlation between the “tree of life”. Wonderful job.”

Honorable Mention:

Charlie Roiland
spider

“Well done, simple and clean pen and ink with its use of the space within the composition. The delicate and clean edges are expressed and give weight to the subject. Skillfully executed highlights and shadows.”

James Pollock

Poetry Awards

*James Pollock is the author of *Sailing to Babylon* (Able Muse Press, 2012), a finalist for the Griffin Poetry Prize and the Governor General's Award in Poetry, and winner of an Outstanding Achievement Award in Poetry from the Wisconsin Library Association; and *You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada* (Porcupine's Quill, 2012), a finalist for the ForeWord Reviews Book of the Year Award for a collection of essays. He is also editor of *The Essential Daryl Hine* (Porcupine's Quill), which made *The Partisan's* list of the best books of 2015. A new book of his poems, *Durable Goods*, is forthcoming from Véhicule Press/Signal Editions in 2022. His poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *The Walrus*, and many other journals. They have won the Manchester Poetry Prize, the Magma Editors' Prize, and the Guy Owen Prize from *Southern Poetry Review*, and have been reprinted in anthologies in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., including *The Next Wave: An Anthology of 21st Century Canadian Poetry*. His critical essays and reviews have appeared in *Contemporary Poetry Review*, *Canadian Notes & Queries*, *Literary Review of Canada*, and elsewhere. He grew up in southern Ontario, Canada, earned a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston, and is now Professor of English at Loras College. He lives with his wife and son in Madison, Wisconsin.*

First Place:

Sarah Luepkes
“force-fed”

“I love the way this poem takes the elegiac and funerary convention of a catalogue of flowers and turns it into a surreal image—or short animated film—in which the body becomes a garden, all in the emotionally intense context of force-feeding and imagined death, so that the “handiwork” of art triumphs over domination. Rhetorically, the poem makes effective use of conceit, congeries, and the imperative mood. Sonically, it deploys consonance, assonance, and alliteration deftly. And the structural volta at the end sticks the landing.”

Second Place:

Lainey Terfruchte
“Dandelion Seeds”

“I admire the superb and consistent clarity of the images in this poem, and the arresting tropes: the sunflowers that “tower like golden guards,” the hair that “hangs in a jagged curtain,” the “thick syrup/ that tastes like nails.” I’m also drawn to the dreamlike imagery of the crows stealing buttons from a clothesline, and of waking up in a pile of feathers. The poem feels assured in its lineation, too, occasionally swerving out of free verse into iambic pentameter and then back out again.”

Third Place:

Carly Davis
“Punch Drunk”

“A wonderfully joyful poem, with a well-developed conceit (the mario-nettes), excellent dialogue, and rhythmically effective deployment of rhetorical schemes like epizeuxis (“happy, happy, happy”), tricolon, (“spit, blood, beer”), and chiasmus (“I’ve got you, man/Man, I’ve got you”). I also catch a lovely allusion here to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “More happy love! more happy, happy love!””

Tyler Barton

Prose Awards

*X.H. Collins is the author of the novel *Flowing Water, Falling Flowers* (MWC Press, 2020). Her flash fiction and short stories have appeared in the *River Cities' Reader*, *Karawane* magazine, the *MOON* magazine and its anthology *Out of this World: The Best Short Stories from The MOON*. Her essays have appeared in *PastTen*, the *Overachiever Magazine*, and *These Interesting Times* anthology. To learn more about the author and her work, visit her website at <https://xhcollins.com/>, and follow her on Twitter @xixuan_c, Facebook @xhcollins, and Instagram xixuan_c.*

First Place:

Lexi Golab

“The Color Green”

“A perfect combination of beautiful prose and captive storytelling, “The Color Green” resonates with me deeply about sudden, unexpected loss and the impossibility of moving on because everything surrounding you will remind you of what you can never have again.”

Second Place:

Hallie Weis

“the reckoning”

“Lyrical and clear-eyed, “the reckoning” captures a small but not insignificant moment of the day, deep desperation with a surprising emotional punch.”

Third Place:

Blake Traylor
“Misgivings”

“Honest and non-sentimental, “Misgivings” is not just about the incompatible giving of holiday gifts, but the mismatched ideas about love, romance, and the trying task of staying true to yourself when everything else is telling you otherwise.”

Honorable Mention:

Carly Davis
“Elegy at 30th and 18th”

“Like a black-and-white Polaroid photo composed with deadpan humor, “Elegy at 30th and 18th” is a snapshot of something so ordinary yet so surreal, and it makes me pause when I come to a street corner just like it.”

Jack Harris and Rene (Powers) Jones

The Barbara Anderson Miller Award

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

Megan Hoppe is a poet and sewist. Her work has appeared in previous editions of SAGA, as well as a Wingless Dreamer anthology and is forthcoming with Dreamers Creative Writing. She was a 2021 graduate of Augustana College, where she held the position of editor-in-chief of SAGA during her senior year. Megan has spent the past school year as an English teacher in France and will soon be returning stateside to begin her next adventure. When not writing, she can be found sewing somewhat-historically-accurate clothes and fretting about both the future and the past.

Judges' Choice:

Kath Neubauer

“Suite: Blue Heavens”

“Suite: Blue Heavens” is a wonderfully unique poem written in four movements. Each section is clear and equally strong with a slightly different tone, but there is an overarching sense of acceptance throughout the piece. While it is not a traditional love poem, there is tangible reverence between the speaker and the subject. The reader observes the speaker’s shift between “it’s going to hurt anyways” and “...struggling to say the right/ and least-painful thing”.

The formatting mirrors the apparent calmness in each section. The short lines and few punctuation marks create a steady flowing that compliments its almost-serene vignettes. After moving through each physical and emotional space, the poem returns to the same image with which it opens: the speaker in a car, with the wind and ghosts of kisses.

contributors

Moreen Akomea-Ampah is a sophomore majoring in Chemistry with a possible minor in Creative Writing. She loves to either sleep or binge on Nigerian movies. She is into dark poetry, which she uses to tell the ills of society, and hopes that the voiceless and oppressed will get the opportunity to speak up for themselves one day.

Jack Beemsterboer is an Art Board Editor and is a junior majoring in History. Jack is an avid film photographer and enjoys all forms of visual art. In his free time, you can probably find Jack at a local thrift store or working as a barista. You can see more of his work on Instagram @mediocrefilmphotography.

Zach Blair is a first-year majoring in English and Creative Writing. His creative work has never been published before, so being in this year's SAGA magazine is like a dream come true. He hopes to keep this up until his stories can be told on the big screen one day. Remember the name!

Jack Brandt is a sophomore. His favorite season is summer, and when he went to that place with the sunflowers, there were SO many bees.

Lauren Clarke is a junior who is way too busy, but still refuses to say no. She's currently majoring in MJMC and Creative Writing with a minor in Theatre, yet she still has no idea of her future career goals, but that's okay. She spends more time than she'd like to admit writing poems in her head, and she's so honored that there are other people that seem to enjoy her work.

Carly Davis is a junior majoring in English, Creative Writing, and Studio Art. She writes regional fiction and nonfiction, pretty-alright poetry, and gets her hands dirty to make art once in a while.

Lauren Dickinson is a Creative Writing major, a Psychology major, and has an Entertainment and Media minor! She is from Southern California and currently lives in Texas. She is also on the first ever women's water polo team at Augustana!

Christopher Ferman is a junior MJMC major, Graphic Design minor, and avocado toast enjoyer. He enjoys hugging dogs, petting cats, watching horror movies, and getting out of creative blocks (Difficult).

Lexi Golab is a first-year studying WGSS, Creative Writing, and Psychology at Augustana College.

Kaitlin Jacobson is a junior majoring in Creative Writing and Multimedia Journalism Mass Communications with a minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. When she isn't writing poems, Kaitlin enjoys writing songs and has a few published on several platforms. She is so excited for people to read her first published poem and hopes that they enjoy it.

Lindsey Johnson is very grateful to be a part of SAGA for her final year here at Augustana. This is her first time actually submitting work to SAGA and she's honored to have been chosen. She does art for herself and for other people. She hopes that her pieces can spark joy in those who see them!

Aubrey Lathrop is a junior majoring in MJMC and Communication Studies with a minor in geology. She enjoys antiquated hobbies such as candlelit embroidery and thinking about the meaning of flowers, since she has enjoyed working in a greenhouse for many years.

Alison Lawrence is a Pre-Med/Biology and WGSS major from Roscoe, IL. She works as an EMT in Milan, IL, and she never stops talking about it. Ever. In fact, most of her work centers around her experiences on 911 calls and long hospital transports, meeting patients and gaining perspectives on life and death. She hopes to become a doctor one day, and by god, she's gonna write poetry about it.

Sarah Luepkes is one of SAGA's editors-in-chief and a junior triple majoring in Creative Writing, Environmental Studies, and Psychology, with a potential minor in Sociology and Anthropology. When not working herself to death in the Brew and C-Store, she can be found writing a lot of (mediocre) poetry.

Sloane McIlrath is majoring in creative writing and multimedia journalism mass communication! She has loved writing since she was little. Sloane remembers writing stories on every piece of paper she could find. She's so happy she got the opportunity to share her work.

Kath Neubauer is a part-time poet at Augustana College.

Charlie Roiland is a first-year Art Education major who wants to study way more subjects than he has time for. In his free time, Charlie enjoys procrastinating until the fear of failure takes over. All of Charlie's poetry writing takes place after midnight. Nothing good happens after midnight.

Justin Runde is a student majoring in Creative Writing at Augustana College.

Paige Sheppard is graduating this year with a degree in English Education, allowing her to become one step closer to fulfilling her life long dream of becoming Miss Honey. She enjoys drawing in her free time, and her goal as an artist is to fill the walls of people's homes who think dots are equally as cool as she does.

David Snubbert creates things.

Aykeem Spivey is a sophomore studying Art and Psychology at Augustana College.

Maggie Talbott is a junior majoring in English and Creative Writing with a minor in Japanese. They enjoy writing poetry and fiction. This is their first piece in SAGA.

Lainey Terfruchte is a writer, artist, and musician majoring in English and Creative Writing. She can often be found inside her head or playing moody pieces on the harp. She hopes to one day escape the Midwest, but for now appreciates being close to her dogs.

Blake Traylor is doing his best not to give himself rope burn as he ravel's his way through the interknotted workload of a triple major (English, Spanish, Creative Writing) plus minor (Linguistics). He works as a peer tutor and writing fellow at the Reading/Writing Center (CSL 4th Floor)--which offers help with drafting and revising creative writing, by the way. He's still pleasantly surprised to serve as one of SAGA's editors-in-chief this year.

Hallie Weis is a Prose Board Editor and a sophomore majoring in English and Creative Writing. She loves writing and edits her friends' creative works and essays. She also loves art and watching Netflix.

Cassidy Wiltjer is a junior majoring in Vocal Music Education. She is a lover of all things creative, but especially poetry and crochet. Her crochet pieces can be seen on Instagram @sunlighttrinkets, as well as purchased online at sunlighttrinkets.com. She hopes to publish a chapbook of her poetry sometime in the near future.

Madeline Young is a potter & poet from Davenport, Iowa. She dabbles in anthropology and likes to dance in any and all circumstances. Her work has previously appeared in the Atlas & SAGA. She can be found on Instagram @madlouyou for pottery and poetry updates.