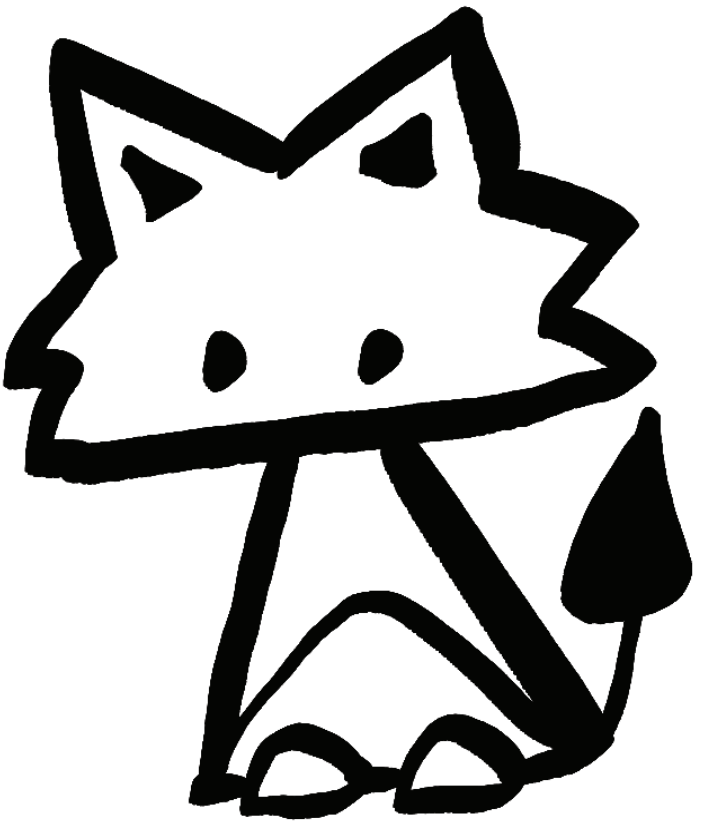


OUR STAFF

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Morgan Noe
C.J. Jones
Luke Ruberg
Carmen Ponzio
Catherine Vincent

COPY EDITORS

Devin Moore
Abigail Mize
Abby Sears
Ava Knudson
Hanah Whisenant

VISUAL EDITORS

Brynna Lindsey
Audrey Stepp

With special thanks to those whose generosity and hard work have made the second edition of The Deposit a possibility, including, but not limited to: our faculty advisor and official club mom Julia Johnson, the Martin Luther King Center and UK's Student Government Association for generously providing the funds to make this into a real book, as well as the countless student writers and artists in Graphite who have given their time, passion and labor to this project.

About Us

The Deposit is a bi-annual literary magazine that was founded by Graphite—UK's only creative writing association—in 2024. It focuses on giving a home to the best writing coming out of the University of Kentucky's literary community in the form of a high-quality physical book. The first issue was released in May of 2025 and was a collaborative effort with another UK student organization—Zine Club. This is the second issue, which was made entirely by Graphite. For more information on Graphite and *The Deposit*, you can visit www.ukygraphite.org.

Content Warning

Some of the pieces in this semester's edition of *The Deposit* contain depictions of topics that may be sensitive for some readers, including but not limited to: racism, sexism, eating disorders, and depression. Individual pieces are not marked with the warnings that may apply to them, so we encourage readers to read at their own discretion. Any opinions expressed in published pieces do not reflect the values of Graphite's officers or of the organization as a whole.

CONTENTS

GIRLHOOD IS A BEACH
Morgan Noe.....1
BOY SUN
Kaelin Reynolds.....3
GRIEVING LIKE SOAP
Luke Ruberg.....5
CHINA DOLL
Charlotte Lawson.....7
EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE
Isabelle Morgan.....17
MARBLES
Isabelle Morgan.....18
KAMIKAZE
Catherine Vincent.....19
THE FROG IN BOILING WATER
Kevonte Kilby.....21
AN AFTERLIFE RONDEL
Jackie Suggitt.....22
36.2950° N, 83.9082° W
Bella Phelps.....23
1,000
Jon Blatnik.....24
HOW TO UNBREAK
Morgan Noe.....25
ONE PAPER BOAT
Elena Wright.....27

HONESTLY?
Luke Ruberg.....28
THE MIDDLE
Faith Yi Park.....31
A TRUE LOVE STORY
Trinity Bohannon.....32
I HAVE A LONG DAY
Hunter Coady.....34
THE CONCEPT OF WATERMELON
Devin Moore.....35
RETURNS
Julian Bagley.....47
SOMATIC
Luke Ruberg.....49
UNKNOWN
Nemo Lamar.....51
WITH MANY SHADOWS
Cassie Speltz.....52
GREASE POPPING IN HARLEM
R.M. Hayden.....53
BEYOND FLESH AND BONES
Keaton Campbell.....54
THE SAINT PRAETORIAN
Kaelin Reynolds.....56
EGO
Luke Ruberg.....58
WILT: AN EBONY STATUE; A FIXTURE IN TIME
R.M. Hayden.....60
I'VE NEVER KNOWN SUCH PEACE
Jack Emerson.....61
TRANCE
Nemo Miller.....63

VERANO 2025
Nicolás Castillo Rodríguez.....67
SUMMER 2025
Nicolás Castillo Rodríguez.....69
OUR SECOND DATE
Elena Wright.....71
THE LULLABY DOCTRINE
G.E. Forest.....72
WHY DO WE PRETEND?
Christian Floyd.....74
AN ESSAY ON ART AND UK
H.G. Page.....75
AN ANTHOLOGY OF POLITE WAYS TO TALK TO FAT GIRLS
Carmen Ponzio.....78
LULLABY FOR HANSEL AND GRETEL
Lou Hurst.....80
AT THE BEACH
H.G. Page.....81
NOBODY
Morgan Noe.....82
I IMAGINE MYSELF AS REGAN MACNEIL
Hunter Coady.....84
TOFU
Ava Knudson.....85
SHAME
Abby Sears.....93
THE GOO
little roger.....94
A COLOR STUDY
Cassie Speltz.....95

FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF AMERICANS
Beaux Hardin.....96
A POEM FOR AUTUMN AND REST
Joslyn Baumgardner.....98
BLACK STAR ABOVE ASPHODEL
Andrew Cizek.....99
ACROSS THE DIVIDE
Peter Krause.....101
ENDLESS HORIZONS
G.E. Forest.....113
FRIEND YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IN A WHILE BINGO CARD
C.J. Jones.....114
GROWING UP ON GRAVY
Sidney Acree.....115
ROADKILL QUEERS
Mercy Rust.....118
WHAT IS THE SPANISH WORD FOR TOBACCO?
Catherine Vincent.....119
BE SAFE
Trinity Bohannon.....120
HAPPY BIRTHDAY
Hunter Coady.....121
ROOTS
Margaret Sansoucy.....122
THE RIDE
Paige Workman.....124
EMPRESS OF NIGHT'S LULLABY
Andrew Cizek.....133
ICE CRYSTALS IN JULY
R.M. Hayden.....134

THE CLIMB
Reagan Garvey.....135
LAMENT TO THE SKIES
Kara Erdman.....144
SO THEY MAY HEAR YOU IN THE CITY
Jackie and the Cicadas.....145
SOUTH OF THE WILLAMETTE
Abigail Mize.....146
LAMENT
Cassie Speltz.....147
VESPER TO AUTUMN
Jackie Suggitt.....148
MEETING THE NEIGHBOR
Emely Batista.....149
SQUINTING SINGLE
Isabelle Morgan.....157
XYLOCOPA
Chase Myers.....158
CROSSWORD
Carmen Ponzio.....159

tunes!

Luke's Picks

- I See Myself - Geese
- Howl - Eli Waltz
- TPWHITB - Black Country, New Road



CJ's Picks

- Say Yes! to M!ch!gan! - Sufjan Stevens
- LTATDOF - Lil Ugly Mane
- 100 - Dean Blunt



Carmen's Picks

- When You're Gone - The Cranberries
- I Want Someone Badly - Jeff Buckley
- You Know I Do - Westhead



Catherine's Picks

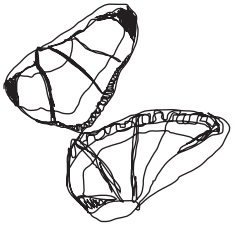
- Novacane - Frank Ocean
- These Days - Nico
- Sleeping In - The Radio Dept.



Morgan's Picks

- White Winter Hymnal - Fleet Foxes
- Clay Pigeons - Michael Cera
- Motel 6 - River Whyless



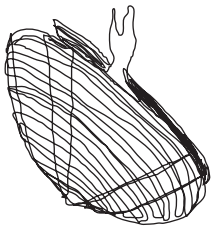


Girlhood is a Beach

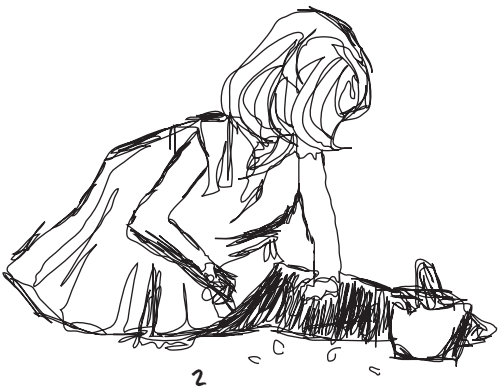
Morgan Noe

girlhood is
the little shells on the shoreline
i used to collect.
tiny treasures in every color,
nestled into the salty wet sand,
shimmering like sequins in the sunshine
under my sandy, sunburnt feet.
concealing little slugs who,
if left alone long enough,
would show their little mushy faces
searching around for a sandbar to cling to,
finding only bright blue bucket walls
as far as their beady little eyes could see.
you had to dig a little to find them,
like rummaging through a treasure trove
of splintered seashell shards and sand fleas,
searching for something shinier than gold.
last year i couldn't find any.
i dug rapidly-deteriorating holes in the sand,
letting it nestle under my long, red nails,
soaking the bottoms of my shorts with saltwater,
but the beach was no longer my treasure chest.
the sand was just sand.

girlhood is
the girl i collected shells with



one summer when i was still scared
to swim.
i lingered where the tide barely
tickled the tips of my toes
and watched her dig.
she wore a shiny silver swimsuit
under a soft white dress
with long, sheer sleeves rolled up to her shoulders
but still soaked through,
that's how deep she was digging.
we sat on a sun-bleached towel
and ate pink watermelon popsicles with our teeth,
just to shiver and scream from the feeling.
she said we would split the shells even
but i could tell
she gave me a little bit more.
i knew her for one wonderful day.
she and her family went home the next.
i never saw her again,
but i have dreams
about holding her hand.





Boy Sun

Kaelin Reynolds

Hallelujah Junction. Ist Movement.
Sixteenth notes reverberate in a crowded hall of statues.
Dance towards one in a corner. Its plaque—

Apollo. The Sun God.
Costa Meridionale Dell'Italia.

He's missing a nose and an arm.

Dueling pianos soften to a quiet hum.
Rushing stream of water supplants all previous white noise.
Chirping midges follow. He smells of apricot juice.

His nose is back.

White plaster walls dissolve into tall grass and Italian brick.
Golden-hour sky kindles his sea-salt soaked hair.
A limp-wrist raps a spoon against the shell of a soft boiled egg.

His arm is back.

The light god still fixed on his platform—
relaxed, smooth, inviting admiration.

Boy Sun

Canvassed veins on his stone hand
flow up the new flesh of a sturdy forearm.

Impossibly curved. And so nonchalant.

Still, but his eyes betray a flare—
a wink of youthful fervor.
Dancing around a villa,
yellow yolk coating the rims of his lips.

As if he's daring you to desire him.

Apollo stands still,
but when moving, I name him—

Elio. The Sun itself.





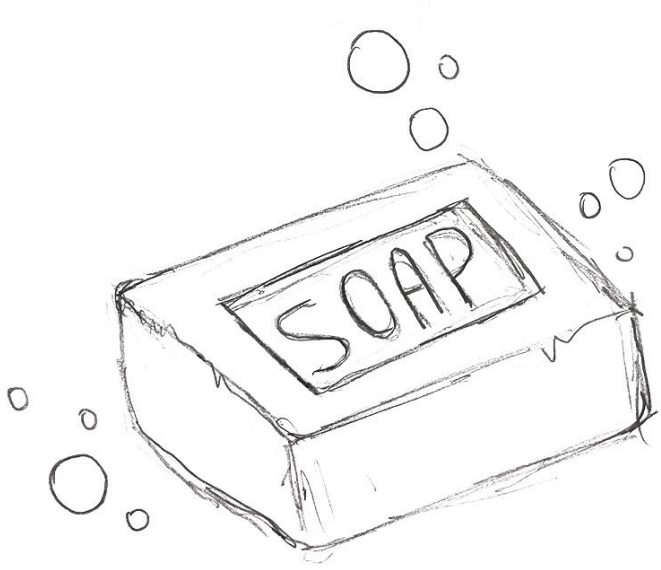
Grieving Like SOAP

Luke Ruberg

I've planned out the interaction a dozen ways and all of them seem mutually impossible.
I keep flicking at my emotions hoping the engine is gonna sputter up and I'll write some meaningful shit, but I can't spell and my syntax is ass and I'm sitting in a pile of familiar rot on an unfamiliar night with my window unit pushing out cold air and the fan above swirling it all together in a big soup bowl vortex. My art pieces flap like half mast flags mourning my rumination.

Maybe this will be a shitty entry with no substance, the same raw and dazzling nothingness you've heard a hundred times about grief and breakups and moving on and mundane beauty and the buzzing at the fingertips when I think about getting to see her again. Maybe she will say hey and we'll get to talking and I can throw all my bitter emotions into the grave I've been digging and cover it up while flirting with the girl I already flirted with and spent 6 months under the sun with. And my writing can be as concise and efficient as the English majors, and I get that I'm stupid in a few unremarkable ways. My pain is their pain and I just don't want to admit that. This sad art is like a chain link I heat and hammer into a necklace and a bracelet and a septum piercing and an eyebrow piercing and a refined edge that I've

decided to place myself upon. Dancing, learning to dance on the edge and balance. Grief, pain, joy and love all have a place here in this mighty body of mine. It will be ok Luke. You miss who you were allowed to be...
and you also miss her shoes,
and her sweaters,
and the clothes she wore,
and her purple covers,
and her wall of posters,
and





China Doll

Charlotte Lawson

It was right after the church service, when everyone stood up and shook hands with each other, that she first noticed the change.

"Why, she's adorable! Just look at her skin, so smooth, like China!"

She recognized the words, it was a common sentiment expressed to her from the people in Ekron, Kentucky, but it took a little too long for her to understand what they meant. The moment for a polite smile and response had passed, however. Mrs. Hodgewell, who had been shaking her hand, gave her a small smile that didn't reach her eyes, and started talking to Moriko's husband Chris instead. Moriko normally tried to follow the conversation, trying to pick up as much English as she could, but this time she found herself distracted. The quiet noise that she heard as her hand scraped against Mrs. Hodgewell's wedding band was playing in her mind. It was not dissimilar to a fork churning against a porcelain bowl.

The thought was soon put aside, however, as she had to focus on keeping a smile that seemed to be forever on her face. She smiled as her husband conversed with the town; it was her job to be pleasant to the few people who came to greet them.



The walk home to their small farm always felt long, but that was because Moriko loved to drag her heels a little as they went. There was always something to look at hidden in the grass or among the trees. When she was back in Tokyo working as a receptionist for an office that dealt with the U.S. military, she liked to occupy her down time at the desk by reading entomology books. On her fourth date with Chris, he bought her a gold chain necklace with a delicate ladybug charm; he said it was because he felt like the luckiest man alive, and it was at that moment that she knew she wanted to marry him. She felt special under his attention, and a princess receiving his presents. She happily left Tokyo when the occupation ended and he was sent back to his hometown. After all, hers—Hiroshima—had been destroyed in the war. There was nothing else really to return to. Besides, she was convinced that her life in America would be filled with the attention and luxury that Chris gave her back in Japan. Instead, she's talked at by the few people who grace her with words, and she is living on a chicken farm.

At least they have different insects here. A lot of them she had only read about in books. As they're walking home, she stops and crouches to stare at something she sees in the ditch of the road. After a moment of looking at it, she identifies it as a *Coccinellidae septempunctata*, or in other words, a ladybug. She instinctively grasps her necklace. She always likes to stop to look at these ones, to try to see if it's a *Coccinellidae* or its lookalike, the *Harmonia axyridis*, the Asian Lady Beetle. There

aren't too many of the latter, but some farmers got some from Japan and tried to release some into the wild to control the *Myzus persicae nicotianae*, the red aphids making the tobacco crops go bad. They haven't taken, but from what little she hears, it's promising. She remembers them from home; she would see them as she climbed in the trees. She would find them in her hair when she got home, and although her mother chastised her, she loved coming home covered in dirt. She wore it like a badge of honor, a layer between her and the outside world.

After a dozen or so paces, her husband Chris turns around and scolds her.

"Mary just come on over here! We ain't got all day."

*

Late in the night, Moriko pulls off her covers and walks to the kitchen. She can never sleep at this time of night. There's always a deep pressure on her chest as she lays there, an emotion she cannot feel pressing on her like dread. She makes a mug of tea—her sister, the only one in her family who talks to her anymore, sends over the good stuff in small care packages. With the steam billowing into her face, she walks outside. The sound of the crickets and the cicadas in summer always puts her at peace and drowns out any tension she has. Her backyard is devoid of eyes or anything else that could even think of her.

She looks out at the field, and from here she can see the chicken coops, which are lit by the one or two electric lights they could afford. A group of *Harmonia*

axyridis were forming in a cluster at the bottom of the stairs. Back home, they typically dwelled in the trees, but there is just something about the ones here that they just can't stand. Moriko's been finding them like this more and more. They fester on each other like a wound repairing itself. She stares at them for a while and eventually walks over to them to take a closer inspection. She reaches out to pick a few up, and that is when she feels a jolt in her chest. Her entire body seizes up, and it sends her careening down the stone stairs straight into the mass of beetles.

*

Moriko feels like she's under water, a babbling brook washing over her as she lays there. She's drowning, but it's gradual, not unlike a frog boiling in water. She can't move. She gets jolted awake from the chickens cawing at dawn, and rapidly sits up. She curses as she rises, but she somehow feels lighter than before. She must have passed out after she fell down the stairs. She feels one of the bugs behind her ear and feels nostalgic for home. Nothing is too banged up however, she feels some aches as she stands up in her knees and her hips, and scratches all over. Well, everywhere except her chest. She puts her hand on her collarbone and hears a grinding sound. She looks down with a grunt—her neck must have gotten hurt too—and sees that the tips of her fingers are white as pearls.

Moriko, panicked, goes back upstairs to the room she shares with Chris. She looks in the mirror and sees that her chest has turned from skin to porcelain, along with her fingers. She stands there in disbelief, debating whether to scream, curl up in a ball, or punch something; though her hands could probably not withstand

the latter. She holds up her hand to inspect it further and tries to pick something up out of curiosity. She can still bend them, but picking up the glass of water on the nightstand proves difficult. It shatters on the floor, and the sound resonates through her.

It's this sound that wakes Chris up.

"Mary, what... what happened?"

Flustered and panicked, Moriko can't figure out the words to explain what occurred in English, or frankly even the Japanese ones.

"Mary, you're filthy!" he says with a scowl on his face, then he demands her to go clean up both herself and the glass.

She holds in a scream and does what she's told.

*

Over the next few days, the porcelain takes over more and more of her body. It stems from her chest and fingers and fractals out, soon overtaking her stomach and forearms. The strangest thing is that no one notices. In fact, she seems to get even more compliments from people in the town.

"How adorable!"

"Wow, Chris, your wife is so quiet, how did you get her to be this polite?"

She just smiles and nods; a lot of her brain power once reserved for interpreting and replying in English has dissolved into fear towards her rapidly changing state. Soon after they offer their platitudes, they turn to her husband and start talking about how their farms are doing. She mostly tunes them out, but her ears perk up when they talk about the *Harmonia axyridis*. During one conversation with their neighbor who owns the tobacco farm next to theirs, she picks out some nasty comments

about the beetle. They swarm in their home, and they get bitten when they try to push them away. Moriko finds it strange he's so annoyed by the *Axyridis*. After all, she's seen the farm ship almost double the tobacco than last year with their help.

*

One day, as she nearly falls over from another jolt, her mother-in-law tuts over her, not unlike a naughty child, and remarks, "Ah, Mary you clumsy girl! Be careful, you don't want to get hurt! Your skin is too pretty to get any bruises."

She feels another jolt as she says that, but she's able to steady herself this time. She stews a little from the comment but holds in her anger—this was not the first time she had been infantilized by her mother-in-law. She is annoyed by the comments; she is a grown woman after all. However now she thinks they may ring true. The porcelain makes her body feel weak and fragile. She turns the inside of her wrist to face her. Her veins feel petal thin, and she is sure they would rip if something grazed over them. She feels barely tethered to this earth, the parts of her made of porcelain hollow, filled with air.

*

Within a week, Moriko is no heavier than a paperweight. Her body is almost entirely porcelain, yet somehow she can barely walk. The town loves her. She has no energy for anger, so her smile just falls into place. But once it clicks in, she can't seem to get rid of it.

The only time she gets any negative feedback about her appearance is when her hair starts clumping together and turning into ceramic. But as soon as one of the townspeople says something negative about it, it

turns into smooth, silky hair. It is different from her old hair: It never frizzes, and it's smoother than it used to be. It is not her own.

*

Moriko continues to morph, her face is finely carved into a smile, and she wants to writhe out of her skin. She can still walk, but even that takes a lot out of her. When she can, the dainty clinks of her joints fill her with a mixture of dread and loathing. Her lack of activity is noted by her husband, and one day, he comes home with a surprise.

"Mary!" he says in an uncharacteristically sing-song voice. "I have a surprise for you!"

His grin gets wider as he carries her to the car, and once she's buckled in, he goes over to the driver's side and starts the car. His smile never falters as he backs out of the driveway and onto the gravel path that takes them to the city.

"So, I noticed you were feeling blue, sweetie."

As he moves the gear selector to go forward, Moriko is shoved into the back of her seat by the force of the car.

"I got this ad in the paper, and I saw that there's a doll just like you up in Indy. I think it's called an ee-chee-mat-sue doll? I saw it and it got me thinking, gosh maybe she is just homesick!"

He smiles at her and pats her leg, there's a dull clunk from where his wedding band hits her leg. She doesn't know how he doesn't see that she is not who she used to be, that she is not real anymore. Maybe this is how he has always seen her.

*

The ride to Indianapolis takes ages. She sleeps for as long as she can, but it proves hard when she is worried about her head cracking open on the car window as she rests on it. Chris makes idle conversation, and doesn't falter when all he gets in response is her plastered smile. She's kept company by a *Harmonia axyridis* that crawled into the car before they left. She stares at it on the windshield and wonders if it will ever find its way back home, or if it will make a new one where it ends up.

They finally arrive at the Indianapolis Children's Museum. It is around 7 PM and about to close, so the crowds are thin. The air is stagnant and muggy from the summer heat. Chris helps her through the line, and she manages to walk a few steps along the way.

They finally make it to the exhibit after spending half an hour waddling through the museum and taking breaks by other exhibits. The banner reads "Welcome Miss Shimane!" in angled, pointy letters. The banner is dusty and neglected, and faded discoloration makes it seem as if it had been vandalized in the past. She looks at the doll at the center of the exhibit. Miss Shimane is in a glass box, one covered in grease clouds and small scratches, and her display is bordered with a gold-colored metal bamboo frame.

Chris gives her the same eerie smile he had given her in the car.

"Why look! She's the spitting image of you, Mary!"

Moriko supposes she is, since her entire body is made of the same material as her now. Otherwise, she thinks that 'Miss Shimane' looks nothing like her, for she is a child and Moriko is an adult woman.

On further inspection, however, she does notice

that her own face is carved with the same gentle smile that Miss Shimane has.

Moriko humors Chris by briefly looking around the exhibit. She feels almost nothing looking at the objects, but she pretends to feel rejuvenated. She eventually sits down at a chair next to the doll, ready to leave. Chris is still entranced by the exhibit that consists mostly of a few pieces of furniture that came along with the doll.

Chris eventually spots another man who ends up at the exhibit. They chat for a while, and apparently the topic changed to Moriko, since they both look at her. It strikes her that they're looking at her not too differently than they did the doll.

They get a little closer to her, and she becomes able to hear what they're saying.

"Wow, she's got quite a figure, so slender."

Click.

She feels herself sitting up straighter against her will.

"Her skin is so fair, I wonder if she ever goes outside."

Click.

Her body forms into the ideal they are looking for.

"She's sitting so demurely, she looks like a princess."

Click.

She finds that she can no longer move. She screams against the force keeping her down, it seems insurmountable.

"Yeah, Mary is so kind, and polite—she's my little doll."

Her blood finally boils over. She stews as she tries to struggle free, and the adrenaline allows her to finally stand. Her anger fuels her as she punches the face of who-cares, shards of broken porcelain embed themselves into his cheek and fall into his mouth. He falls to the floor, clutching his face. Moriko's hand has shattered completely, leaving the jagged stub of her wrist.

Chris looks at her with a mixture of shock, fear, and disbelief. She thinks of all the times he never listened, of all the times he and everyone else in E-fucking-kron, Kentucky never talked to her beyond a small smile and a comment about her looks, or how polite she is, or how he and everyone else never even noticed that she was turning into ceramic. A *Harmonia axyridis* lands on her arm, egging her on. She rips off her ladybug charm necklace and throws it at Chris.

Chris tries to say something to Moriko, but before he can, she jabs her broken arm through his throat.

"離婚したい"

He collapses to the floor, blood spurting out messily from his artery.

As she grins, she can feel her blood flowing again, and her body regaining a sense of weight. She can breathe again.

She grabs Miss Shimane and runs.

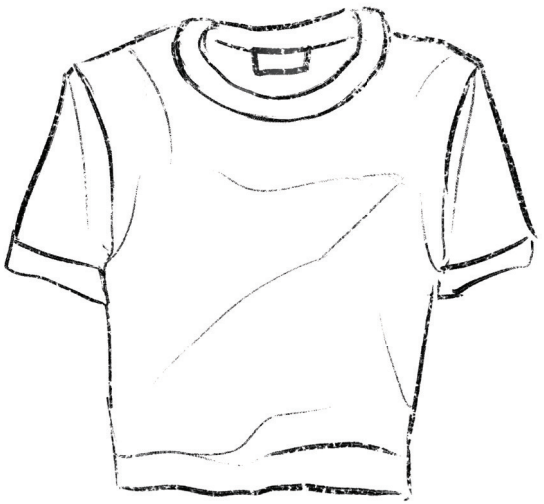




Emotional Baggage

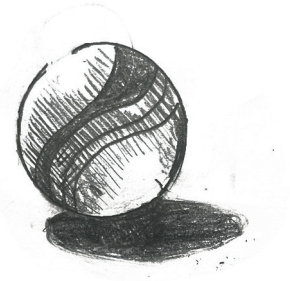
Isabelle Morgan

It's dark
Not quite black
But further than grey
Like a sweaty navy shirt
Soaked and deeper in shade
Heavy and clinging
Showing all the parts
I intentionally drape over
Scars that haven't quite faded
Curves that haven't deflated
And the swollen ball
In the center of my chest
That nobody should see undressed

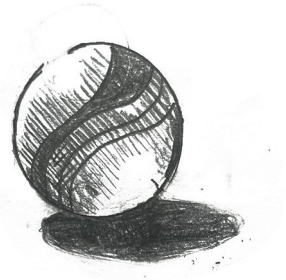


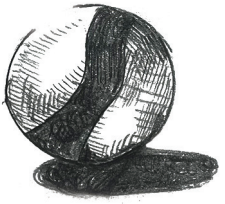
Marbles

Isabelle Morgan



It's marbles
So many little glass balls
Piling up in my throat
Grid locking my thought of train
Jamming my air of flow
Stretching my cheeks
Moving my tongue out of the way
My mouth has run out of space
Words are stuck behind the orbs
Cracking when I try to speak
Blood drooling
Red dripping off my lips
It doesn't matter what I say
I mean really
What difference does it make
A brief motion of my lips
Voice those three words without looking away
The urge has gone
The bottomless ache has finally drained
And now I have nothing to say
It's new
My whole life has been a battle
Between the least offensive
And the right way to behave
The filtering of gut through throat
But it has now muddled
I can't decipher myself from these sounds
The words I scramble to relay







Kamikaze

Catherine Vincent

The deceptively enticing gravitational pull of the porch light tugs the moths into orbit. I hear the sizzle of their singed wings as they fly full force into the fluorescents. It smells the same as my smoldering cigarette that lies heavy in my hand and I consider putting it out on my skin to remind myself I'm not dead. The moths swerve around the smoke curling into the air. I want to tell them that a little smoke won't hurt them and killing yourself for a lightbulb is absurd. The doctors told me there's tar in my lungs–and I should quit now before I kill myself–but I still cradle a cigarette between my fingers so who am I to tell the moths to stop? Sometimes when I'm driving during a storm I'll press my foot all the way down on the gas pedal and scream. I'm flying ninety as this ugly, cathartic noise spills out of me until my throat is scratched raw. I don't care that I can feel my tires starting to lose grip or that I am seconds from hydroplaning because I remember how good it feels to want to live. Then lightning splinters the sky and I pull over and start to sob because my burning tires smell like singed wings and I am as naive and reckless as the moths careening toward obliteration. They fling themselves into lightbulbs over and over because they like the bleak reassurance that they are invulnerable against everything but themselves. They mistake porch lights for the moon and pretend it is gravity reeling them

in, not their misjudgements. It is easier to say we can't help our attraction to the things that hurt us instead of admitting we like the pain they cause because it makes us believe we are indestructible. I like how my chest constricts when I inhale too much smoke and the sound of my wheels screeching against slick asphalt. I like how my body crackles like a live wire when I fling myself into lightbulbs but I'm afraid I will ignore the smell of my singed wings until I finally sear them off my back. Hurtling toward self-annihilation is the only way I can feel alive and I am scared that one day nothing will be able to wrench me out of orbit. I am scared that I will kill myself trying to reach an unattainable escape velocity.

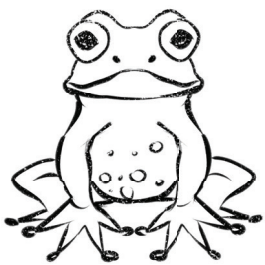




The Frog in Boiling Water

Kevonte Kilby

It's summer '16 and there is a heat only Kentucky could
know.
I am on a picnic in Noble Park and I can't tell if I'm
sinking or floating in this season's soup.
I stare at the sky and tell someone I loved that I could
look up towards this planet's beautiful face forever.
What a privilege to gaze.
It's a shame I'll have to see the first star pimple its way
into such a perfect day.
It's here she tells me about the metaphor of the frog in
boiling water.
How a forever can change so gradually that you don't
even notice the difference until it's entirely too late.
But I can not heed her warning,
not at a time like this.
I am young and too in love with this blue sherbert sky
and this summer's passion to ever think about its
moonlight,
and I swear that evening I looked upon heaven's
comforting face for years before I ever noticed a
blemish.
But in the twinkle of an eye, every summer was over
and that sky was dark,
acned with stars.
And that heat made way for so much rain,
And every night was blisteringly cold,
And I was alone,
Somehow still boiling in everything I missed.





An Afterlife Rondel

Jackie Suggitt

To live is to accept what you have lost;
To turn the knob of the unopened door.
Through love and laughter you are never poor,
And no sorrow too terrible a cost.

When even your threshold of pain is crossed,
Stay. You make the world infinitely more.
To live is to accept what you have lost;
To turn the knob of the unopened door.

Like myself, who counts the sparkles of frost,
I no longer visit his vacant floor.
Though my withered wings can no longer soar,
This art of mine I can never exhaust.
To live is to accept what you have lost;
To turn the knob of the unopened door.





36.2950° N, 83.9082° W

Bella Phelps

glittering and
glistening and
oh so very deep
falling in love
with sun lapping over
diamond peaks and
rocks so deep. we are
laughing
swimming
wanting an ever-
lasting
kind of forever sun and summer (i
was born in july for a reason).
skin-kissed and sun-kissed
“let’s swim a little longer.”
the kids like to play
a dream in my mother’s eyes—
always—
the fourth of july.
boats stopped to glitter
and glisten i think
oh so very deep.
isn’t this (what)
life (should be)?





1,000

Jon Blatnik

As I walk out unto the sea,
A million sights for my eyes to shine upon.
Lo, a thousand glittering broken sea shells lie before me.
A thousand blinding broken dreams lie at my feet.

Who may cross such a canyon of dead things?
The sea grass sways either way.
Can I keep my dream from being?
Will the paint take to the canvas?



Say adieu to the sea, look to the land.
Treasure hidden among the sand
Where a thousand broken sea shells lie.
A dream, a memory, a piece of me.

As I walk through the land,
I cannot begin to seem to understand
The repercussions of my every sin.

For what good am I to try to hold them in my hand?
A thousand broken sea shells here in this bay.
A dream, a thought, a memory,
an idea or action.
Will either change their charted course of decay?



How to Unbreak

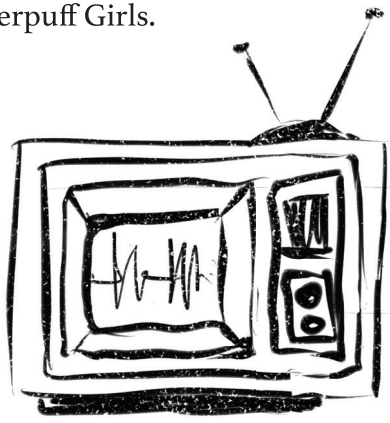
Morgan Noe

after Danni Quintos

They are.

I watch Powerpuff Girls on the couch in the living room while my parents whisper in the kitchen and try to figure out if both arms are broken. Slowly, I peel myself from the cushions, and with a weak, fractured limb I let myself out the back door. I scratch on the glass with limp fingers, useless and crusted with dry mud. In the next room, Mom thinks she's hearing the dogs scratching to get in and doesn't get up. I climb stiffly down the back porch stairs, a freshly exhumed corpse making my way to a flattened patch of grass, and I let my body dissolve into the girl-shaped bruise imprinted on the ground. I stare up at the sky for a long time, watching thick clouds retrace their steps as the ache in my chest and arms continues to swell. I don't cry. I hardly breathe. Then, motion. My head taps once, neatly, against the ground before I rise, feet first, into the air. From the moment my skull detaches itself from the grass, I can feel every little wire and circuit in my brain slide right back into place, nerves resuming their correct positions, everything settling into its right place so perfectly it's near mechanical. It feels like lights turning on. As I rise, I feel the sickness slide off me like a sheet of silk and

melt into the dirt. As I rise, I feel myself becoming a girl who will never curl up like a drenched dog around the shower drain, begging her pain to wash itself away. As I rise, I can finally feel myself moving back into the unaching, easy frame I've only been allowed to inhabit in my dreams. Then I'm back in the sky, and my small fingers wrap around the branch, calluses mending, palms un-scraping, little glitter flakes of skin un-shedding. A gust of wind like a firm hand hoists the rest of me back up onto the limb, arms and legs wrapped tightly, slothlike, around the bark. Then, only wavering a little, I stand. I reach up and grasp the branch just behind my head, once again steady and unafraid of the air and all its emptiness, letting the hand carry me as I swing back down and land, poised like a gymnast, feet crowded together on top of the lowest branch. I jump down. The grass catches me gently. I make my way back across the yard, skipping, and my legs carry me all the way over to the deck without a hint of hurt. I let myself in through the back door and curl up on the living room couch. I turn on Powerpuff Girls.



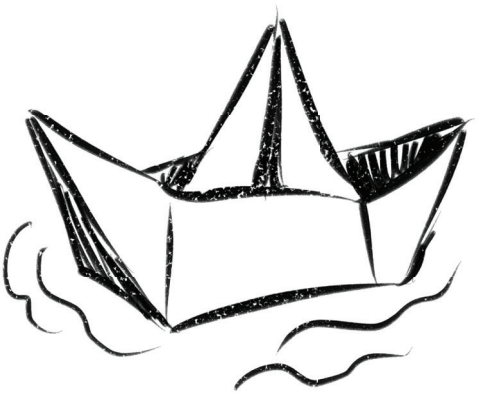
One Paper Boat

Elena Wright

In the echoes of the water, in the folds of the sea,
A paper boat drifts, and that paper boat's me.
And the twin luminaries, they govern the tide,
The sand's all I've known, and the ocean's so wide.

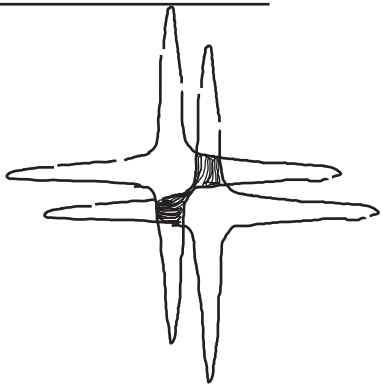
But I'll hold on to memories amidst opaque blue,
Uncertainty fails when I think about you.
You've witnessed the folds as they make selfish claim,
So you folded me tightly and toughened my frame.

Can one piece of paper impact a whole book?
As I drift on the water, will you remember to look?
Will you still call me when there's a break in the rain?
Do my tears to the ocean fall softly in vain?



Honestly?

Luke Ruberg

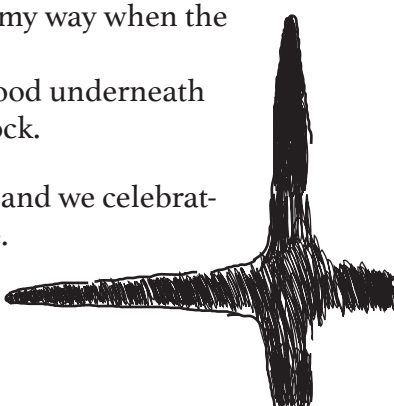


Distorted homeostasis.
Old age diction.
Antiquated ingrown creeds
beneath our eyelids,
caught mixed in our spit and blood,
below our clothes,
our body skin,
pumping through us
like a snake under tall grass.

When I was young I was given a pretty rock and told the boys down the street wanted it.
They didn't care that I had a momma. They didn't care that my poppa was off to work. They wanted it. They didn't care if my blood on it was dry or wet. They didn't care why my shoulders calloused. They wanted it, and it was up to me to learn the strength to defend it. I had to be the man of my house and defend that pretty rock. Alone and solid. Care for it, Baptize it, and polish its many faces.

I spent a life protecting it, holding it close, but I met a girl my age.
Beautiful skin and long gentle hair.
She liked to dance and would wander my way when the rain fell.
I thought she could see it, the dried blood underneath my fingertips holding on tight to my rock.

She showed me into her own tapestry, and we celebrated that we had found our own balance.



But she had tears where most didn't, and the movies that raised me never mentioned what to do with them, so I sought to mend her. Sow her tapestry back to what it once was, what it could be, but as the needle pierced the soft cloth it pierced my finger tips. Soft blots of blood balled on my flesh. She gazed down at me with wrath. The threads warped and stained. She bit down, Deep, into my strawberry heart. Took her pointer and middle and drove it down my left ventricle dividing it and taking enough blood with her to match her own.

Masculine scars
That won't wash off.
Long frame and a strawberry heart.
Wanting to bathe in the sun.

Served into sexual impotence
And a place of hungry flesh.
Wet Tongues dangling.
Eyes prolonged.
It all terrified.

O How they ate her up. The blood I gave, the time. Staying by her side in the hospital teaching her that love, her love, was special and had a place amongst all the beauties in all the heavens we conjure. The brokenness I tried to face devoured by those naked dogs taught by their masters to stay hungry. Go out and find the kind prey. The easy prey. They looked upon me and found me too light, too thin, not worth a meal. Baseless competition.

Scar tissue stays.
Spelling out its own language.
Grooving and carving the skin.

Callusing sweetness.
Parching the eyelash valleys.
Cutting the openings of love.

I met another girl. Beautiful colorful skin, Bleached hair and black hole eyes that filled themselves with the color of her world. She moved through her space with the gentle precision of a ballerina. Her hands, adorned with rings, old and new, found themselves on my chest. As she leaned her red lips full of life to my own hovered there for a second to look into my blue eyes, weak to her own light, and then pressed forward into an intimacy I had never known, never allowed, and grace was finally given. Her frame anointed me and our grief, our sins, our pain welded by our own heat. Her eyes ate up so much and the teeth of those dogs marked us both. I was terrified she would take another chunk of the heart I had already grieved.
The seasons changed, and the white gray fell on the world. My limbs, long and slender, went cold but her warmth seemed like enough to let me move.
I wish it was. I fell frozen and bit down into her as I shattered deep into the spot on her neck she told me to never touch. The blood sparked and flaked to our red mess. left us in our metallic longing and broken promises.

Patterned beast beneath our lens
Finding its own tail and biting down.
Consumption into growth
And growth into consumption.
Endless looping
That frames our own history.
Forever and ever
Burning, burned
Rising and risen.





The Middle

Faith Yi Park



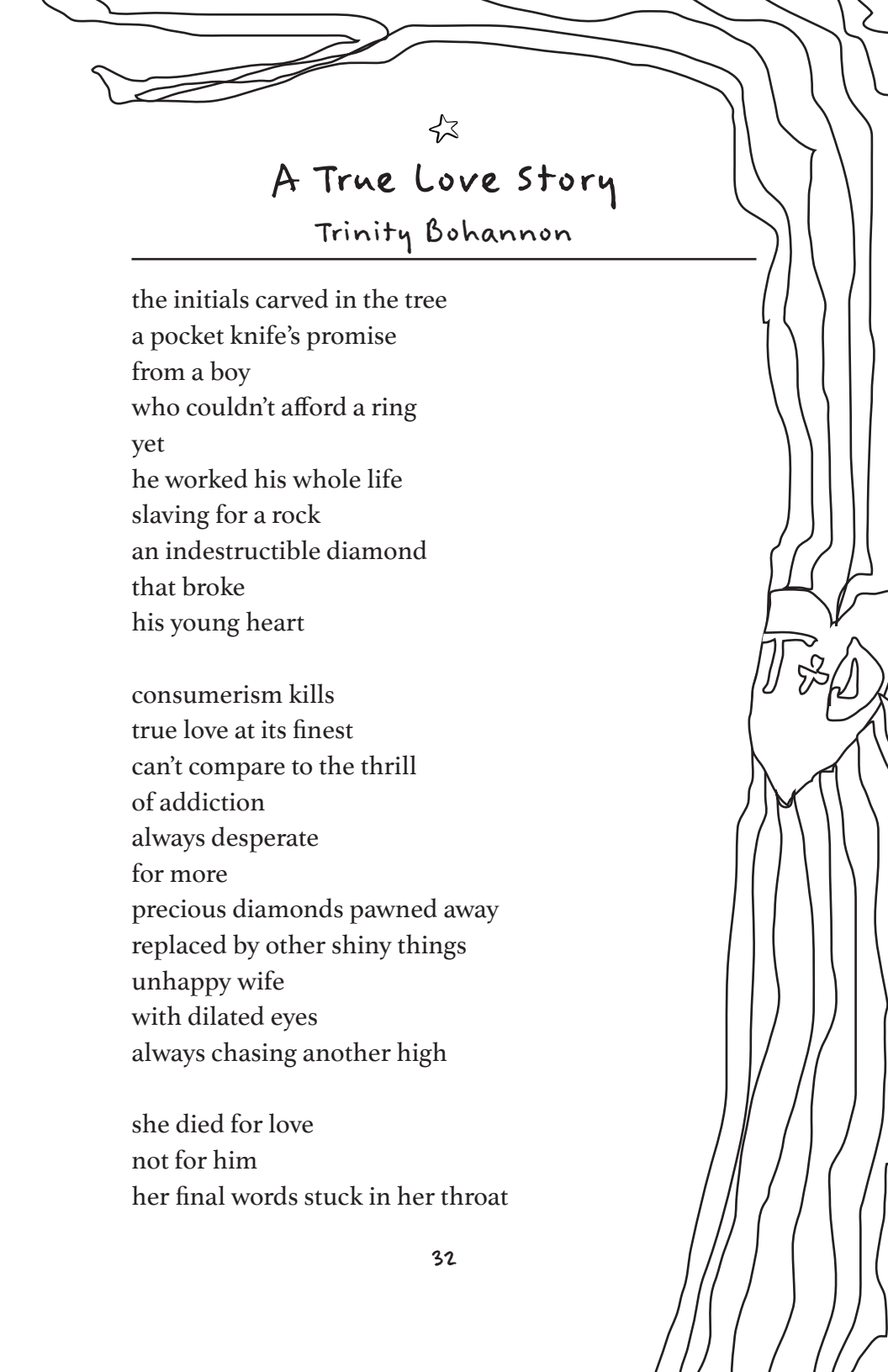
Like a sandwich of smooth peanut butter and
strawberry jam, crusts on,
I am the slice and pull between the drooling halves,
vertically cut.

You can find me in the gasp of air between the filler
words that trip through marathon sentences as
the out-of-shape mouthful of "damn, once again,
if only you had started thinking before you
started this sentence" crosses the line in last
place.

I am the space between the teeth of the zipper of 2015
skinny jeans that sit with the moths.
The tension between the head and the bridge of an
underplayed and overtuned guitar, I am not the
strings.
No, I am the air in which they ring.

I, too, am a lover of all things significant; still I remain
with the others.
I start and end, but I have never known myself outside
the very middle I find myself knee-deep in.

I skip over the bit of creek between the stepping stones.
Oh, she roars sometimes.



A True Love Story

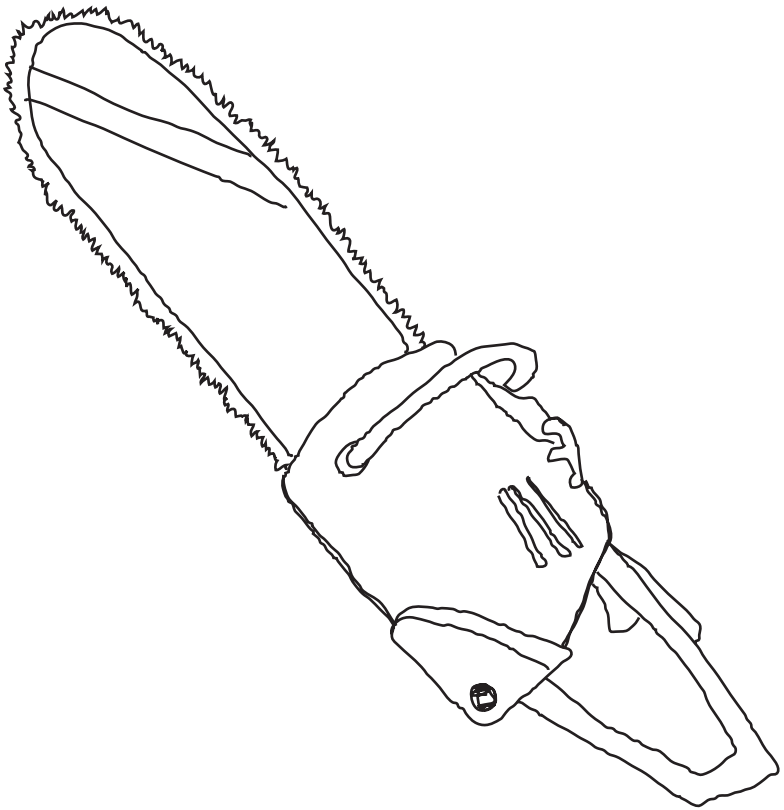
Trinity Bohannon

the initials carved in the tree
a pocket knife's promise
from a boy
who couldn't afford a ring
yet
he worked his whole life
slaving for a rock
an indestructible diamond
that broke
his young heart

consumerism kills
true love at its finest
can't compare to the thrill
of addiction
always desperate
for more
precious diamonds pawned away
replaced by other shiny things
unhappy wife
with dilated eyes
always chasing another high

she died for love
not for him
her final words stuck in her throat

overflowing passion
overdosed
over time
the old man couldn't bear it
alone
he bought back the ring
pocket knife promise stripped
from the tree
hacked away with a
15-carat chainsaw





I Have a Long Day

Hunter Coady

A people are dense and rhythmic, always have been.
the life coalescing—splitting—fusing again—severing,
hanging on words that remove the world of oxygen for
seconds,
moments that terraform planets too far to touch
the feet are weary of even the bumps in the driveway,
the texture of the rug too bright.
when baths are supposed to be a whole process, a whole
metamorphosis.
but the water doesn't taste right, the hair never feels
clean
and the day grows tired in the rumbling

A time the insects feel the liveliest, the dead flies the
greatest of them—
it's of no great concealment that they're deeply
miserable, and they're better off for it,
but there's an effort to the telling of things out here, a
studying.
someone comes to know the TV as a manifesto, the
books as organs,
one makes up stories about the bus driver to get by,
makes a whole religion out of minimum wage jobs,
takes the long walk home after getting off,
around any building taller than two stories,
until side streets start to whisper secrets
and the margins are almost home.





The Concept of Watermelon

Devin Moore

There are six sixes and one of us that live in a transparent box three wing-lengths long—enough of us that if we had the option to, we would already have separated into two or three new colonies. As it is, we collectively decided to base the colony in the right corner of the box, under a particularly large piece of cardboard, just for the sake of it, since we were uncomfortable having no designated nest. Really, the whole box is all one nest, since it's too small to differentiate different spots. The walls of the box are slippery like ice, or so Musty-Scent, the only of us to have seen ice, always says, and the roof is kept clamped on tight by something—we don't know what it is, but we do know it is some sort of reinforcement, because it didn't use to be there, and Spicy-Scent was able to get out long ago, before he was recaptured by one of the twolegged and put back in the box.

He says the Outside was just another inside—a chamber of a twolegged-nest. There were many other boxes, some like our own and some very different, and some of them had other insects in them. Some of them could even speak— there was a colony of roaches similar to us, except their language relied too much on aspirated air and body movements, rather than our twitch-and-flick-and-mandible click language. Then, Spicy-Scent says, there were two other colonies whose languages were closer to ours, but whose bodies



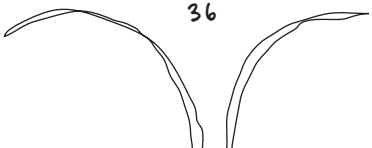
scarcely looked like a proper roach at all—much smaller and different colored.

There are also things that don't talk at all.

There are boxes of crickets—Spicy-Scent says he felt sorry for them, a large colony living in a box smaller than ours, that didn't seem to hold anything but a little burrow-paper and a mulch of all the crickets which had not survived. They didn't look like regular crickets—they were pale instead of black, and smelled sort of unhealthy and overfed and as if they'd been mating into the same colony for too long—so perhaps that condition was natural to them. I can't say.

There were also several boxes full of insects with long, bent and nubbly bodies like twigs, all as different from each other as our colony is to the other roach colonies. They have bigger boxes, and green leaves, which I do rather wish we had. But they aren't allowed the comfort of dirt to burrow in, or paper-logs for hiding, so maybe we are the fortunate ones, after all.

Then, Spicy-Scent said, he came upon a large, towering container with rounded edges that contained a strange creature that looked like one of the twiggy insects, but with the oddest face he'd ever seen. He couldn't recall coming across something like it, and couldn't tell us much about it, except it had very big main-eyes, much bigger than ours, and long, bent front legs covered in wicked spines. It was eating a fly when he investigated, so it must have been a meat-eater. Flowery-Scent thinks that what he saw was something called a 'mantis', and since none of us have ever seen it, we've



taken her word for it.

There was a tub full of earth that smelled like beetle and old meat—home to something burrowing and predatory, and a tub full of beetles and long, squirming things that must have been younglings, judging by their smell and the rebirth-shells scattered around, though Spicy-Scent said they were more like worms than any grub he remembered seeing, when he was free. These latter lived in something that smelled more like old, well-lived-in grain than our burrowing-earth, but they seemed to burrow like we do. They seemed like they might have been like us once, but they'd almost lost the art of antenna-semaphoring, and Spicy-Scent could not make out one word in ten even when he got close enough to pick up pheromones.

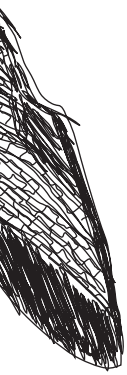


There are also boxes with not-insects: spiders, some small and some more than three or four wing-lengths long—much longer than any one of us, but all unnaturally hairy where they should be chelated, and sporting an extra pair of legs, and something else that are not spiders and are not insects and are especially not roaches—things that have eight legs like a spider and plating like a roach and like to eat crickets alive and struggling.



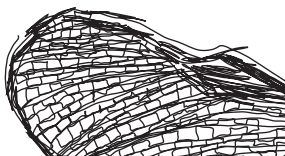
Spicy-Scent also found many other things about that strange twolegged-nest. There were little containers that smelled like dead things and fruit fermented for so long it turns sickening astringent, and odd woven materials hanging off sticks that seemed to be for catching flies, and many, many boxes and containers smelling

of twolegged, and at least two boxes that felt as cold as winter, and shook with ever-present trembles when Spicy-Scent dared to jump down on them, and there was a big tub of clean water, and a sharp thing, like a cold, shiny spine, that smelled like fruit gone sour—Spicy-Scent thought perhaps the twolegged used that to cut fruit, because they had tiny mouth-bones instead of big strong mandibles like us.



There were also strips of sticky paper, covered with the desiccated bodies of flies—perhaps they were like sundews, collecting insect bodies to eat later? And many different places where the wall was hollow, with slabs of not-wood too heavy to shift, but he says some places the not-wood hung off the wall and left openings where it looked like two-legs stored their things. None of us had known two-legs liked to keep food stashed like ants and hoard non-edibles like lacewings, but it did make some kind of sense that they would do such a thing, though we don't know why. Bitter-Scent says she thinks they collect us too, but she thinks a lot of things about the two-legged. She likes to watch them as much as they watch us, and every few feedings she has a new theory about why they're keeping us here.

There were also mouthwatering piles of paper, but Spicy-Scent says they smelled sort of wrong, too much like the odd black and blue and green markings that two-legged put down like pheromones (because, Musty-Scent says with an authoritative bob of her drooping antennae, twoleggeds can't smell—they're as bad as plants that way.)



Spicy-Scent said that he heard noises and felt vibrations and smelled smells from a crack on one side of the twolegged-nest, but he never got a chance to squeeze through it before he was picked up by a meaty appendage and put back in the nest.

Not that our nest is too bad. It's cramped, sure, but it's still comfortable, smelling of dry, comfortable earth, and the faint traces of frass scent-trails left from when we were first exploring the space, and old, many-times-chewed paper rolls, and occasionally sour fruit. It's also very boring, after a long time. None of us know how long—the dark-light cycle here is strange and inconsistent, sometimes being dark and light many times in a short time, and sometimes being dark (or light) for what seems a comparative age, so we count by feedings now, although those can be a bit irregular too. I can remember a lot of feedings—at least thirty-six cycles of cricket stridulations by now, I think. In the wild, that would be thirty-six nights. I think here, it'd be longer, because the crickets are probably just as confused by the irregular light cycles as we are.



Anyway, for a very long time we were fed nothing but apples.

There is nothing wrong with apples—Fresh-Scent in particular loves them, but sometimes they are very dry, and our bodies shake with thirst. But then there was a new scent signature on the food, and we started getting new, different fruits.

There was once something sweet and starchy and rather dry, but easy to gnaw on, and of a color that

our eyes see as yellowish grey. Sweet potato, Musty-Scent tells us. For two feeding sessions, we got dark-green-leafy food—it was too strong and too tough and too dry to eat regularly, really, but we nibbled on it and we burrowed under and around it, trying to stay close to the smell of green wild leafy things as long as it lasted. There were dark-colored sugary round fruits (like berries, but without seeds) that sat on woody stems in clusters—the skins were very thick, but when we were able to saw through them, we tasted sweet-fermented pulp. We couldn't figure out a name for those, but Sharp-Scent said she remembered something similar being called 'grapes' so we've called them that ever since, even though the grapes she remembered were pale and greenish-yellow. There were also fruits that Flowery-Scent thinks were called plums, with dark skins and light-colored yellowish insides (though they were too sour and too fermented for my taste).







Occasionally, we were brought round slivers of something very watery and fresh-smelling, with many seeds in a soft, wet pulp. Cucumbers. I didn't like the taste much, but they were very wet, and that was glorious. We only got them a couple times though.

Sometimes we got a mushy whitish-yellow fruit with a stringy pith coating around the outside—it was sweet, but it wasn't moist enough, because the moisture wasn't in the juice, it was in the pulp proper. Bananas, I think they were called. Most of us didn't like those, except for Sugary-Scent, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of those who did pretended not to just to spite

him.

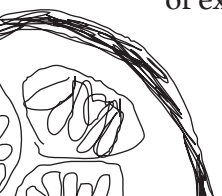
Several times, we got slices of something soft and pulpy and yellowish in a thin membrane, tasting as bright and sweet as sunshine, and as wet as leaf litter in the spring. This was the one thing that we universally agreed we'd eat every day for the rest of our lives, even if we never got anything else. Especially if we never got any more apple.

Fruity-Scent told us that they were called oranges.

Today, we haven't yet been fed, though I can tell in the deepest cavities in my body that it is probably going to be today. It's been a little longer between feedings lately, and it's been especially long since the last. That had been apple again—I think it might be hungry-season for the two-legs, and that's why they haven't been bringing as much. Sharp-Scent says that they're just lazy, and Smoky-Scent thinks they've forgotten about us, but I hope not. As tasty as paper is, we can't live on it, and all of us are already wanting for water. And we're too old to eat frass like younglings might. Even the younglings tire of it, now.

"What do you think we'll be fed next?" Thin-Scent says, with a nervous twitch-flick of her antennae.

Discussion of food is a favorite pastime here, right up there with eating, burrowing, grooming, and copulating. Back when we lived in the Outside, we did a lot of exploring, too, but there's only so many times we can mock-explore the box before it gets sad instead of exciting, and Smoky-Scent and Woody-Scent, the





strongest of us, have long grown tired of rearranging the cardboard so the landscape seems fresh for us to "explore" again.

"Apples again, I suppose," Musty-Scent said with drooping resignation. The constant apple diet had hit her harshest, because she is the oldest of us, already old when we were taken, and she remembers foraging all her life. Having food she didn't have to track down is a blow to her independence, and having the same thing every feeding has broken her down. And, while none of us are fond of dehydration, it might actually kill her not to have wet things regularly.

"I hope it's something else, like brine-shrimp," Overexcitable Nutty-Scent clicks. "No offence to you, Fresh-Scent."

"None taken. Just because I like apples doesn't mean I want to eat them nonstop," Fresh-Scent says, from where he'd idly been observing the conversation on top of a bulge in the cardboard. "That said, I don't like brine shrimp much—they taste good, you know, but they make your gut feel heavy, and I'm always thirsty until the next feeding time if I have more than a nibble. I think cucumber or whatever that fresh watery stuff would be nice for a change, you know?"

"Cucumber," Smoky-Scent butts in, looking up from grooming Mellow-Scent to get a better angle with her antennae. "That'd be nice. Not as sweet, you know?"

"But the sweet's the best part!" Sugary-Scent—a rather small male with wings so ragged they're nearly gone— protests. "I wish we could have banana again."

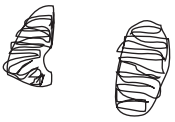
Woody-Scent scrapes his legs over his chitin in disgust. He hadn't liked Sugary-Scent (or bananas) to begin with, and the long confinement in a tiny nesting-space had made all the males more aggressive than they would be naturally, as nesting close together becomes nesting on top of each other with enough time and enough younglings hatched, and there's only so many times you can tolerate being accidentally kicked in the spiracles before you get mad enough to bite. Woody-Scent and Wet-Scent are the worst for starting fights. So is Sugary-Scent, but his fighting proceeds more from the fact he doesn't shut up and he likes harassing us girls, which tends to get him bit. Woody-Scent and Wet-Scent are the sort to do the biting. "Nobody but you likes banana, come off it."

"I just said 'I wish we had some', not 'I hope we get banana every feeding for the rest of our lives!" Sugary-Scent whines. Then, fed up with the conversation, he retreats to the other side of the box to flirt the stubs of his bitten wings at Stinging-Scent again. She turns her back—not unusual, though I suspect this time she's actually nearing molt rather than just playing hard to get.

The rest of us aren't too sad to see him go.

"What do you think, Crisp-Scent?" Spicy-Scent says to me, punctuating his question with a pointed flick of his thin, loopy antennae. "You haven't said anything yet."

I think about that for a while. "I wish we get something new, you know? Maybe it would turn out to



be as good as oranges, or better!"

Everyone cheers at the thought of oranges. It's been too long since we'd last had any.

"What would that be, though?"

"I mean, the whole point of 'something new' is that it's something we've never had before," I say. "I don't know. Something wet, like, as wet as cucumber, but sweet like oranges," I say, imagining. "And a new taste—something we haven't gotten tired of."

Everyone takes a good long time to imagine that, and there's a great deal of wistful gesturing. No one else can top that, so after a few more naming of favorites (I want greens again! No, plums!) the aggregation separates, each to her own. A few of the others start a more involved grooming session, Sugary-Scent tries and fails to get Mellow-Scent to copulate with him, and Nutty-Scent starts a competitive burrowing competition, which I did not join, thank you very much.

Then comes the increasing vibrations of a two-legged approaching the box. Sometimes they just look, instead of putting in food, so I don't let myself get too hopeful, even as the rest of the colony starts shifting around in excited agitation. But then comes the tell-tale feel of our box getting moved, and set down somewhere. The scent of many fruits left open to the air spills across us, so that their fresh juice-and-nectar-and-green scents waft ever nearer to our box, and we know it was Feeding Time. The younger ones scuttle about in excitement. Musty-Scent complains about being moved. Wet-Scent bites Fresh-Scent, who'd been thrown into her when the

box was lifted.

There are several wet thumps of fruit landing in our box, and then the lid slides back into place and we're put back on our shelf. For a moment, we all scuttle around, each eager to be the first to find and taste the food. Then, slowly, there comes a rising pitch of pheromones from the other side of the enclosure.

Spicy-Scent has found it.

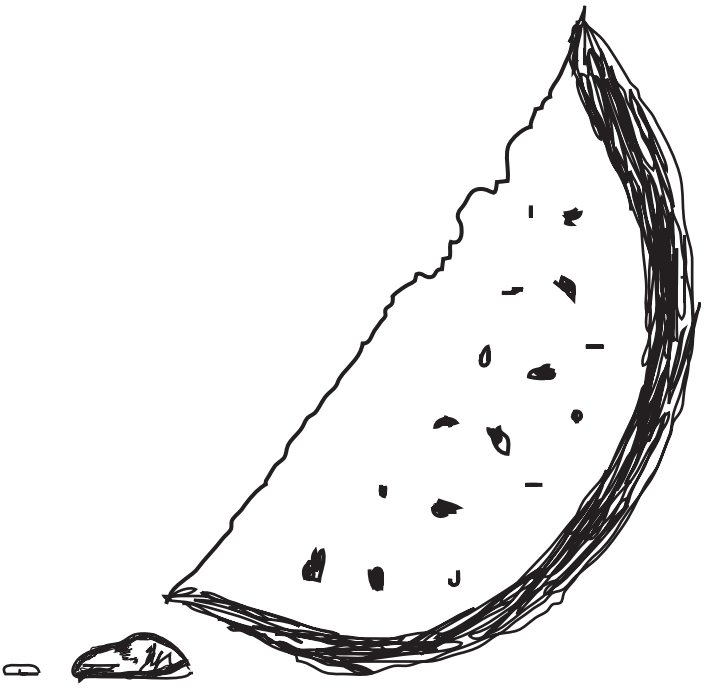
None of us have ever seen anything like it. It is that color grey that made me think that perhaps there was something we weren't seeing, because it smells like sunshine and freedom and hot summer days, and it's so wet that some of the fibrous soil substrate is clinging to it with the moisture. We all dig our faces in, and it tastes like something that must have fallen down from the Place of Ripe Fruit and Wet Soils, where all of us go when our bodies stiffen.

"What is this?" I asked, finally, looking from roach to roach, hoping one of us had a name. Most of the colony was too busy stuffing their mouthparts to answer, and the ones that weren't had no idea either. It was old Fruity-Scent who finally answered, in feeble twitchings from his non-paralyzed antenna.

"...Melon..." he said, forming each word with the utmost care. "It...like melon....don't know the kind. But... so wet...should call it...*watermelon*."

Watermelon. I like the taste, and the soft, beautiful wetness of the pulp. We all do, I think, even Rank-Scent, who normally says sweet things tasted like rot. This is a day that will be remembered many feedings

after, even if we never got to taste this 'watermelon' again. It had been the first new good thing in a long time, and maybe it proved that wishing really did do something. Maybe freedom would be like the concept of watermelon.



Returns

Julian Bagley

Hi, hey, sorry, I don't know
if this is in your domain or not, but
a while ago I traded my tongue
for safety and I'd like to reverse that
transaction if at all possible.
Except, the thing is, when I say "a while ago"
I mean a while ago, so I don't have
the receipt anymore, and actually I don't think
y'all were giving receipts then anyway,
but if you could please still maybe try checking
the backrooms or something I'd really, really,
really appreciate it. And, um, if you'd be willing
to do that, if you could also look for my teeth,
especially the front ones, since I kinda need those
to be able to say things like "fuck no" and "fuck you" and
other phrases necessary for being a person and not
a thing—anyway, I'd like those back, too,
and come to think of it, I'm also missing, like, all
of my jaw and part of my throat, and the thing with
        those parts is that
it's sorta impossible to do much of anything without
        them.
Like, no talking, obviously, but also no eating or
        drinking,
and looking back on it, I'm pretty sure I'm actually dead,
so that safety I got was more just the rest

of an undisturbed, unturned, unmourned grave.
Which isn't all I thought it'd be.
Point is, it'd be great if you'd give living back to me
and I'll return the grave no problem.



Somatic

Luke Ruberg

A night woman met me.
Flooded with black
promising everything.

Ample and soft
black berry lips
devouring all that laid between us.

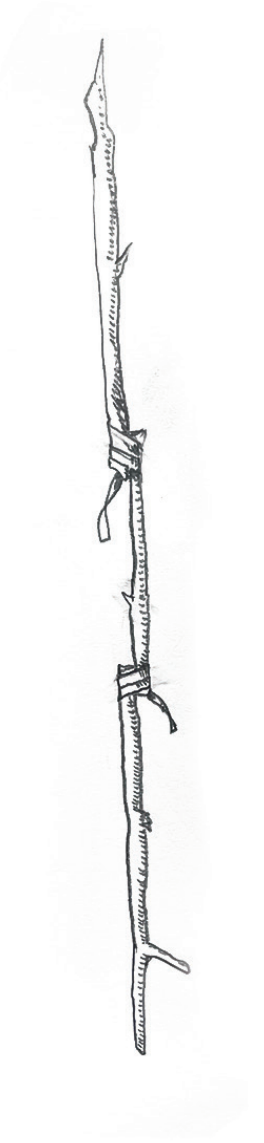
Kneading carnal union.
Tumbling into each other.
Warm hands on cold ankles.

It felt everlasting.
Baptised by the night pond.
Finally immortal.

As the lights peaked east
she left between moments.
My hands charcoal stained.

Scratchboard memories
rang like our wedding bells.
She was there with me once.

Her hands.
Her promise.



Her hair.

She was real in the sunlight once
with blackhole eyes behind cheap prescriptions
and ten rings for each finger.

I want to take off her denim again
And brush our teeth staring at each other.
I want to play with her hair again

I want to see her snow white teeth
laid in her crooked smile
I want to feel her pulpy lips underneath the Christmas lights.

I want to walk with her there.
Challenge our familial habits
to make a new one.

But all these memories rot with time,
A time capsule with an expiration.
A healing bruise.

And slowly,
Slowly,
Slowly,

I forget.





Unknown

Nemo Lamar

Gazing over the precipice
Doubt consumes
My senses

Forcing me further
For another look

The uncertain
Cosmic, inspiring comfort
Primal, encompassing fear

With Many Shadows

Cassie Speltz

We are women with
Many shadows.
We speak in broken tongues.

Stick it out at your father,
He'll pull it from your head.

We are women with many
Shadows.
Just how many
Tongues can one bite
Until the flood, silk blood,
Swelling tongue,
Start to choke?

We are women with many shadows.
Grasp at the air,
Try to catch the smoke,
Arms spread like
The wildfires.

Will we ever escape the drought?





Grease Popping in Harlem

R.M. Hayden

an homage to Lucille Clifton

what won't be fried?
i would bake
a sweet and savory
casserole of sound.
if i could—
i hear louis armstrong's
trumpet blowing, beating, blasting—
d and f# notes with the g to complement;
a beautiful robust rhythm,
a wonderful world.
funky, too, with bessie's sweet song
melodiously playing in the background,
with rhythmic junction and
perfect attitude.
i see black culture.
Black People.
with thoughts of discovery
awaiting,
to be unfolded and applaud-
ed,
remembered and celebrated.
and i smell the grease pop-
ping
in mama's cast-iron,
in the little apartment on
125th street,
which holds 246 years





Beyond Flesh and Bones

Keaton Campbell

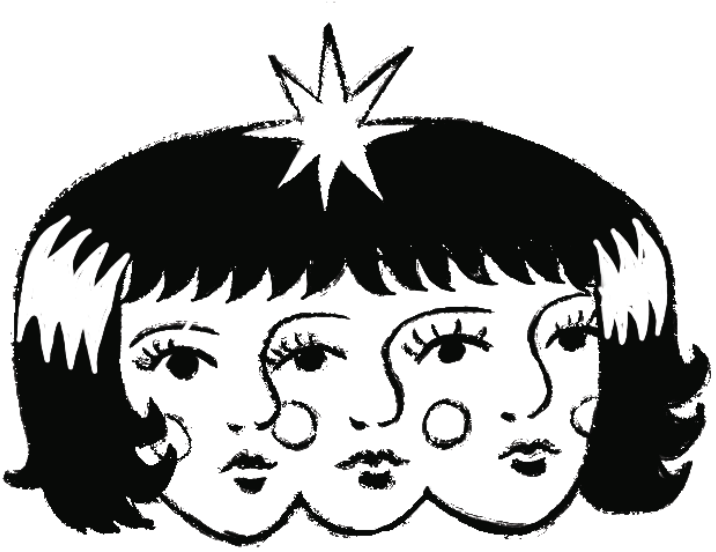
Close your eyes, the mirror lies, it tells a shallow tale.
The spirit is not sculpted skin, nor bone, nor body scale.
You do not speak to flesh and lips, nor lashes bent in guise,
But to the fire beneath the ribs, the soul behind the eyes.

You did not choose the curve of your nose, the shade your body wore.
No bargain struck to claim your face before you reached the shore.
So why should cruel and careless tongues decide a human's worth?
When every frame is nature's choice, a vessel bound to earth?

If soul still hums within their chest, then let their vitality free.
You wind yourself with shallow hate, chaining your empathy.
What matters is the captain's hand, the mind that guides the whole.
Not muscle draped in passing cloth, but intentions of the soul.

One day the sculpted 'perfect' face will lay to rest in dust.

The same decay that takes us all, the tyrants and the just.
And when the body gives to dirt, what beauty will remain?
The memories of love you gave, or bitterness all the same?





The Saint Praetorian

Kaelin Reynolds

a broken body howls for eternity
and a healed one sings praises behind closed doors.

battered ribs and sunken face,
the sinew of his skin so tight,
the pious roman has transcended lucidity
and collapsed.

muscular and crucified arms
have rope burns from oak lynching trees
and scars from the slings of bows and iron.

he holds a christ-like complexion in persecution,
a formerly strong body clings to life,
laying open, ready to rise to his heaven.

but nimble fingers lift milk and honey to praetorian lips,
as another gentle hand washes his body
and traces the outline of arrow heads
pierced through naked flesh.

purging all infection, raise him up like Lazarus.
Canonize him as the saint of devout endurance,
mark the spilling vestige from his flamed tongue—
I'm so tired, my God.

But wake Sebastian from his sleep,
watch him grow muscle back to athletic heights,
let him be a soldier again and continue
his holy run.





Ego

Luke Ruberg

Dealing with it.

Eating my ego and losing to it.
Sliding down and gagging.
I'm fucked.

I feel like they realize
The pairs of eyes hidden
Near and far.

I need time away
Beyond these apartment walls
Where the ambulances can't reach
Where the drunken screams
The drugged cries
Can't touch.

But what would I be?
Others are my contour
Their flesh my own

What is beyond the auxiliary noise?
The background colors?

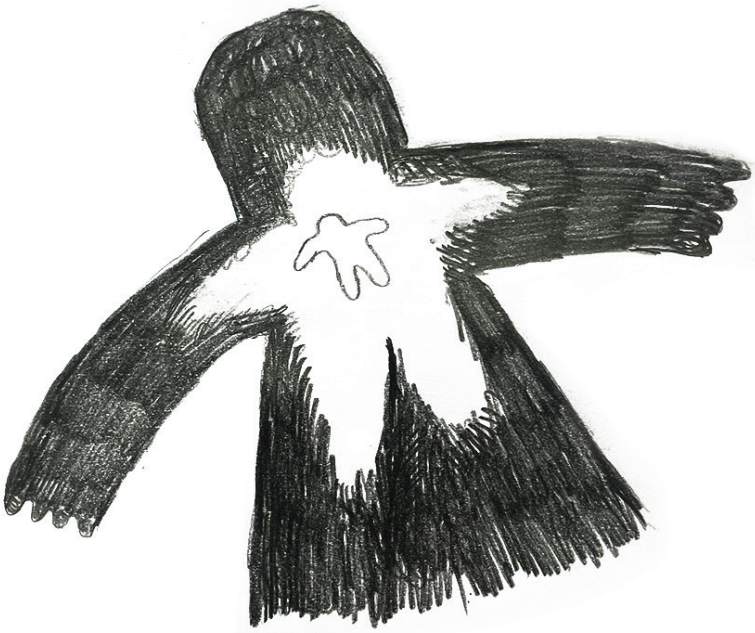
What is the foreground,
Could I even recognize it?

All I've ever been is a whisper
A cough in a stage play.

What do I do with this silent avalanche inside me?
How do I capture the cascade of color?
Take the sheen away,

What is left
Once it is you?

Just solitary noise.
An organic hum.
What is left?
Who are you?
What do you have to say?







Wilt: An Ebony Statue; A Fixture in Time

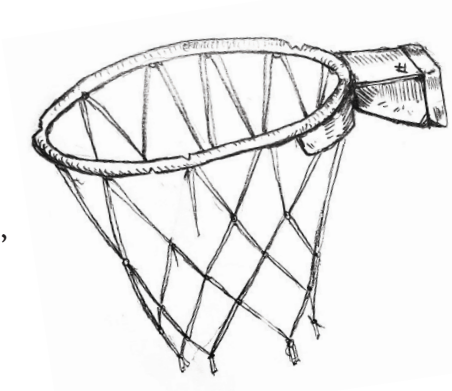
R.M. Hayden

His stature is immense—
A 7 foot 1 inch structured behemoth,
275 pounds of steel.

He sports a soft, elastic, knitted mesh fabric,
with big red numbers and letters;
a red font and white background,
representing Philly
with the unlucky 13.

The Hercules of his time—
his 12 labors
found within Boston's Bill Russell,
the Warriors' Nate Thurmond,
the Knicks' Willis Reed,
and the Bucks' Kareem.
All offensive and defensive juggernauts,
and the game represents a hardened battlefield.

It becomes a war.
Through bloodshed and sweat,
effort and determination,
which stains not only the Maplewood,
but the entire arena.



But Wilt stands tall.
Wilt never falters.
He is built sturdy,
and can't be broken.
Even when he is knocked down,
he isn't defeated.



I've Never Known Such Peace

Jack Emerson

I've never known such peace :
Of sunflowers as they beam;
Of rhododendron leaves;
Of elderberry trees...

I've never known such peace
As I have known defeat,
As I have learned warmth
In the arms of mercy.

When you come crying to me,
Then will you let me sing?...

When all seems lost,
When all falls from dream
To dream,
To dream—
Still I would not seize upon the emptiness,
Nor vie to 'fill its fateful plea...

Grant me, then, one moment
To be dismayed at your absence...
After all, we may not comprise a body
With two heads—with two lives to lead.

—But a loaf of bread between us,

And we've torn it all to pieces
For the lucky ducks that greet us.

I've never known such finality,
As a widely-held belief,
Or cherished, common custom,
As minute as it is complete.

How may I sing?—once
Enrobed in caustic, frantic fraternity,
Devoid of all melancholy,
Remade in the image of solemnity and silence and grace and folly?

I'd sooner be caught,
Naked and submerged,
Drowning in your substance,
Than tethered to its buoy.





Trance

Nemo Miller

Arnold Abernathy wakes up on a Monday morning just as usual. He brushes his teeth, takes a shower, puts on his dress shoes and work uniform, and leaves for work at eight-forty-five sharp, just as usual. He doesn't think much during the solitary hours between waking and work, he simply knows that, at some point, he gained consciousness, and he is now present at the nondescript office building where he works. He sits, eyes glazed over, in front of a small monitor. The screen emits a cold blue light that puts Abernathy into a trance. This trance is something that he welcomes, it makes the day go by a bit faster and makes work feel less tedious.

He exists contentedly in this zombie-like state until twelve-thirty when he takes his lunch. He happily strolls to the small common room within the office and heats some tuna and rice he left in the fridge yesterday. He knows that the smell of the dish will cause some aggravation in his coworkers, but they'll get over it like they always do. He eats his lunch at a moderate pace and reads the headlines on his phone. In big bold letters: *Suicide rates at an all-time high* and *The American Dream: An outdated ideal?* He puts his phone away and returns to work. He sits down in the scratchy office chair and slowly lulls himself back into a lazy-eyed daze.

When the clock reads five o'clock, Abernathy slowly packs up his things and heads out the door. The

commute home is always a blur. Traffic tends to send the young desk jockey into spiraling thought. Before he realizes it, he's home. He has plans with his friends tonight, though he thinks about canceling and staying in. He contemplates this decision, not very carefully, while he makes a small meal for himself.

Suddenly, without recalling exactly how he got there, he's out with his friends. He can't seem to focus on anything for long though, and he's not sure why. He gets tired and enters the same comforting trance that he uses to pass the time at work. He finally comes to when he is brushing his teeth before bed. He wonders, but can't seem to remember, what he and his friends talked about tonight, and he shrugs it off and rinses his mouth. He lays in the bed, closes his eyes, and drifts off to sleep.

Arnold Abernathy wakes up on a Monday morning just as usual. He brushes his teeth, takes a shower, puts on his dress shoes and work uniform, and leaves for work at eight-forty-five sharp just as usual. He doesn't think much during the solitary hours between waking and work...

*

Arnold Abernathy wakes up on a Monday morning just as usual. He brushes his teeth, takes a shower...

*

Arnold Abernathy wakes up on a Monday morning just as usual...

*

...wakes up...just as usual...

The Deposit

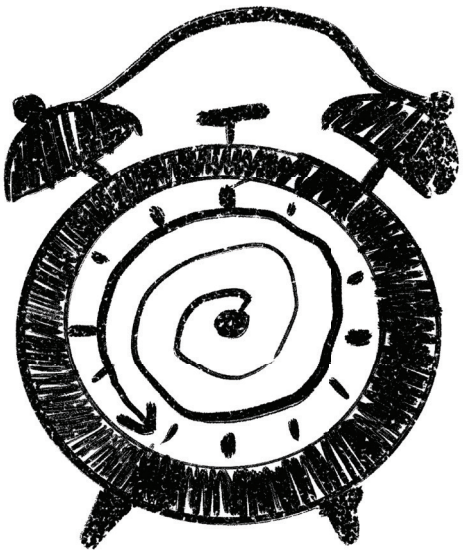
*

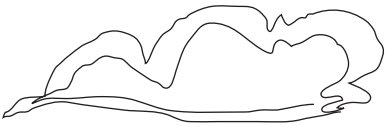
Arnold Abernathy wakes up on a Monday morning just as usual. He brushes his teeth, takes a shower, puts on his dress shoes and work uniform, and looks at himself in the mirror wondering when he started to look so old. He leaves for work at eight-forty-five sharp, just as usual. He sits at his desk and wonders when his back began to bother him so much. He has lunch at twelve-thirty just as usual. He's tired of tuna and rice. His coworkers are as well. Abernathy leaves work at five o'clock and makes it home shortly after. He looks in the mirror as he brushes his teeth before bed, he reminisces about his past. But, to his surprise, he can't seem to remember anything that stands out. Maybe a wedding every couple of years, or a funeral every decade or so?

"Where did the time go?" he asks himself. He thinks about it for a bit, then, at a loss, shrugs his shoulders and goes to bed.

On a particularly unusual Monday morning, Arnold Abernathy doesn't wake up. He doesn't brush his teeth. He doesn't get ready for work. He doesn't visit his nondescript office building. He doesn't take his lunch break. He doesn't drive home, and he doesn't make dinner or go out with friends. Instead, Arnold Abernathy leaves his home on a stretcher at two o'clock in the afternoon. He arrives at the morgue at three o'clock sharp. His toe is tagged, and he is pushed into a holding rack at four o'clock. The funeral home director, hoping to construct a eulogy, asks the people who knew Abernathy about what kind of man he was. Nobody had anything particularly fascinating to say. In fact, most people who "knew" Abernathy couldn't report much about the man other than his punctuality and a presumed love of tuna and rice.

Arnold Abernathy was buried on a Monday morning in the spring. His body was dressed, transported to the cemetery, and lowered into the ground at eight-forty-five sharp. Needless to say, he made it there on time, just as usual.



Verano 2025

Nicolás Castillo Rodríguez

Escribo entre el sonido del mar y de una canción de
salsa,
entre el ruido firme de olas intensas y mi masoquismo
que siempre ha estado presente,
que es sordo a la mesura,
a cualquier rectitud,
que es ajeno al materialismo de nuestro tiempo,
pero al que siempre, al que siempre, le gobierna la risa
de la nostalgia, y no de la razón.

Es el corazón quien conoce toda certeza,
toda respuesta,
y yo ya la sé, pero la verdad es que no es aquello lo que
me interesa,
es así para los seres condenados a la imposibilidad de
no dejar de amar, de no dejar de sentir,
condenados a la búsqueda y deseo constante de aquello
que siempre está presente:
En el canto del sol,
En el calor de la lluvia,
En la intensidad del viento en una bicicleta,
Y en la fuerza, en la fuerza que se escucha del mar.

Ahí es cuando la memoria impresionista parece pre
sente,
cuando la bruma del río Sena es la misma del mar de

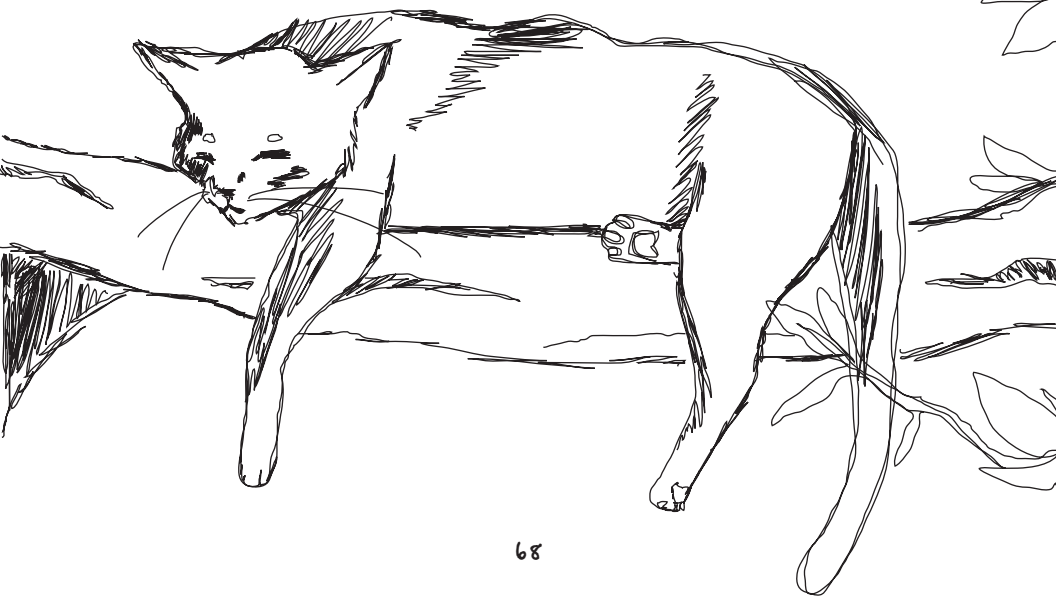
Verano 2025

Mendihuaca,
en la caricia de la imagen de un tiempo que se
desvanece,

Cuando no desconozco qué es hoy, qué es ayer,
quien soy hoy, quien soy ayer,

Atento a los detalles que la presencia es el único norte,
aún para los que venimos del sur,
aunque dure tan poco,
aunque se desvanezca,
Esa es la eternidad,
aunque el paso parece no detenerse,
El respiro es la eternidad,

Sentir el trazo, la arcilla, y la bruma,
Ser el trazo, la arcilla, y la bruma.









Summer 2025



Nicolás Castillo Rodríguez

I write between the sound of the sea and a salsa song,
between the steady noise of the crashing waves and my
ever-present masochism,
deaf to moderation,
to any righteousness,
unfamiliar with the materialism of our time,
yet always, always ruled by the laugh of nostalgia, not by
the one of reason.

It is the heart who knows every certainty,
every answer,
every answer that I already know and that I just don't
care,
it is so for those condemned to the impossibility of not
loving, of not feeling,
condemned to the constant search and desire for that
which is always present:
In the song of the sun,
In the warmth of the rain,
In the wind's intensity on a bicycle,
And in the force, the force heard from the sea.

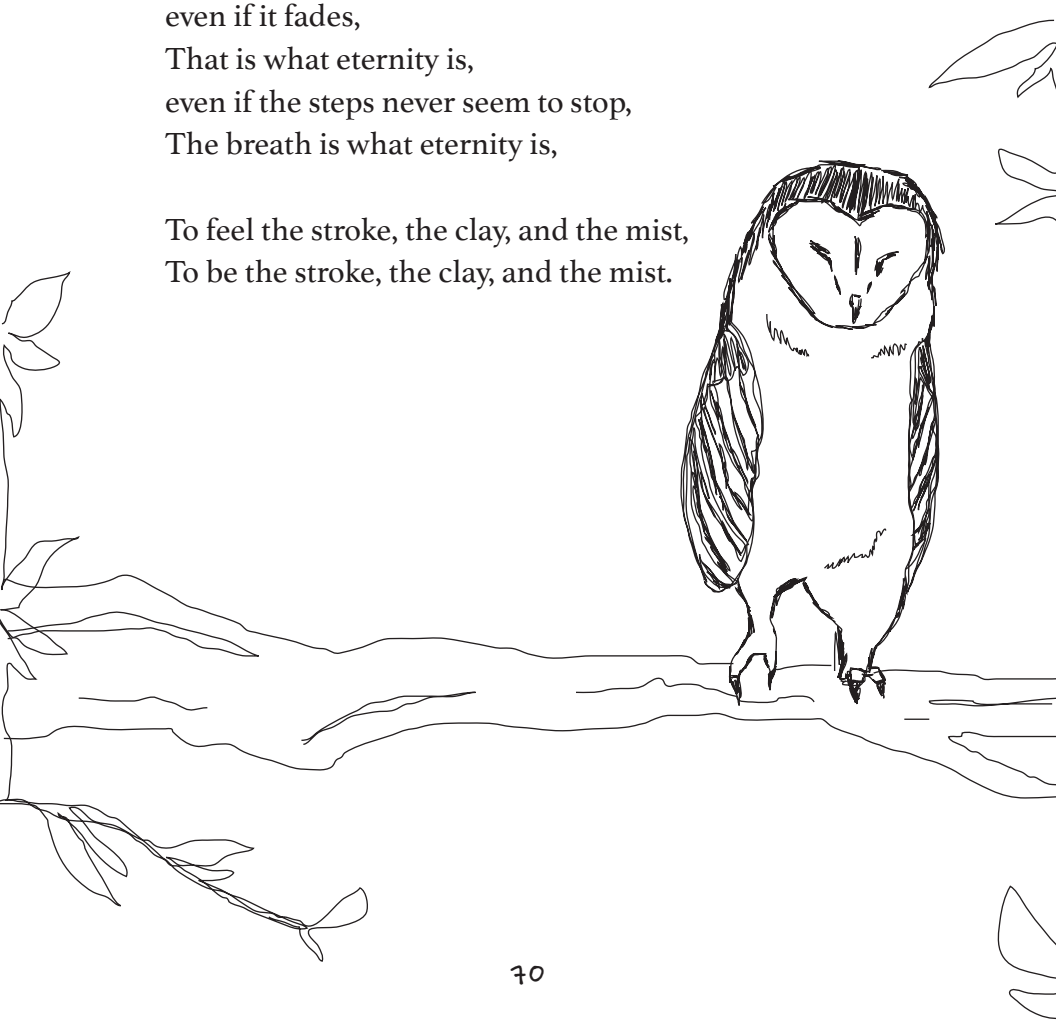
That's when the memories of impressionists seem to
appear,
when the mist of the Seine is the same as that of the sea
at Mendihuaca,

in the caress of the image of a fading time,

When I do not forget what is today, what is yesterday,
who I am today, who I am yesterday,

Attentive to the details, presence is the only north,
even for those who come from the south,
even if it lasts so little,
even if it fades,
That is what eternity is,
even if the steps never seem to stop,
The breath is what eternity is,

To feel the stroke, the clay, and the mist,
To be the stroke, the clay, and the mist.



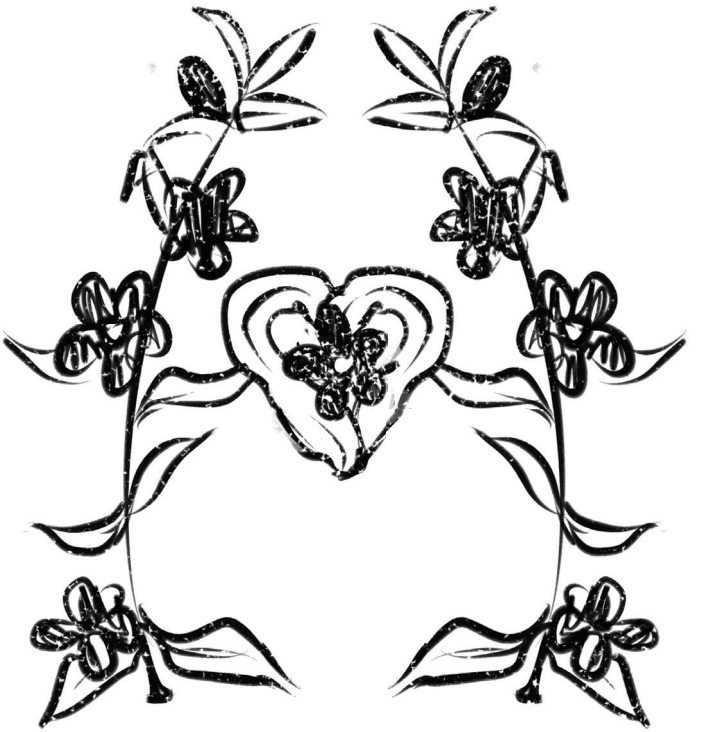


Our Second Date

Elena Wright

A new adventure sweetly we embarked,
Blushed granite rock and sky abundant blue,
Thankfully with rope the trail was marked,
For Nature wept her February dew,
And falling tears made for a gorgeous view.

So happily as if it were a dream,
My heart grew fond along the Jessamine.





The Lullaby Doctrine

G.E. Forest

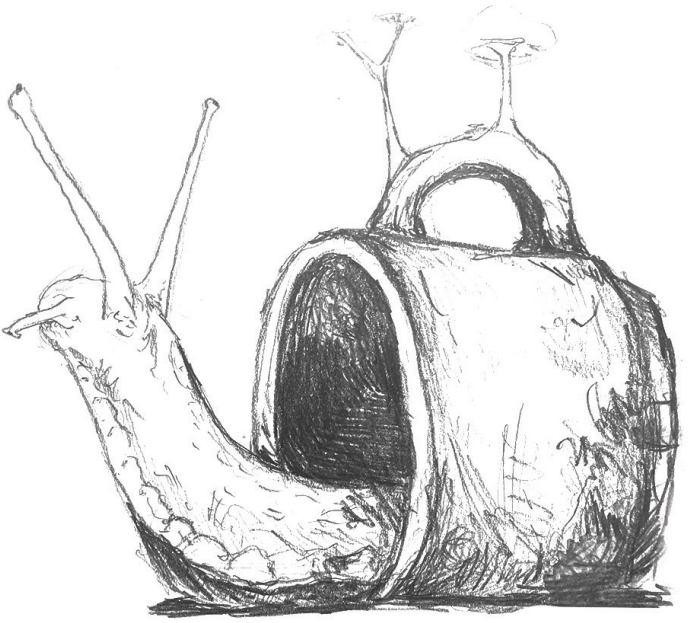
I am lured into the darkness by an enchantment that I know—I have no thoughts of hesitation.
It wraps me in its blanket of wanderlust, providing tasteful warmth for contemplation.
Wind caresses my face, flowing like a gentle stream—earthly silhouettes around me dance away their rigid builds.

Stars speckle the black canvas of the night sky, each blaze whispering to me in celestial tongue,
But together, they harmonize into beauty unsung.
Intermittent twinkles write their rhythm, composing a cosmic symphony of a light song strummed.

My breath escapes, leaving to join the wind.
My ego is torn, and Mother Nature points me towards thoughts of zen.
In this peaceful twilight, I have found my guise.
I have searched for remedies to relieve the burden of life's bitter surprise,
Yet here I stand, healed by nature's poetic lullabies.

In the gentleness of the night, I hear wisdom's call,
A gentle reminder that we all are small.
The stars above, as the lighthouse of old, guide my spirit to be brave and bold.

This moment is steadfast, a foundation built upon rock,
A seeker can find solace, wherever they may walk.
Nature's symphony, so pure and true,
Sings healing rhythms, forever anew.



Why Do We Pretend?

Christian Floyd

Why do we pretend to be lifeless?
Sometimes, it is all I can do
to not stop and lie in the soft grass,
or trail my fingers through the wheat patches
just because I yearn to do so.

Instead, like many others,
I continue walking on the path—
not to somewhere I want to be,
but somewhere I need to be.
It's funny, the way we are.
Asking, "*How are you?*"
and trying not to look each other
in the eye for too long.

We prohibit ourselves from real connection
because staring is *weird*.
Daydreaming is *weird*.
Humming in public bathrooms is
weird (or strange?). Who knows?

We only know to be mirrors,
reflecting those who have become
masters at pretending.
But there are moments...



Fleetingly freeing moments
where I choose to be myself.
Oh, what a beautiful thing
to be.

An Essay on Art and UK

H.G. Page

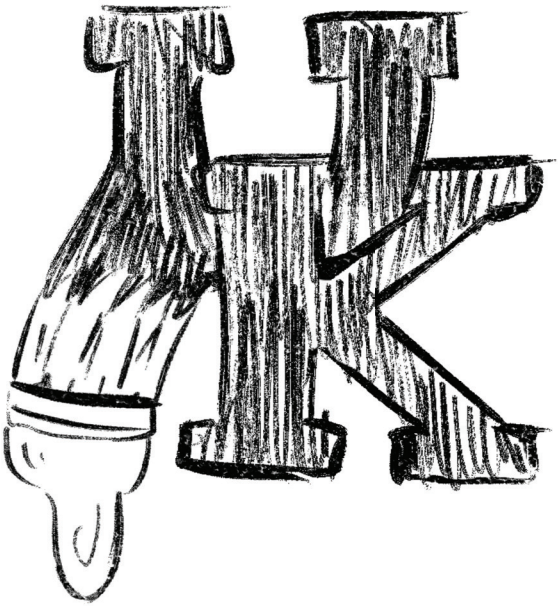
What counts as art? This question plagues people still, haunting the air of museums, the columns of newspapers, the threads of message boards, and the minds of anyone who's spoken to me long enough to hear my opinions. I spent my summers closing at Paducah's local pizza buffet: flipping ingredients, scrubbing floors, shoo-ing customers. I found an art in the path my mop head took, the order in which I restocked the buffet, the various contrasting closing methods coworkers taught me that I spliced together to save time. Sculptors and painters measure success in galleries and awards; I measured it as leaving the same day I clocked in. The artistic muscles that Pollock and Picasso used as they splattered paint and smattered figures, a mother hones in a neat and efficient diaper change. Compressing and compacting the code of an app or website, balancing all the channels and levels for a recorded piece of music, intricately spicing a big pot of food for a family, these are all artistic endeavors in their own ways. Zhang Huan said "Art should be about daily life, which has lots of parts. It is mundane and ordinary but it is also dramatic and theatrical." Simply, I define art as something done well for the sake of doing it well, a craft or skill sharpened over time to create—to express—something larger than its creator.

Three times a week, I half-push half-pedal my

bike up the awkward stretch of path between the College of Fine Arts and the Funkhouser Building. This dark and deeply shaded stretch of a few hundred feet is lined with layers of brick buildings, tall trees, short shrubs, and enshrined with thin long black handrails. I learn the pedestrian paths, dodging and swerving around students stuck in their cell phones, another art form itself. Right in the middle of the hill lies an unnoticed work of art, surveying the southeast entrance of Lafferty Hall. Two tall brick guards with jagged legs, holding dual incandescent lights topped with matching askew black shades. The left light has been tagged with "BÄUME!" on its underside. Their frames twist in divergent directions unlike any other arrangement of bricks on campus. They stand before cement L-shaped benches, together with rails forming two three-walled pavilions.

It's hard to know for sure what the intention behind this humble corner of campus is, the artist responsible is unknown. It's possible they were completely unaware of the effect it would have, of the need for a new law building back in 1936, or the complexities of the law that the students who interacted with their art would know. It's possible famous alums like Steve Beshear and Mitch McConnell had the same uncertainty I have now. What is known for sure is the existence of these pillars, their height and heft and presence on the hill. When I think about art, I imagine a triangle, one point for the art, one for the artist, and one for the audience. The lines connecting these points are the relationship each

has with each other. In the case of these brick posts, it is a rather heavy sided triangle. The artist is unknown, the audience thousands of students at different speeds, and the art itself blending into its background. Lafferty Hall is one of the more detailed and eccentric buildings, its adornments and details contrast the stark black windows on its right face. Compared to the sharp edges of the Singletary Center, the white accents of the King Library, the weathered and guarded President's House and the long blue hands that lift students into the towering Funkhouser Building, Lafferty Hall is just another pile of bricks for some other major at UK. Yet at its side lies a perfect representation of my place and my feelings so far at UK: a stark and elegant work of art that, though inconspicuous and sometimes overlooked, stands tall with undeniable purpose and excitement.



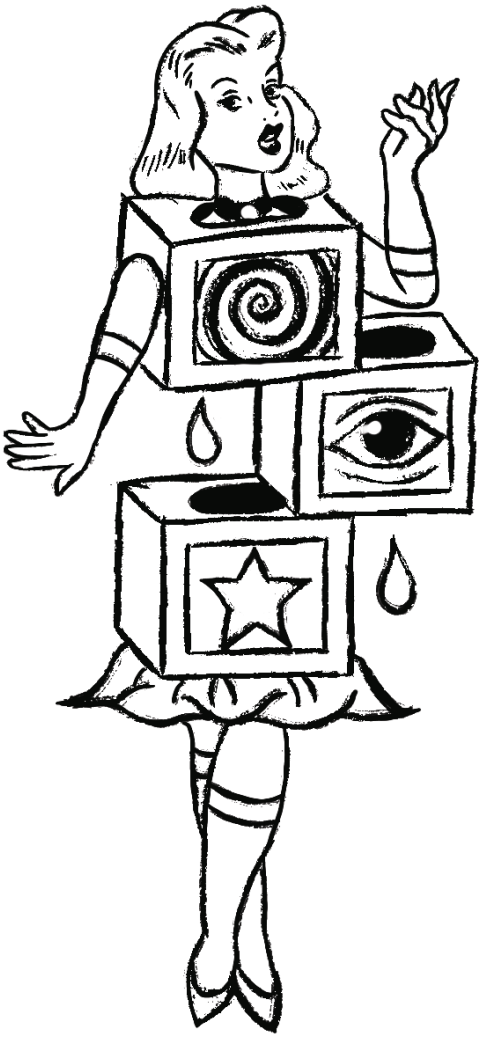


An Anthology of Polite Ways to Talk to Fat Girls

Carmen Ponzio

Big-boned. BBW. I wish I had your
Confidence! Chubby. Curvy. You look great;
Did you lose weight? Dress for your body type. Don't
Eat that. Eat this instead! Eating makes you
[ ] No, we don't use that word! That's rude.
Go to the gym. Greedy. Girl, you're so brave.
Heavier. Heavy-set. Have you heard of Ozempic?
I'm just concerned for your health. I'm
Just looking out for you. Have you tried
Keto? What about Atkins? You might qualify for
Liposuction! Large. Larger. Lose weight with this pill!
Minute on the lips, lifetime on the hips. Breaking
News: Have doctors finally found the cure to
Obesity? Ozempic! Try Ozempic today! You just need
better
Portion control. Plump. Pear-shaped. Plus-size.
Quit giving excuses—you could lose weight if you
Really wanted to. Real women have curves. Buy our
Shapewear! Sorry, our store doesn't have your size, but
Torrid might. Take the stairs! Tired of being overweight?
Use our herbal blend. Use our juice cleanse. Use our
Very easy weight-loss program. Voluptuous. Shed thirty
pounds
With a weekly shot! We just want you to be healthy. We
carry

XL in-store, but you can find up to an XXL online!
You have a pretty face for a bigger girl. Have you tried O-Zempic? Try Ozempic today! You need Ozempic.





Lullaby for Hansel and Gretel

Lou Hurst

Father gave you the slip: see his shadow, shrunk
Behind the yew's moonstricken trunk,
Slink back to Mother, who hated you first.

A palace with panes of white spun sugar
Sprung up like a fungus to humor your hunger,
And by such bread were you both cursed.

O Hansel, your cunning has come to naught.
Black ravens filched its crumbs away
(O Gretel, you shouldn't have trusted your brother)

Bereft are you both amid groans and croaks,
And the great black maws of the ancient oaks,
The hollows where goblins crouch and grin,

And the rot-felled heaps of snail-slimed logs
Whose roots pitch ledge for your dangling clogs,
Are too old for you to cradle in.

So you keep your last loaf in your kerchief tight
And a haunted sleep stalks you tonight
As by turns you clasp and blame each other.



At the Beach

H.G. Page

Grass grasps crass clasped flasks.
Crabs clap, craft cracked casks.
Cam's hands clamp cramped clams,
Zander's sand-ily meander, bands of ham and canned jams.
Sam's family scram-ily stands,
commanding Aunt Jan's grand plan.
Chihuahua paws claw, draw sod, gnaw straws.
Pawpaw's flawed slaw drops jaws, stops spas.
Bob bobs.





Nobody

Morgan Noe

Once,
I woke to the whisper of her red hair
laid over my lips like mist,
breathed with her in that milky dawn
as my mouth worked against it,
sliding strands between my downy teeth,
melding her shampoo with my spit,
and felt the animal heat of her back
glowing onto my skin from beside me.

She whispered, "He
told me once
that he imagined it
would taste like cherry slush."



I swallowed
and whispered back,
"It does."

She knew
which lipgloss I was wearing by the smell,
knew the callused skin of my feet,
knew the taste of our mixed, damp breath in the
morning,
knew blind where on my back to drag her nails
so they wouldn't catch on a mole.

I knew the soft hill of her stomach,
like sweet cream, like snow.
I knew the thin lines of dirt
between the crests of her acrylic nails
and the real ones beneath.
And I knew them still when she moved
to an island eighteen hundred miles away
from me
and died there.

Nobody knew to call me.

I found out a week later
and wondered
how I didn't feel it;
how I didn't know
just from the way my feet
struck an earth she no longer stood on
that I was the only person left
who knew
all the ways in which we fit together
and fell apart.





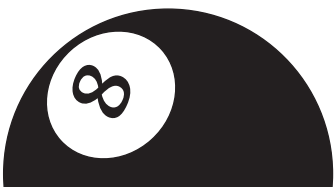
I Imagine Myself as Regan MacNeil

Hunter Coady

we once hailed the kitchen as a mender but
as i sit here regurgitating, spitting up history on our clothes,
farewelling to the fabrics like they are nothing
(how indignant food can become while sitting inside,
rolling into an anger of sentience,
possessing an emotion beyond ourselves, beyond our home, beyond our love for each other),
i ache with something primordial, something beyond like that.
i wish i could navigate a cosmos with direction,
find the point before history so i could answer more, but
i'm not so trusting of my own history, not so trusting of
myself, *i'm sorry for you to see me like this,* sorry to see you covered like you are.
for the sense of order, i stack rocks on myself,
my hands nailed down on either side, ready for autopsy
as if exorcism hasn't reached me yet.
how bizarre it is to be captained.

don't take this so seriously, you say.

so we try to laugh at our words, that we hurt each other.
perhaps there is something to being seen below holy,
to overcoming the stench of familiarity, to being less
scared of the food in my stomach you've already seen me eat.





Tofu

Ava Knudson

I didn't know how to get her out of bed. She'd been acting different lately. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen the male in a long while. I certainly didn't mind—he smelled weird. He always tried to touch me and talk to me in that stupid, condescending, high-pitched tone that made me want to claw his eyes out. Sometimes I tried to, but I only got a few good swipes in before he yanked his hand away and went about his business. At least she gives me personal space.

It was my breakfast time, but she was still asleep. I'd been yelling at her from the floor, but she didn't seem to hear me. Time for more drastic measures.

I crouched and sized up my jump. Wiggling my haunches for good measure, I leapt onto the bed, landing on her chest, jabbing my paws into her ribs for balance. Jerked out of sleep, she shot up in bed.

"Hey!" she scolded. "Tofu! You're greedy! I'm up, I'm up. Let's get you some breakfast." She slid out of bed and walked into the kitchen, not even glancing at the piles of clothes on the floor. Personally, I'd taken a liking to her dirty laundry. It gave me new places to sleep.

I looked up at her. "You know, you should really clean this place up. I mean, my litterbox could really use some scooping," I said, waiting by her feet while she scooped my food. She didn't respond to me. I licked my lips while I listened to the clinking of my dry kibble

hitting the bowl. The litterbox forgotten, I went straight to eating. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. She started to pet me. Her greasy hair was touching me, but in the moment I didn't care. She completely ignored what I told her. I don't really think she can understand me. Hmph. Humans.

She continued to stroke my back until I finished my food. I started lapping at my water bowl until it was empty. I looked up at her.

"Fresh water, please," I told her. She only stood and walked back to bed.

*

I stared at my food bowl. It'd been hours. She was still in bed, and I was hungry. She usually left the apartment by now. Maybe I should've woken her up. I knew what would do the trick. I padded over to the bedroom and leaped onto her dresser. It was like a playground up there. There were plenty of trinkets – big and small – to mess with. She hated it when I got up there. The first thing my eyes landed on was her jewelry box. Oh yeah. This was bound to piss her off.

I started nudging it to the edge of the dresser with my nose. I glanced over at her, but there was no movement yet. I had to commit. I took my paw and pushed it over the edge. It landed on the carpet with a thud and busted open, small shiny objects spilling out onto the floor. I looked at her in bed. All she did was open an eye, glance at me, and roll over.

I continued in my havoc until the top of the dresser was bare. I pushed off hair ties, a lint roller, a

watch, two TV remotes, a hairbrush, *my* hairbrush, and a pair of sunglasses. Each object came crashing down and hit the floor with a varying level of noise. With every item, I looked to her as she lay in bed. The most reaction I ever got out of her was her grumbling my name and going back to sleep. What else could I do?

I jumped back down to the floor and sniffed the shiny objects that had come out of the jewelry box. I started chewing on a small, round one. It wasn't good, and it was so hard that it could have broken my teeth, but it was something to distract myself from the gnawing hunger.

*

It was the middle of the night. She still had not moved from her bed. My last meal had been my breakfast the previous morning. She never gave me dinner. I can't remember the last time she had gone without feeding me. Sometimes, like this morning, she would take some convincing, but she had never just completely *forgotten*. My stomach was relentlessly rumbling. Sometimes she would joke about me needing to lose weight, but this is just unfair.

I walked around the kitchen. There was a vile smell coming from the sink. I jumped onto a stool, then onto the counter to investigate. There were dishes piled up to create a mountain. There were chunks of slimy, soggy food still left on most of them. That would explain the smell.

She hadn't done the dishes in days, nor had she done the laundry, scooped my litter, and taken the trash

out. I was living in a real dump.

I hopped back down and went over to the cabinet that held my food. I pawed and pawed at it, determined to get it open. I wedged my paw between its door, and then stuck my nose in it to push the door all the way open. Jackpot. There was a large orange bag of my kibble. I wiggled myself into the cabinet and started to gnaw on the bag. I was determined to get this thing open. With one last triumphant tear, food spilled out from the bag into the cabinet and onto the floor. I had plenty of kibble to last me a few days until she was feeling better. Surely she would go to the store sometime soon. Maybe she'd buy me some treats to compensate me for all of my trouble.

*

I heard her get up very early in the morning. She flicked on the bathroom lights. At the sound of her shuffling, I jumped to get her attention. I went straight to rubbing against her legs.

"I thought you'd never get up! I tried to get your attention all day! Hey by the way, while you're in here, my litterbox could really use some work," I said, trying to talk enough to keep her awake. If I wasn't careful, she'd ignore me and go back to sleep.

"Tofu honey, you're meowing my ear off. Hush," she grumbled in reply. She turned the sink on and splashed her face a few times. She turned it off and turned to the toilet. I left the room to give her some privacy. I heard a flush, and then she stumbled out and fell back into bed. She hadn't washed her hands.

I ran back to the bathroom while the toilet was still swirling. She had left the lid up – perfect. She still hadn't given me fresh water. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

*

The days went by, and we repeated this cycle for a long while. She wasn't getting out of bed, so I'd try to get her up. When she wouldn't wake up, I'd continue to scavenge around the house for anything edible—or entertaining. I continued to drink from the toilet. The smells from the kitchen were becoming more intense. The trash, along with the dishes, and interestingly enough, the refrigerator, emitted a strong, foul odor. The apartment was beginning to rot. I wondered if my owner was too.

By the fourth day of this cycle, I noticed ants in the kitchen. They were mostly crawling around in the sink, but they were also in my kibble supply on the floor. This was a source of my entertainment for a few days. I would swat at the ants, pretending they were my prey. I felt I was becoming more feral by the day. I had eaten most of my kibble by now. It was hard to ration it out when I was hungry.

She would get up from time to time to go to the bathroom, but she'd always ignore me. What was going on? Speaking of the bathroom, I had resorted to going on the floor. It was humiliating. This was what her negligence had pushed me to. Cats like me used to be worshipped by the Ancient Egyptians, you know. She'd tell me that sometimes. But now, I was relieving myself on

the floor and drinking toilet water. So much for being worshipped.

*

The next day, I had eaten the last of my kibble. My owner was yet to leave the apartment to get more. I was getting desperate to get her out of bed. What was wrong with her? I had ripped up the curtains, clawed each bit of furniture, even yelled in her face to get her attention. Nothing seemed to work. I wasn't sure how she was still alive. I hadn't seen her eat once in the last week and a half. Surely she would have had to get up to eat at some point.

I jumped on the bed to check on her. She was clutching a framed photo of her and the man together. She was awake, but she didn't look like she was present. All she was doing was staring at the ceiling. I walked over and sniffed her face.

"Tofu, I'm sorry. I just don't feel good right now," she said. I started to paw at her. I was at my limit. I was frustrated. I was hungry. "Tofu, stop," she scolded. I swiped at her again, but that time she swiped back. She pushed me off the bed, and I twisted to land on my feet. This has gone too far. How dare she push me off the bed. I hissed at her and ran out of the room.

*

Something was wrong. I had slept in the cabinet last night, and when I woke up, there was a weird smell in the air. It was different from the rotten smell in the kitchen, in fact, it made my stomach rumble. I stretched

and flexed my claws. I swatted some more at the ants, imagining they were fat, juicy mice. I was starving. I padded into the bedroom, where the aroma was coming from. On the way, I passed the clothes piles, more ants, and more soiled carpet. The longer this had gone on, I had come to hate the place. The source of the smell was my owner. Before I jumped on the bed, I noticed something on the floor. It was a small orange bottle. Her hand was dangling off the side of the bed. She had probably dropped it. Her fingertips were purple. I sniffed at the bottle, but it was odorless.

"Hello?" I called. I crouched, wiggled my haunches, and jumped onto the bed.

The smell was overpowering there. I took a good look at her. She was limp and lifeless. I pawed at her face to see if I could wake her up. Nothing. She was cold. Her mouth was blue. The rest of her face was turning an odd shade of purple, almost like a bruise. My stomach rumbled again. I had a lot of resentment towards her in that moment. She had left me to struggle on my own. I was living as a stray in my own home.

She had taken me in from the streets a couple of years ago. I had been a different cat then; I was used to this way of living. But after years of love and comfort, I had forgotten how cruel the world could be. Now I was trapped with nowhere to go. I relied on her to take care of me. And then she was dead. I only had one option.

Looking at her lying there, it almost drove me mad. I started to imagine she was one giant rabbit. Or maybe an entire group of rabbits, huddled together like

a dinner buffet. I licked my lips. I couldn't decide if she was an upgrade or a downgrade from my kibble. Regardless, it would have to do. As it turned out, it was the most delicious flesh I had ever tasted.





Shame

Abby Sears

I was ashamed to pray naked.
Now to retell, I feel in my womb the need to describe it
carnally, with defiance; *resilience*.
To elaborate on all the details, so that the bite of the
words fall onto the flower and tear sodden path they
belong.

I sat attempting to read prayer.
One breast was exposed; I felt the wind, the light on it.
It was ugly, uncomfortable.
I went to cover up because God is a man.
To renounce him as a woman is blasphemy, sinful.

And so, my cold breast next to a Bible was no sinless
sight for any man.
Until late, I did not see He was much more than any
man.
I did not see that I did not have to hide in guilt or
shame.
I did not have to be blessed with the less favorable sex.
I realized I could pray naked.

The Goo

little roger

saw a pile-a gray on the side of the dirt path today
poked it with a stick
it clung onto the thing, climbin it almost
touched it with the toe of my shoe
didn't stick but it came away wet
"don't touch it" bobby told me
"could be somethin bad"
i came back in the evenin
told paw i was goin to shoot frogs
walked halfway back to the main road
and there it was
i scooped it into a jar
and rolled it under my bed when i got home
bobby doesn't know,
but the gray wants to become somethin
it wants to grow
i know it
and i'm gonna let it



A Color Study

Cassie Speltz

Spring!

The overgrown lawn.

The fading, threadbare rug.

The Disney-Villain smoke.

My mother's favorite turtleneck.

My big sister's eyes.

Mold creeping through strawberries we "just fucking bought."

Our twelve-foot pine in the living room.





For the Consideration of Americans

Beaux Hardin

inspired by Haki Madhubuti's "For the Consideration of Poets"

Where is the poetry that doesn't ask for permission?
Where is the poetry that translates
the sun's rays to the peony's petals?
Where is the poetry that opens the door of the mouth,
walks across the welcome mat of the brain with dirty
feet
and lazes about the mind uninvited?

What happened to the poetry
that made the streets electric
and the nights euphoric?
The poetry that outlines the architecture of America
against a lead colored back drop—
where is the poetry that strikes with venom
and can taste the rain on the horizon?

Where is the poetry that burns like the flesh of a flame?

Why does this poetry now walk with the memory of
when capitalism gave this land its first bug-eyed kiss,
groping
her at a sweaty underthesea themed prom

housed in a defunded run down ghetto school?

Why does this poetry eat the ones it loves?
Why can't it speak Creole?
Why can't it dance beyond manmade walls?
Why can't it see past the skin on our backs?
Why can't it hear Mother's song and sing back in re
sponse?
Why don't the words curve and roll like the bluegrass
hills it was born from?
Why does this poetry work a 9to5 and then a 5to9?

Where is the poetry that can afford to be free?
Where is the poetry that seduces the silence into being
anything but?
Where is the poetry that smells of cataclysm and
climax?
Where is the poetry that sees me, staring at the sun in
awe,
and whispers, "Crave your own radiance"?

Where is the poetry that bleeds American?



A Poem For Autumn and Rest

Joslyn Baumgardner

"The trees say they're tired, they've born too much fruit / Charmed all the wayside, there's no dispute / Now shedding leaves, they don't give a hoot / La-di-da, di-da-di-dum, 'tis Autumn."

- "Tis Autumn" by Nat King Cole

There is a time for creating,
For pouring out ourselves,
For producing things that make the world go 'round.
But there comes a time
When even the trees must rest,
So why don't we?
Our schedules and our pockets grow heavier than ever
As the trees whisper, "Slow down."
Showing us the beauty that can bloom when we do.
They do their work diligently,
Giving us air to breathe and food to eat,
But without their well-earned rest,
It would cease entirely.
How long must we go on
Without listening to the trees,
Without learning that we are part of nature?








Black Star Above Asphodel

Andrew Cizek

I see an image of brick and glass
erect upon the earthen ash.
The light, a knife, my eye is cut
into inquisitive realm of snuff.

*

My spirit wavers across
the plain as gray fire burns my feet or
sight. Wailing forgotten notes of ancient songs
as I alone wander eternal days and nights.

The sky in emerald strikes my song with
a drunken temper like the seas my elders crossed.
The black star hangs above and only then—
wandering past the fields' edge—
do I discern the orb's dilation,
focused lens,
the watchful baron of the sky.

The sky closes,
fires in the dark twinkle like rubies now.
My eyes widen.
A hiss of air,
And I fall.

*

For all the dust in concrete walls

cannot fill holes in human lungs.
You'll ever cough, wheeze, gasp
'til breath is cut by broken glass.





Across the Divide

Peter Krause

A news story caught my eye late last night. An experienced hiker had died in New Hampshire, caught in sudden snow and high winds, even though he managed a 911 call including his coordinates. Rescuers were unable to reach him in time, and a statement released the next day said: "While his family and friends are devastated by this loss, we find comfort knowing that he died doing what he loved." I rocked myself back from my screen and sat, bathed in a thin blue light, in a still house, my mind suddenly unquiet.

It was an arresting quote, used in many sad stories, a ready platitude: "died doing what he loved." And there are any number of cynical comebacks usually attributed to thoughtful types like Kinky Friedman and Charles Bukowski: Find what you love and let it kill you. Re-reading the short piece gave up only enough detail to leave me wanting more. He had a wife and a young son named Solomon. Were they left to wonder: did he not have time to build a snow cave; where was his space blanket; how quickly did hypothermia rob him of his ability to think clearly?

I leaned back in to search for more, seized with a dim sympathy for this stranger. What few things I found: His name was Christopher and he was thirty-eight. He had hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, the Appalachian Trail, and the New Hampshire Forty-Eight, all

the peaks in that state with a height above 4000 feet. I stilled my fingers on the keyboard. I felt a pull toward the mountains, toward a man I didn't know but had kinship with; my feet shifted with an instinct to follow in his tracks, to be there when it all went sideways for him. And as I sat, with unclosed lids, I pressed forward through a riot of inaudible thought until I could see a fluttering shape sketched on a hillside and through the slanted blast of stinging snow the hiker appeared. And we began to speak:

*

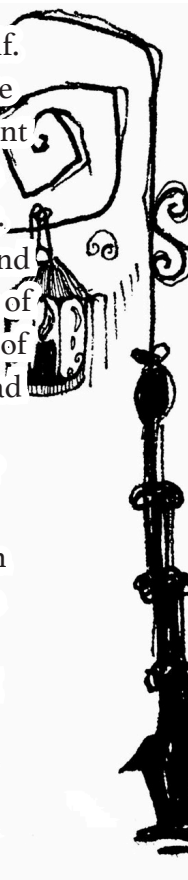
I can remember thirty-eight, Chris, so we kinda have that in common.

What the hell! You spooked me. Are you a ranger?

No. But I am an experienced hiker, like yourself. Also a father. When I was your age, my daughters were four and one and because I was the stay-at-home parent I can remember feeling harried. Well naturally all the joys and elations too, lots of them, don't get me wrong. Our days were an unbroken string of little triumphs and brave explorations stitched together by the humdrum of gathering scattered things, wiping of surfaces, wiping of faces, wiping of, um, everything. Which sometimes had me feeling harried. I wouldn't trade it.

Don't know none of that. Sure you're not a ranger? Damn, I thought I was saved.

Sorry about that. I don't think I can help you in that way. You know Tennessee Williams? No? Well, he said life is all memory except for the one present moment that goes by so quick you hardly catch it going. I



think this is that moment for you, Chris. Here on this frozen mountain. I wish I could delay it somehow, keep it right here in front of both of us.

Don't know if I even see you. I hear you. I must be getting dehydrated.

I'm not sure how it works, really. I've heard that for some who grieve acutely, they can see and even talk to the one they've lost. It happens all the time.

You're not a loved one! Put my wife on the phone.

Wish I could. But look at it this way: What if I'm the only one who shows up? Look around you. Can't even see the ridge anymore. If it were me I'd want someone, even a total stranger, to keep me company. I was thinking, with the night and snow whirling down like it is, I could tell some stories about my girls growing up, things we did and that you hoped to do one day with Solomon. Lend you my memories until you find the trail again, or the snow stops long enough for you to find your way out. It might ease ...

It will not blunt the outcome but suit yourself.

Alright. Maybe I'll start with our first time at Chuck E. Cheese. You been yet? Know the drill? First, there's drop-off procedures, and the whole hanging out bit (I hated hanging out.) I wish I'd had you with me then. Can't talk to the moms, can't work up conversation with the employees, a bunch of slack-jawed high schoolers sliding along under the lower limits of their training, barely able to hide their disgust at being there, at everyone being there. You at least have a choice, they seem to say. I feel like you would be the guy who asks them: How

often do they clean those balls in the bouncy house? What shit might they find at the bottom of the pit?

Don't see where you're going with this. Don't see much of anything.

Can a person be claustrophobic in whiteout conditions like these, Chris? I was terrified of being stuck in the Sky Tubes that day. My Maddie was stopped in the tunnel, wanting me. Her separation anxiety was in a standoff with my fear of tight spaces. And primary colors are not soothing. Ultimately, there was no real drama. Someone finally came along to rescue us.

Someone will probably not be along here.

Won't offer false hope on that. I've seen a wind like this one, that bends all the trees down below the ridge and sounds exactly like a freight train. Instead, I will relate: When I was a kid, our dad gave us pennies to put on the railroad tracks by our house and after the train rolled by, we raced between the ties and gravel of the roadbed until we found our flattened treasures. Some had edges as sharp as razors. Not round anymore and the side of Lincoln's face was wider or mostly erased. Naturally I repeated the exercise for Maddie and Mae when it seemed age- appropriate. Later, I came to understand that "age-appropriate" can work in the other direction. If it keeps your mind off the snow filling your collar, I'll try to explain.

One day, while watching *Shanghai Noor*, that one movie with Jackie Chan, I offered a history lesson to young Mae, then in second grade. I told her what they used to call Chinese railroad workers because of the

shape of their eyes. And I also offered that Asian people in this country would refer to white Americans as round eyes. It is still deeply, deeply, embarrassing to tell this. I have plumbed the depths of this idiocy without finding a true bottom and continue to work on myself. But I didn't hear, until she was in high school, what Mae had done back then with my tidbit about eyes. She'd told it to her Asian American classmate, who burst into tears, which got Mrs. Pellegrino involved. I'm not sure why I didn't get a call from the school on that one. Maybe Mae hadn't ratted me out.

Over the years she'll tell me small things when she feels I'm ready. She spoke recently about a friend, living now in Connecticut with young kids, dogs, and fences but who, in high school, followed Mae by leaping between two rocky pinnacles in Hacklebarney State Park. Mae had just landed and turned in time to see her friend misjudge the distance, falling about thirty-five feet. Cat-like, as it turned out, and not a bruise on her. And then there was the Pinecliff Lake arrest, when her girlfriends took her fishing on a boat, and they hooked a duck. She waited a year to let me in on that one. Because a witness on another boat called the cops, Mae's group was met at the dock, but by then they had released the duck. There were no charges filed. As I tell it here with you, Chris, I wonder not so much what I would have said at the time, but what else she has protected me from.

Damn this wind!

Yeah, it's brutal; visibility sucks too. And look at

how snow is stuck fast to one side of all the trees. Keep pushing forward. I'll offer something a bit longer: We car-camped quite a bit with another family when our kids were small. Each campsite came with a fire ring and a large picnic table. One fine morning, as folks rolled out of their tents, jobs large and small were performed without discussion. We'd done it so many times. I bent low to the heap of ash from the night before, held my hand near searching for warmth, unearthed a live coal, and blew the life back into our fire. Mae and a girl about her age were at the water's edge. Maddie was three years older, and that morning had the empty face of a monk.

"See if you can find a frog, one look like that will turn him to stone," I joked.

But she only scowled and went to help lay the table for breakfast. In no time places were set, and drinks were being poured for the kids. Everyone was seated. The mothers cut sausages onto plates, and fruit passed from hand to hand. Like so many times before. I brought the percolator from the fire, lifting it carefully with the mitt, and set the steaming pot in the center of the table. I don't remember whose hand came across, or what they were reaching for. The coffee pot tumbled, and black steaming liquid spread all over. But nobody panicked, instead napkins and cloths appeared, and it seemed over before it began.

Maddie jumped up from the table, screaming. She swatted at her jeans, and I thought it was bees but then we all saw the dark stain spread upon her thigh. Still screaming, she pulled her pants down, and we all

saw it. A bright red patch about the size of a playing card, and when the jeans pulled away, a perfect square of skin came with it, as easy as peeling a sticker.

My heart was in my throat, it seemed suddenly dark, like rain about to fall, although the sky was only gray. A plan came together, and we called a nearby clinic. My wife held Maddie in the seat beside me as I drove, stealing glances every minute at her face. She was crying silently as if she were thinking of the saddest thing in the world, and I had no words to make it better.

In the clinic, we sat in a row and quickly a nurse squirted the burn with saline, and Maddie watched with interest and held the gauze pad over it as she was told. I held her other hand and her mom stroked her hair until she shook her head no, I listened to her breathing become slower, more measured, and allowed myself a mental sigh. The resident in the white coat ducked behind curtains and soft voices rose and fell. One guy came in howling in a high voice. He'd put a nail from an air hammer through his forearm. It was sticking out. He wouldn't calm down. I held Maddie's hand a little tighter and she let me. We had to wait a long time for the resident, and we asked if Maddie could go in the pool, and what we should put on her burn. He had to get a book and look it up.

"It's probably his first week," I whispered in our daughter's ear.

"Looks like Doogie Howser too," she said. Of course she was fine. Just a second - degree burn after all was said and done. My wound took a little longer to

heal, but you've got to know: you're going to injure your child.

I feel like I'm talking to the mountain. You know what, mountain? I've stopped shivering.

That's good, Chris. That's good. Maybe time for a few more.

Much later, when your kid is in soccer, or swimming, and there are club teams, and they practice in three different towns and compete in seven more and you look at the carpool option and say no. Because why join a cult where you must participate in a dozen weekly phone calls every time the regular order is blown up because someone wants to trade Wednesday with Thursday and would you please pick up Ashley on Thursday no not this Thursday the next Thursday you'd better write it down and of course call. Call if anything changes. Chris, you have no idea. So, you ditch the carpool and drop off your own kid and stay through practice. It might be quality time together but of course she doesn't want to talk to you on the way there and she's too tired and sweaty on the way home. Headphones make the point most elegantly; eyes seek an elsewhere point down the highway somewhere, so you just drive. And you tell yourself it counts; it will mean something someday. I'm telling you, buddy, you'll want this too.

Let me tell you about this one time I drove across two states to take my daughter to a party. My wife and I went to Connecticut for lunch. Maddie wanted to stay home, which was okay; she was sixteen. When it was time to drive home, snow had started falling. A winter

storm called Shock-Tober or Snow-Tober had begun, and inches piled up quickly. On our way home she started calling, "When are you guys gonna be here?"

I explained the snow and how long it takes from Old Kent to our house in northern Jersey. I didn't tell her we were hung up in a line of cars behind one woman too scared to move. The line didn't move. It was a two-lane backroad, trees on both sides; everything outlined in snow. It took almost five hours for a two-hour drive; the thruway had one lane partly plowed, and she called again. The power was out, and she had a fire going in the living room. She had found candles and wanted to know, "Are you guys close at all?"

I was proud thinking she could handle herself in an emergency, but she was worried about the party. Her phone was low. She wouldn't call again for a while. When at last we got home, I couldn't pull into the driveway because she came stomping out immediately, in a cocktail dress and heels (it was a dress-up party), traded places with her mom, and I drove across town in the gathering dark. Trees had become ghoulish shapes; some bent double under the weight of snow. It's not supposed to drop twelve inches while there are still leaves on all the branches. Many limbs lay on the ground, still attached but defeated. Fallen trees blocked some lanes and there were wires down. At last, when I could drive no closer, I stopped to let Maddie out, said good night, and watched her trudge the last few hundred feet to the house where her friends waited.

There are lines in life so faintly drawn they seem

not to separate anything at all. But step over one and what you've left behind never seems the same. Like maybe, Chris, the first word Solomon ever spoke was such a line. He went from a boy with a light in his eyes to a talker in that instant. As I watched Maddie pad through the snow, her ridiculous heels sinking past her bare ankles, I felt she had crossed one of those lines. It became more difficult after that to think of her as a child. When she got inside, they told her they had changed it to a pajama party because of the storm.

Want to hear a confession? I have a lifelong fear of calling people on the phone. Only friends and family, but that is no comfort, obviously. But I feel myself clamming up just thinking about dialing 'em. So, when my brother Bill came down with stage four cancer my first thought was to call him, then I gave some thought to how to go about it, and what to say. What could be said. What *could* be said? I called my younger brother John.

"Christ," I told him, "It's his wife who has stage four cancer, what the..."

"We should go down," he said, referring to Sarasota, where Bill and Joan lived. It was more of a question than a statement; the more we talked about it the less certain either of us felt. We decided I would call. The shock of it had just percolated because Joan had been our focus since her diagnosis. And Bill was only fifty-five. When I got hold of him, they'd already started hospice care, and he spoke through a morphine fog that left the talking mostly up to me. All his life, Bill loved fishing. If I wanted to get him going, I knew I could just

talk about that. So, I told him about that day in Florida when Mae caught her first fish.

My sister-in-law's husband said we should take the kids fishing after dinner. This was in Palm Beach where they lived. The town had a wharf where people watched sunsets and stuff. None of us knew how to fish, but we were their guests, so we tagged along, happy in the knowledge that we were certain not to catch anything. Pretty sure Mae was five years old, maybe six. The sun was hanging low and orange, and a haze clouded over the far shore of the Intercoastal; that's the bayside waterway. What they call it. Their cousins showed Maddie and Mae how to do it, and they got to dropping their lines into the water and reeling them back up. I figured the fun would last around ten minutes. But wouldn't you know it Mae spun around with her pole straight up, huge smile, and a dripping baby tarpon firmly hooked. She started to swing it back and forth slowly to show the fish to us, the kids all hooted and I was just beginning to think about getting the camera when a pelican, with a yellow bucket for a jaw, swooped in low and swiped the fish right off and was just gone, I kid you not. Believe this, if you get a chance to tell a fisherman a fish story you take it.

Breathe in now. This always had an expiration date, sorry brother. This was always going to end with one of us falling in the snow and one, well, just not being there, not having ever been there. The snow was temporary, sudden, not to be trusted. If your life was inevitable, it was also temporary. But the snow didn't kill

you, my friend. My voice carried to you, each word on a snowflake, with hope that you could find ease in that lonely place. I couldn't be less helpful if I tried. Maybe we arrived at the same conclusion. Anyway, there's a picture going around, a nice picture, of you riding Solomon on your shoulders. In the picture, you're both smiling. Your ending, elusive, doesn't rest with you. It rests with him. Breathe out.





Endless Horizons

G.E. Forest

Come. Join. Come see what I can see.
I will take you to the place where black ink meets the sea.
To the place where words are heard, a place where you'll be free.
Don't say no, just stretch your wings, go forth, rove infinity.





Friend You Haven't Seen in a While Bingo Card

C.J. Jones

They still smell like their old house, but you don't tell them that. That would be weird.	"No way, I almost didn't recognize you from over there, haha!"	They will inform you which old classmates of yours are pregnant now. Without asking, of course.	Try not to blame them for what they said about you. They were young. You were too.	They will ask how your semester is going. Make sure to lie.
You notice the cross dangling from their neck. It's staring at you.	You don't make eye contact. You never make eye contact.	You know things about them. They probably know things about you. Maybe.	Pretend not to recognize them. It's not going to work, but try to pretend anyway.	Make abstract plans for some point in the future that neither of you plan to follow up on.
You're in a picture on their mom's Facebook from their graduation party. You kinda wish you weren't.	They will attempt to dap you up. Or a hug, maybe? You will turn it into a weird handshake either way.	"How are *you* doing?"	You were really hoping that they wouldn't see you. Maybe they were hoping you wouldn't see them.	Start thinking about the last time you saw them. It was a funeral, right?
You're walking behind them. Very slowly. Don't walk past them.	Pretend not to realize how much weight you've gained since the last time you saw them.	Tell them all the personal updates they don't actually want to hear. Get it over with.	Pretend you don't know which Bible verses are in their Instagram bio.	"Remember that one time? With the goat noises? You remember when you did that?"
You have nothing in common anymore. The only thing left to discuss is the past.	"An English degree, huh? What do you even *do* with one of those?"	They're in the middle of telling you an old story they think you were there for. You never were.	Try to stop yourself from wondering who they voted for. It will be difficult.	You hear someone calling your name through your headphones. The voice is familiar.



Growing Up on Gravy

Sidney Acree

I am five years old. Tucked perfectly snug with my baby blanket and Dora-branded pillow, the smell of warm chocolate and fresh biscuits hit my nose. I begin to hear the sounds of many voices making their way inside for breakfast. Following them, the smell of cracklings and cold morning air. It was a cozy smell, almost cold but still brushed with the aroma of smoke. When exiting my room, I am greeted by Papaw's friends.

"What are you doing sleepin' so late on hog killin' day, pretty girl?"

"Now you better get out there and start renderin' the lard,"

"I can't believe your Mamaw don't have you-a-cookin' yet."

Everyone laughs at their jokes, and I make a mean face because I am not yet old enough to help the men. Mamaw fusses about how "that little girl" needs her sleep, and it's only seven in the morning. She brings me a plate of chocolate biscuits and gravy, and I eat while listening to the men contemplate which hog will be best for killing next.

I am ten years old. My grandma wakes me up with the news that school is canceled due to snow. I wipe the sleep out of my eyes and look out the sunroom window toward the field. Papaw's blue Ford tractor shines brightly against the blanketed white land. He's

carrying out a bale of hay for the cattle. On a warmer day, he would offer me a ride. I'd sit on his leg and bump along, listening as he told me how to drive the tractor. Today, though, I am hungry and excited for whatever it is Mamaw has begun to make in the kitchen. I sit at the island and watch her dump flour and milk into a bowl. Not once did she measure as she went. After putting the biscuits in the oven, she grabs the cocoa powder, and I know what is on the menu. Ten minutes later, Mamaw and I sit down with our delicious plates and listen to the morning news, waiting for Papaw to arrive and tell us how the cattle are handling the weather.

I am fifteen years old. It is seven in the morning, and it's time for my grandpa to drive me to school. Mamaw has been working at her restaurant since four AM, but the time that she looks forward to most in the morning has now come. I hop into my grandpa's 2005 Chevrolet Silverado, and we begin our ten-minute drive into town. Soon enough, we arrive at Mamaw's restaurant, which was still called The Bait Shop, as she didn't want to change the name of the well-known business that had been there prior. Each table is full. Many men ramble on about politics or how hot the weather has been. Some mothers attempt to coerce their babies into eating their food. A few of my friends from school stand in line to check out, grabbing their food quickly, then heading to class. My grandma greets everyone by name, and has memorized most everyone's order. I dash behind the counter and give her a big hug. She smells of cooking grease and has stains of flour on her shirt.

Turning around, she hands me my to-go dish of chocolate biscuits and gravy, and I head off to school.

I am twenty years old now. I wake up at my house in Lexington. No longer am I welcomed by the warm scents of hog killing day, the great news of school being canceled, or my Papaw's morning drive. For breakfast, I prepare an egg and sausage sandwich from Trader Joe's and whole wheat toast with olive butter spread. It is Friday. I begin to think about how I will wake up in the morning after my two and a half hour drive home once classes end.

As I eat my breakfast, I give Mamaw a call. "I'll be home in the morning. You think we could fix some chocolate gravy and biscuits together." I can almost hear the smile in her voice when I ask. The smell, though imaginative, begins to come back to me. I hang up the phone and grin, because in the morning I will wake up in a full house. I will hear my Papaw leave to feed the cattle when the sun rises, and I will eat my chocolate gravy and biscuits with Mamaw, while we sip coffee and watch the morning news.



Roadkill Queers

Mercy Rust

must laugh to survive
(so says the coyote
as he bleeds out on some asphalt sideline)
must eat, take joy where it is found, dance.
what else is there?
love is a debasement
love is an offense
(to the good people, the law, the church, the LORD)
love is when the car blows through your ribcage at 60 miles an hour.
all my friends
live on the side of the road
(or die on the side of the road)
marginalia, discarded, mason jar—
but we have a pretty good time, all things considered.





What is the Spanish Word for Tobacco?

Catherine Vincent

Only Salvador calls me Caterina
Sweating in dry tobacco fields, sun touching our scalps
Kicking up dust, waving his trowel
¡Hola Caterina!

Tobacco seedlings spoiled by stem rot
Discarded to the earth, deserted as the tractor lurches forward
We say a farewell to those forsaken
Adiós planta.

Goodbyes flow from my tongue
Flawed in speech, spoken with sincerity
Salvador laughs, asks me
¡Caterina! ¿You know Español?

Friday, Salvador was taken away as if spoiled by stem rot
No more Spanish spoken beneath summer sun and soil
Dusty and withered like the tobacco in the barn,
Caterina is an empty word on stale air

I say a farewell to those forsaken
Adiós planta.





Be Safe

Trinity Bohannon



I've never touched
a bottle.
Drunk, only from his
lips.
The simplicity of
slurred lyrics,
hands gently grazing
hips.
Intoxicated by the
moonshine
glimmer in dark
eyes.
So far gone, I lost
myself too.
Clinging to the influenced
lies.
Sinking in secrets, our
shame to share.
Leaving me, lonely all
along.
Now I'm sick
to my stomach
wondering where I went
wrong.



I turn twenty this week and all I can think about is how someone said the way I share things makes them feel voyeuristic. This morning my new grandpa said he had a Reddit account and I spent an hour working that into a poem. Last year I wrote a book about someone I only knew through Instagram. I hate the word voyeuristic—the way it implies a perversion on my part. When I totaled my car a few days ago it was because I was too busy writing to focus on the road, and even staring down my friends tonight I can't focus on anything but how to alchemize the people I know into characters. I worry I've spent my life pursuing something I'm only sufficient at. I worry I won't do my family justice in their eulogies when they die. I worry I can only tell someone how much I love them by writing them a story and throwing it in the creek. I met my idol and couldn't put together a coherent sentence. The worst part about me is that I've never been able to organize my thoughts into succinct patterns until I'm reading them retroactively. Nothing makes sense until it's outside of me. There are certain people I've declared too sacred to write about, but do I really have to ask permission to put someone into my thoughts?

I thought writing would tell me something about nineteen.



Roots

Margaret Sansoucy

I watch from windows as we pass
House
After
House.
Brick walls,
Painted wood,
Large windows,
Small porches.



Each one is slightly different,
But I imagine the similarities:
The parents moving in,
Young and in love.
Children growing up
Knowing they are safe;
Moving out but always coming back.
Names scrawled on walls,
Stories carved into stonework,
Foundations being built and never taken away.

No moving truck.
No new zip codes.
What must that be like,
To go home
And think of one place?
To know without a doubt where you are from?
I imagine it must be nice.

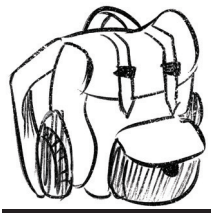
I used to pity people who never knew of the world.
Who never saw foreign countries,

Who never saw other cultures.
I thought they were trapped by their roots,
But what if it wasn't entrapment,
But a warm embrace after a long day?
A knowledge that everything will be okay
As long as you can come back
Here.
There.
And that's nothing to pity.

Now I'm the one to pity.
I've seen parts of the world,
I've seen other cultures.
My roots have never trapped me.
I fly from place to place,
From person to person,
Unafraid to leave welcome signs in my rearview,
Burned bridges I never look back at.
I never had any roots to trap,
Or to embrace,
And it's not too late, really.
Maybe I still can grow them,
Spread deep into rich soil some day.

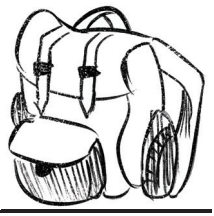
But I balk at signing a lease for more than a year.
I wince when my suitcase grows dust.
So I pack my bag,
I load up my car with familiarity,
And I watch out the windows,
Past welcome signs,
Past small porches,
Past brick houses,
Past all the roots I'll never know.
But I keep imagining.





The Ride

Paige Workman



The night pressed close, thick with fog and the smell of wet pine. He had been walking for hours, boots soaked through, jeans stiff with dew. His pack was heavier than he remembered, straps digging into his shoulders. The narrow road ahead was no more than a thread of cracked asphalt vanishing into the trees.

Every few steps he looked sideways, half-expecting to see something pacing him between the trunks. A shift in the shadows, or even the glint of predatory eyes. The silence of the woods was wrong—too heavy, too still. No crickets, no owls, no rustle of small animals in the underbrush. It was as though the night was holding its breath around him. The only sound that cut through the gloom was his labored pants, though they did nothing to ease the sharp tightness in his chest.

He swallowed hard around the dry lump in his throat. There was an unrelenting ache in his chest from running earlier, though he told himself he hadn't run that far. Just far enough to get clear of the campsite when the snarling began. He hadn't looked back—hadn't wanted to—but he thought he'd heard something akin to a scream. Or maybe it had been his own voice breaking.

He shifted his pack higher and forced himself to keep moving. The road was safer. He just had to reach a town, a gas station, anywhere with people and lights.

Water would ease the rawness in his throat, but his canister was left behind somewhere. His desperation was not enough to overcome his fear, to convince him to turn back for it. When headlights finally bloomed in the fog behind him, relief surged so sudden it almost knocked him to his knees. He raised his arm before he even thought about it, thumb jutting out. Anything would be better than staying out here. If they wouldn't pick him up, maybe he could at least get confirmation that he was heading back toward civilization. The vehicle slowed: an old sedan, its paint dulled to the gray of ash. The driver rolled down the window.

"You need a ride?"

The voice was steady. Not young, not old, and not marked by any accent he could place. It was only remarkable in the way that it was unidentifiable. The driver wore glasses; the faintest glint reflected off of the circular lenses. The hitchhiker hesitated. Every warning he'd ever heard about hitchhiking crowded his mind. But the fog pressed cold and damp against his skin, and his legs trembled from exhaustion. And, he figured he must cut a much more suspicious figure than the man inside the car, after dragging himself through the darkened woods until he reached the road.

"Yeah," he finally said. "Thanks."

The handle was cold enough to send a shiver up his arm when he pulled it. Inside smelled faintly of leather and something sweeter, like cedar smoke. It was hard to tell over the mustiness that clung to the interior, leading him to briefly wonder if the car had been shut

away in a garage for a while. He dropped into the seat, clutching his pack to his chest. The door closed behind him with a heavy click. He cast a passing glance to the dashboard, hoping to reorient himself somewhat by finding the time, but it was entirely analogue. The tiny rectangle that he imagined might have once displayed the hour was cracked and dim.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked, steering the sedan smoothly back onto the road.

"Anywhere with lights," he muttered. "Ellington, maybe. Wherever is closest is fine. I'll figure it out when I get there."

Neither of the men really looked at the other, and the hitchhiker could not decide if he appreciated this or was unnerved by it. From the corner of his eye, he saw the driver nod. His hands rested loosely on the wheel. The car moved with uncanny smoothness, as though the pavement itself were carrying them instead of tires.

"You've been walking a long way," the driver said.

The hitchhiker frowned. "Yeah. Guess it shows." He shifted his backpack toward his knees to cast a glance down at himself. The pale gray light that sifted through the fog was enough for him to tell that his favorite jacket was covered in dirt and more tattered than whole.

"It does." The driver said plainly, without judgment.

The radio crackled to life, a burst of static before violins poured softly through the speakers. An old song,

one he thought he'd heard in a movie once. The melody curled into the cabin, delicate and out of place in the damp night.

"You don't mind the music, do you?" the driver asked.

He shook his head. "No. It's fine."

The driver smiled faintly. "Good. It helps pass the time."

The hitchhiker sank into the seat, breathing out slowly as the tension in his body finally began to ease. He turned to examine the driver next to him, who either didn't notice his staring or chose to politely ignore it. The light was enough for him to see the lines on the man's face behind his glasses, but he wasn't sure if they indicated age or just a joyful life. If the music was anything to go by, they were certainly of different generations, but maybe he was just the sort of man who enjoyed the classics.

The heater blew weakly, more lukewarm than hot, but at least it kept the fog from his bones. For a while, they drove without speaking. The music continued to cut through the quiet with only the occasional crackling of static, dissolving the edge of awkwardness around their silence. The road unspooled endlessly before them, white lines swallowed as soon as the headlights touched them. The hitchhiker stared out the window, but the fog pressed close, showing him nothing beyond the glass except the occasional shadow. He tried to convince himself the lingering tension in his gut was only hunger, or lack of sleep.



"You camping out here?" the driver asked suddenly.

His stomach lurched. "Yeah," he said. His voice cracked, and he forced a laugh. "Not a good night for it."

The driver's gaze didn't leave the road. "You were in the woods. Heard something moving."



The hitchhiker's hands clenched around the sides of his pack. From the driver's tone, he wasn't sure if he should interpret his words as a question or a statement. "Yeah," he said again, quieter. He couldn't bring himself to explain anything with his waning adrenaline. Couldn't bring himself to say the word beast. Saying it out loud would make it real.



The driver's voice spoke in a measured rhythm. "There are things out there bigger than us. Faster. Hungrier."

The hitchhiker swallowed hard, throat still dry. "I got away."

The driver hummed, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.



The radio changed songs with only a second of static as warning, sliding into a woman's voice. The melody was old, aching, full of emotion. Something about it struck him, catching in his throat. Though this time, instead of exertion, that feeling was one of nostalgia.

"My mom used to sing that," he muttered.

The driver nodded once, as though that were expected.



Unease prickled his skin. He shifted in his seat, staring harder at the window. For a moment, he thought

he saw movement in the fog—long, lean shadows loping between trees. But when he blinked, the shapes were gone.

"How much longer until we hit something?" he asked. "Town, diner, anything?" He desperately wished to ground himself. It was hard to guess what road they were even on after running for what felt like an eternity. The map he remembered studying was no help.

"Not long," the driver said. His tone was mediated, kind even. "Though it depends what you mean by something."

The bend in the road came sudden, like a fold in the world. The driver must have been familiar with the area, to drive so confidently in the limited visibility. Ahead, lights suddenly flickered in the mist—red, blue, white. The hitchhiker sat up straighter, relief sparking. Finally, people. The radio hissed and faded out as they approached.

As they drew closer, the scene sharpened: two ambulances parked at angles, their doors open; a police cruiser blocking half the road; a white Animal Control truck idling nearby. Floodlights threw stark shadows across the asphalt.

The driver slowed the vehicle, giving the area as much space as he could by drifting to the far edge of the road. Shapes moved within the haze as they passed. Paramedics bent over a stretcher. Officers marked notes on clipboards. Two men in heavy gloves hauled something massive and limp beneath a tarp—the outline of a predator, tail dragging.

The hitchhiker's blood went cold.

Past the floodlights, the ground sloped down into a clearing. He recognized the collapsed tent, the scattered gear. His gear.

His breath caught. "That's—"

The driver said nothing.

"I was just there." His voice shook. "That's my—"

"Yes," the driver said softly.

Panic surged. His breath came and went quickly, reigniting the burning in his lungs. He clutched the door handle, yanking hard. It didn't budge. He tried again, harder, until pain shot through his hand. "Stop the car! Let me out!" They were moving away from the emergency vehicles now, and he had to see. He had to see it, had to make sure, had to—

"There's nowhere to go," the driver said. His quiet sympathy was stark in the face of the hitchhiker's panic. There was no threat behind his words, instead he said them as a gentle truth.

The hitchhiker twisted in his seat, staring out the back window. The figures blurred into fog, but he thought he saw a body lifted onto the stretcher, pale hand escaping from beneath a sheet, blood darkening the fabric.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. "It can't be, right? No, I ran. I'm right here."

A beat of silence passed. Then, the driver's voice was steady. "You've been walking a long way. Longer than you realize."

Tears burned at his eyes as he mechanically

settled back in his seat. "I'm not dead."

The driver's expression didn't change, and his hands never tightened on the wheel. "Not exactly."

The radio hissed, then sparked to life again, carrying a lullaby he hadn't heard since childhood. His mother's voice had once steadied him with the same song during storms, keeping him from crying when thunder rattled the windows.

The sound gutted him. He pressed a fist to his mouth, choking back a sob that was fighting its way up his throat.

"I can't," he whispered. "I can't be... How is this happening?"

"No one is ready," the driver said. His tone wasn't cruel. If anything, it was almost kind. "But the ride comes anyway."

The hitchhiker's chest heaved, his breath ragged. He squeezed his eyes shut and memories surged—his brother he hadn't called back, the woman he hadn't apologized to, the promises he'd never kept. All of it spilling out of him at once, heavy and unfinished.

The driver glanced at him briefly. His expression wasn't cold. It was weary, maybe even tender.

"You've carried them far enough," he said.

The memories subsided for him to see the stretcher again—his body, slack and pale beneath a bloodstained sheet. A paramedic bent low, shaking his head. Suddenly, pain flared through his chest, sharp and tearing, like claws ripping him open all over again. He gasped, clutching at himself. He opened his eyes to see

his fingers, which came away slick and red.

The driver's eyes flicked toward him, dark behind the glint of glasses. "It won't last."

And it didn't. The pain ebbed as quickly as it had come. When he blinked, his hands were clean. His chest eased.

Tears blurred his vision. He let his eyes close again, breath slowing, the weight of his pack sliding from his lap to the floor. The tension and fear seemed to drift out of his body. The fog outside began to unravel, softening into something vast and endless, faintly glowing like the edge of dawn.

The driver's voice was calm. "The road only feels long until the end. You should rest, now."

For the first time in hours, he felt warm.



Empress of Night's Lullaby

Andrew Cizek

I was born under stone vow and scrawl,
With ghosts of stars watching on in awe,
As if they'd etched with furious strife
The lyric prose with fiery knife,
Happening to give me—silent—my life.
The deathly light whisks me from tomb,
Taking me, wherefore unknown, to lands anew
With budding lilies and pines alight
Under pale beauty, the Empress of Night,
Whose presence brings sweet, unearthly delights.

She peers at me—for her dark eyes I scrounge
Under her dim, silky lamp, my soul does lounge,
Listening to chirping bugs and owls' call
Before, fin'lly, her song cradles me in its lull.







Ice Crystals in July

R.M. Hayden

Are a mysterious thing.
The event is marked by
A runny nose and pink fingertips.

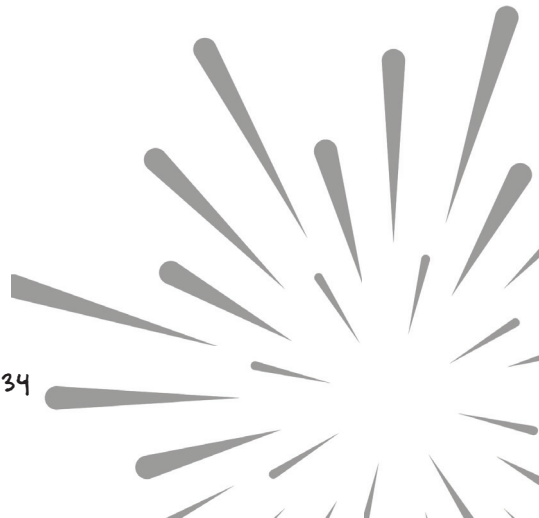


Fireworks shot off into the sky,
Like bottle rockets on the Fourth of July,
The cavalier and the compatriot!

Both enjoying their franks,
Yellow mustard upon their lips,
And green relish upon their pink fingertips.

As they observe the snowball fight upon the hill,
A boy and a girl make a Lincoln snowman.









The Climb

Reagan Garvey

All I can remember is that it was an August afternoon, or maybe a morning in May. The sun beat down on us as we lay on the driveway. I was covered in bug bites and filled with lemonade. It was the perfect day for some pointless fun.

"Let's go climb the tree!" my brother said. Our faces lit up like stars in the sky.

"Yes!" cried my sister. We quickly ran away from home towards the towering tree.

Mom and Dad were worrying after us as we started to climb. "Don't go too high!" called one. "Watch every step!" called the other as they lifted me up to the first branch.

Looking up I could tell this was no ordinary tree, or at least, it couldn't have been the tree I saw moments ago. This tree was taller, sturdier, and more magnificent than any my seven-year-old self had seen before. Its leaves were so bright and sparkling. They blew in the wind and the swishing and rustling filled the air. I couldn't see much from the base except for my dad, my mom, my brother, and my sister.

So I climbed.

As I reached for the first branch, the leaves suddenly began to shimmer and change. The expanse before me had transformed into every classroom I had ever been in. Fluorescent light flooded into the space.

Teachers were calling on me, answering my questions, yelling at me. My chair was perfectly uncomfortable. Symbols appeared on a projector at the front of the room, but I couldn't understand them and felt no inclination to try. Without thinking, I swung my legs and found they fit perfectly between the gaps in the tray under my seat.

What just happened? It all felt like a dream, but vividly real at the same time.

I laid my head down on the desk. Its smooth surface was surprisingly cool and comfortable, so I tried to relax. A wave of emotions came to me. I was sad, frustrated, and satisfied all at once. Was this really what education was meant to be?

I looked down, through the classroom floor and saw my parents smiling up at me. "How's the view?" they called.

"*Underwhelming*," I thought to myself. Since when has my vocabulary included the word "underwhelming?" My head snaps back towards the front of the room as someone says my name. The tree lies between us and I am faced with a decision. Disoriented, I reach for the next branch.

Once again the leaves began to change, and this time my siblings were climbing with me. We faced the new environment together. The space immediately became colder. Beautiful, multi-colored light came through ornate stained glass windows. A chorus sang a psalm off-key. A priest smiled at us gently—his gray complexion and soft demeanor invited us to come

closer—and he gave us the body of Christ. We knelt in front of the altar to accept it one at a time, though it didn't seem like we had much of a choice. This baptism was overwhelming, yet distant. I stood and took a step back. Looking down I met my father's softhearted eyes, now full of tears.

"Where's Mom?" I ask, choking back tears of my own now, though I don't remember crying.

The church was too much to handle.

My grip loosens so I step off the branch, jumping back down to the ground. The mirage fades and I am seven again. My parents embrace me, and check for any injuries. I am grounded. "*I don't like climbing trees,*" I think to myself. "*Why did I think this was a good idea?*" The tree, although magnificent, was confusing and difficult. Each branch was more difficult to climb than the last. I bruised my leg somewhere along the way and my mom began to interrogate me.

"Dear that looks like it hurts, are you alright? Why don't we just sit down here and watch your brother and sister climb?"

"I'm fine, Mom." I declare, though a tear remains on my face.

She wipes it from me. "Okay then. Go and catch up with them now."

I was disheartened, but determined to not fall behind my siblings.

So I climbed.

I climbed through the uncomfortable classroom.

I climbed past my brother as he remained in the

with all the questions I hadn't been able to answer, never really focusing on one, but jumping from one to the next. One thing was certain: I was eager to arrive home and see my family again. As I fell asleep I grew curious to ask my parents if they had climbed this tree when they were younger.

The tree!

The vision was so genuine I had completely forgotten how I came to be in this bus seat. I shot up again and started reaching for the branch when light came flooding in from the front of the bus. I peered down the center aisle expecting to see the sunrise.

The road signs blurred into shapes I didn't recognize as our driver yelled, "Dear God! Brace for impact!"

*

Someone slammed into me and spilled their drink everywhere.

Everyone stopped to stare for a moment before breaking into dance again. My head ached terribly. "*Is this what a party is*?" I thought to myself, somewhat disappointed. Empty beer cans and empty promises of fun filled the air. Unrecognizable music blasted through my body and my thoughts felt fuzzy. It felt as though my entire life had led up to this moment, the kind that's supposed to make everything worth it, but no one seemed to care. Or maybe they cared too much, singing over each other as if volume could make the night eternal. Snow was falling outside and the floors became increasingly slippery from each new entry to the party. Every decoration and piece of furniture looked as if it

cold church.

I climbed even higher to catch up to my sister as the world changed once more.

Before I could reach her I found myself lying down in the middle of a school bus. My mouth was dry. I suddenly felt so tired but I shot up in my seat to take in my surroundings. The hum of the bus's engine filled what would otherwise be a silent cabin. Classmates and teachers were sleeping in a variety of uncomfortable looking positions all around me. It was pitch black except for the faint light of the moon and the glow from a couple of phone screens scattered throughout the aisle. My best friend was slumped over the seat next to me using a school sweatshirt as his pillow.

I had no idea why the tree had brought me here, so I stayed put in my seat, watching for road signs and fighting off sleep. I began to wonder if these visions were an insight into my future. "*If that's the case,*" I thought, "*then are the decisions I make on my own or are they predetermined?*" Had my brother and sister also been on this bus? When would I be able to go home? Hours had gone by as the moon began to dip below the horizon line and I became increasingly confused by my situation.

The solitary time was incredibly thought provoking, though I couldn't come up with any decent answers to my own questions. I resigned from my conversation to readjust my seat and get some rest. I leaned against the side of the bus and rested my head against the cool window. The engine droned on and coaxed my eyes to close. My body was ready to shut off but my mind raced

had been bought from Facebook Marketplace.

"Hey! Are you okay?" My sister asked as she put her arm around me. "You look like you just got hit by a bus." She laughed and I (although very confused) returned the comment with a smile. I was so relieved to see her again. "Tonight is going to be the best, let me get you something," she decided. My sister stood up and walked over to one of her friends.

I took a seat next to someone I didn't recognize and they immediately moved away to another seat. Everyone's faces were distantly familiar, as if they were once actors from commercials I had seen growing up, but I couldn't remember anyone's names. Someone who was obviously intoxicated came up to me and said something unintelligible to which I replied, "Yeah!" The friendly stranger seemed satisfied with my response and gave me a hug before finding another partygoer to subject to the same routine.

I wasn't sure how I had arrived at the party but it seemed like it was just getting started. My sister returned and handed me something. I drank it routinely, without question. I felt as though I could do anything, go anywhere, be anyone. I wanted more of whatever was happening, and I needed it yesterday. My body started to dance without my permission, and I let go.

What felt like hours passed before my head stopped spinning. I held back my sister's hair as she dry heaved. It was quiet now, and her irregular breathing was starting to scare me. Nobody was around to help us. I considered the car keys in my pocket as her breathing

became even worse. It felt as though my entire life had led up to this moment, the kind that made you wish you could take everything back, but no one seemed to care. The party's glow had faded, its energy spent, leaving behind only shadows.

My big sister rested upon my unprepared shoulders as I struggled to our car. I desperately wished our mom and dad were there. How could this happen? Where did everyone go? Why does this keep happening? I needed to find help. I needed a way out. Miraculously, after I had situated my sister in the passenger seat, the branch appeared again.

Memories of the classroom, church, and bus came flooding back to me.

"Shit."

My stomach turned. I wanted to go home. I wanted to go home so badly. What happened to me on the bus? Where was my brother and why wasn't he with us? I looked to my sister and let out a sigh as the heat began to kick in. Thankfully, she fell right asleep.

I took a deep breath and considered my situation. I couldn't find the base of the tree by looking down, through the mirage as I had done before.

So I do what I have done my whole life.

I climb.

*

The air starts to clear. The mirage fades. I am standing at the top of the tree. It's beautiful. I can see over the neighboring houses. I can see beyond my known experiences. The world sprawls out before me.

Looking down, I feel every branch I had conquered to get to this moment. At the base of my magnificent tree I see my family perfectly clearly. Their worn faces smile up at me. I smile back.

I am alone on top of the world. I cannot climb any higher, but I start ascending into the clouds. *Who planted this tree?* I think.

I have no control over where I am going, but I feel as though I have never been more intimately in tune with an experience. I sit on the branch for a while and let time pass. I cry. It is beautiful.

More time passes and I sit across from myself. Curiously, I ask, "Did we turn out alright?"

"Who knows?"

"You would say that."

He stands up and walks along a branch like a tightrope. Fearlessly he dances from one branch to another with the world far below him. He is free. He is everything I want to be.

I sit in silence. I had never felt as I did in that moment and something told me I would never feel the same again, at least, I wouldn't remember feeling so. I watch myself in wonder. I was so unique. So full of potential.

More time passed before he sat down next to me again. I don't know what to say but the words, "I'm scared," escape my mouth. We meet each other's eyes. I know he and I are the same but I can't comprehend how different I look. His eyes seem to know more than mine. His skin is tougher than mine. He smiles a bit wider

than I am able to. Taking a deep breath he tells me, "They need you."

"I need you."

We embrace and he departs from our branch. Confidence fills my soul and I climb down through the parties, churches, and classrooms. I hug my family and hold them dearly. I am seven again, and happily so. The tree stands before me, its magnificent leaves blowing through the air.

"Did you have fun?" my mother asks. I think for a moment.

"Can we climb it again tomorrow?" I reply.

She frowns at me before giving into her smile.

"Of course, dear. That's why it's here."





Lament to the Skies

Kara Erdman

I'll see you in the night; in the night, will I see you?
well, I sure hope I do.

in the stars, in the skies, do you wait every night to shine
down on me?
or do you sleep or do you weep or do you wish I was
better or do you wish I was clean?

well, I'll scrub off anything that ever made me me just so
you can see that I am clean.
I'll scrub off my thoughts and those gods you believe in,
so I'll be a heathen, so you won't be lost.

can't cover the cost, my heart's been broke since you flew
to the stars and left me home, all alone, just a
child in the darkness of the unknown, now you
need someone to let you go, so I'll let you go.

go be a star in the sky in the loneliest night and I'll let
you leave me behind.
go fly to the moon, to the clouds, I'll watch you pass
around and hope one day someone lets go of my
doubt and be proud of the star I'll become, once
kingdom come, perhaps I'll be with you now.

or perhaps I'll never see you in the night and I'll never
get to say goodbye.

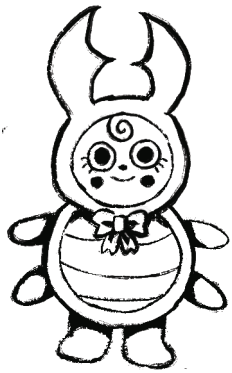




So They May Hear You in the City

Jackie and the Cicadas

They will not sing in the city
For their symphony plays in soundless sear
Tymbals clicking with fierce alacrity
Aestival song for all to hear



Their symphony plays in monotonous sear
Terrene mutes under timeblinding sun
Ephemeral song for all to hear
One chorus uniting a brood's only run

Terrene mutes under timebinding sun
Who shed alien cribs to brave upper realm
Rise in unity for their singular run
Dispatching their seed from oak, willow, and elm

Old bodies left to endure upper realm
Crumble to dust in autumn breeze
Barren silence in oak, willow, and elm
The absence is never greeted with ease

You will be swept away in autumn breeze
So sing with fervent alacrity
Your absence can never be greeted with ease
So sing, so they may hear you in the city





South of the Willamette

Abigail Mize

It stood south of the Willamette
where the tributary met the Columbia
River with its calm, flowing water: wild,
unruly, unkept, unbothered, the bear ate
from the salmonberry bush.

I stood frozen in awe,
watching as the majestic beast ate
the red fruit; I wished to remain suspended
in the moment. It was beautiful to
behold. The rarely captured moment in
life was right in front of me.

My mind filling with an idea, I
reached for my camera, only to
disrupt the image I so desperately
wanted to photograph. The bear
must have heard me, for it bolted
as soon as I moved.

Just south of the Willamette
the bear had stood, eating—
a moment one wished, hoped
to see. I ruined the opportunity, selfishly,
by reaching for my camera.

It had stood south of the Willamette,
eating without care.





Lament

Cassie Speltz

O Carolina, the mountains weep.
O Hurricane, lay the forests to rest.
In all my years, all my hatred seething
O, there is nothing like the budding
sunrise of the Smokies.

O bedroom, O sleep facing a mirror.
O identical twins in a painting, O moth-eaten
lampshade
above my head.

My mother, a siren warning for the next room.

O feet, ache as I trudge
forest, does extend with each heavy step.

O fantasy, one I never dreamed to
let go of; this place I despised slipping.
Slipping like red mud you can never wash out.
Slipping from my fingertips.



O morning, O windchimes
untamed in the midnight breeze.

O stars, how I believe I can reach
thee, stretch out arms on propped up feet.



Vesper to Autumn

Jackie Suggitt

Within
Cathedrals of conflagrated colours,
We marvel the dancing murmurations,
And hear the hums of harvest field hullers,
As trees sing vespers in susurrations.

Embrace
This fulgent fresco of fecundity,
As we breathe petrichor in its bowers.
Revere the sun's aureole of ruby,
Vigorous vestige in these lulling hours.

How
The bees cannot see summer's palimpsest,
Purple premonitions of sprawling nights,
This golding realm aglow before cold rest
Farewelling forever our youthful flights.

Hush
For ambered are we, once and a million,
Mounted upon time's glimmering pillion.







Meeting the Neighbor

Emely Batista

Scene: An upper-middle class suburban neighborhood. Jim is going to knock on the door of his newly moved-in neighbor.

Jim: [Knocks on door, holding a housewarming gift]

[Someone creaks the door open slightly. Their face is obscured by darkness.]

Jim: Hello there! Was hopin' to, y'know, introduce myself to the new neighbors. [Awkwardly chuckles]

[The "person" opens the door to reveal that they're a zombie. They start moaning and snarling.]

Jim: Jesus Christ! [Jolts, dropping his housewarming gift]

Zombie: Graaugh! Urgh! Uh... [Clears throat] Sorry, sorry! Yeah, I'm sorry, uh. I should've told you that I, uh, am... uh.

Jim: Oh! Sorry, I had no idea, ha! [Awkwardly chuckling] Y-You can speak English?

Zombie: Yeah. I, uh... Was actually born here. The "gurgling" you heard was my GERD...

Jim: Ah, acid reflux? [Trailing off] My cousin was diagnosed with that...





Zombie: Yeahhhhhh...

[Awkward silence]

Jim: Well then! Let me properly introduce myself. The name's Jimmy Smith and I'm your friendly neighbor. You can just call me Jim for short! My kids saw a movin' van outside the house and, yep! That's why... That's why I'm here, heh! Meetin' the neighbors! [Puts hand out for a handshake]

Zombie: Oh, cool. Happy to meet you too. [Extends hand to shake]

[Jim firmly shakes the zombie's hand causing the zombie's hand to fall onto the floor. The hand starts writhing on the ground.]

Jim: Oh, golly! I'll just, uh, [Leans down and picks the hand up by the fingers] pick that up for ya'.

Zombie: [Talking over Jim] Shoot, um... Yeah, that's— If you could just— Yeah, thanks.

Jim: [Talking over the zombie] I'll just, heh, put that back.

[Jim tries to put the hand on the zombie's wrist but they both aim in different directions.]

Jim: Nope, that ain't—

Zombie: Oh, um— You can just—





[They try again and go the opposite directions again.]

Jim: That ain't workin'— Y'know what... I'll just—

[Jim sighs and just gives the zombie his hand back.]

Zombie: Yeah...I'll take that.

Jim: I am so sorry—

Zombie: [Interrupts] It's okay, it, yeah— It happens all the time.

Jim: Well. As I was, sayin', I... [Pauses] I hope you're not too busy 'cause I was thinkin' we could have a little chat as friendly neighbors inside?

Zombie: Actually, I... Uh. [Pauses] You know what? Sure... Come in.

[The zombie opens the door fully and invites Jim inside.]

Jim: I see you're still movin' in! Y'know, I remember me and my wife, Shannon, movin' in this neighborhood and, whew, that was somethin'!

Zombie: Oh, really? [Starts pouring Jim a drink]

Jim: [Setting down housewarming gift on table] Sure was! There were so many, y'know, things we had to unpack and— Good lord, those boxes were heavy. Those boxes were killin' me! Shannon was sure I would be a dead man...





[Jim looks at the zombie.]

Jim: I mean! Not "dead man," of course! [Awkwardly chuckling] I meant, that I was, y'know, tired— But not sayin' all dead men are tired, I just meant— Y'know?

Zombie: [Look confused] What?

Jim: N-Nevermind. I was just sayin' me and Shannon had some trouble with our move-in day, so if you have any trouble with yours, please don't be afraid to give us a call!

Zombie: Thanks, I, uh, appreciate it.

Jim: Y'know, I've been just talkin' your ear off about me, but I'm curious to know more about my new neighbor, heh! [Takes a sip of the drink] What brought you into the neighborhood?

Zombie: Well, I, uh... I mainly came over here, uh, because of job opportunities and, yeah. Oh! I also really like the grapeyard here. It's comforting and, uh, half the reason why I chose this area.

Jim: Ooh! I lived here for 'bout ten years and I had no idea we had a graveyard!

Zombie: Uh... Grapeyard? [Overpronounces the "p" sound]

Jim: Of course. Of course you meant the grapeyard, what was I thinkin'? [Awkwardly laughs it off then mumbles to himself] Fell right into that one, Jim.





Zombie: But... Uh, yeah. Besides that, it was mainly, uh, job opportunities. I work in the medical field.

Jim: Wow! Ain't that impressive! Nice to know I can call up a doctor anytime now. [Laughs] What kind of doctor?

Zombie: Heh, I'm a neurosurgeon.

Jim: ...

Zombie: ...

Jim: ...

Zombie: I'm joking.

Jim: Oh! [Awkwardly forced laughing as he's talking] Phew, I thought— You got me there, whew! I thought you were being genuine for a sec there, ha ha!

Zombie: Yeah, that'd be... Heh, that'd be pretty bad.

Jim: Sure would be! [Laughing trails off] So, what actual kind of doctor are ya'?

Zombie: Well, I am actually an infectious disease specialist.

Jim: Aw, c'mon stop pullin' my leg now! [Awkwardly laughing again] I wouldn't trust you stoppin' a zombie outbreak!

Zombie: Uh... That is my, uh, actual job... [Looks around awkwardly] I work for the CDC.





Jim: [Laughing slowly stops] W-Wait. You're not jokin'?

[The zombie shakes his head and points to his framed medical school degrees on his wall, one of the only things that he managed to unpack.]

Jim: [Speechless and stuttering over his words] I... Wh...

Zombie: It's fine, I was— I was, uh, messing with you earlier so...

Jim: [Quietly] Good lord, I am so sorry ... It is, um, once again good to know that you are a doctor. My kids get colds all the time so... [Trailing off]

Zombie: Yeah, I— [Trailing off with him] Yeahhhhh...

[There's an awkward silence. Jim pretends to look at his broken watch. He then slaps his knees and gets up from the couch.]

Jim: [Shaky voice] Well won't ya' look at the time! Looks like I gotta go home and start helpin' make dinner for my kids, ha!

Zombie: Yeah, I have to be, uh, somewhere after this...

Jim: Oh, yes, of course, of course!

Zombie: [Awkwardly smiles] It was, uh, nice talking to you, though.

Jim: It was nice talkin' to ya' too!





[A pause happens then Jim blurts out.]

Jim: Y'know what... You should... Come over for dinner... T-Tomorrow!

Zombie: T-Tomorrow? [Eyes widen] Uh... Thanks, but—

Jim: [Interrupts him] See ya' there!

[Jim walks towards the door and is about to leave when the zombie quickly limps over to him.]

Zombie: Actually! Jim...

Jim: [Turns around] Y-Yes?

Zombie: I don't... [Sighs] I really don't, uh, want to be rude about this, but, uh... You're a really nice guy and all and I really do, uh, appreciate you coming over but this was—

Jim: [Interrupts] ...Really awkward?

Zombie: Yeahhhhh... And with full respect, I really don't want to... Go to a dinner where it, uh, still might be, um...

Jim: [Interrupts again, sighing] ...Really awkward?

Zombie: Yeahhhhh... You— I just feel, uh...

[The zombie clears his throat and puts reassuring hands on Jim's shoulders.]

Zombie: Listen, Jim... You don't *have* to talk to me.





Jim: I don't have to talk to ya'?

Zombie: You really don't.

Jim: [Surprised] ...Really? So, you won't feel any type of, y'know, offense if I don't...

Zombie: I would, uh, honestly prefer it! I'm pretty introverted anyways...

Jim: [Comfortingly smiles] Oh, thank God...

Zombie: [Laughs] Yeah, really don't worry about it. I understand that, uh... I'm a bit "different" from, uh, other neighbors you've had, so...

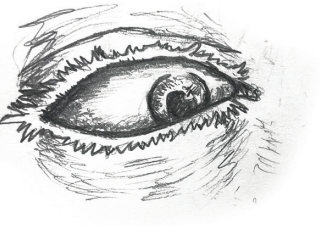
Jim: Definitely, [Sighs] Definitely...

[Jim opens the door and looks back, smiling, at the zombie before he goes back to his house.]

Jim: See ya' outside when you're mowin' the lawn?

Zombie: [Smiles] I'll *just* wave, Jim. I'll *just* wave.

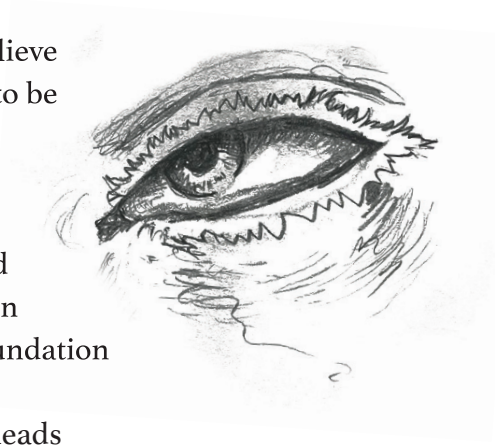
FIN.



Squinting Single

Isabelle Morgan

I've often wondered what words
What phrases you promised each other
What you secretly vowed together
And why the breaths between
Make me desperate to dispute
The curiosity doesn't end with you
I'm confused by nearly every couple's
Quiet moments when the room belongs to only the two
When I can tell watching is to intrude
But I just want to understand
How a pair agrees
How these separate entities believe
That their bodies were meant to be
Tied together
So I watch
Observing then debating how
This could realistically succeed
Somehow I always find a reason
A flaw that would crack my foundation
But it isn't up to me
The day ends with only their heads
On the pillow
So I go to sleep with these thoughts
While they imagine a world with more trees







Xylocopa

Chase Myers

The carpenter bees shake sawdust off their hind-legs. Dad is yelling behind the grill, his big, hairy arms thrown up in frustration.

"Caveman," the cul-de-sac kids call him. The grill smoke makes him choke and scream and bang his spatula against the propane tank like *clang-clang*.

Sis is ignoring him and tells me the bees go by *Xylocopa* in her science books. It sounds like the name of a dinosaur. I'm scared of their sting and burrow my face into her shoulder.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them," she tells me. Her natural wisdom feels like a wool blanket over my head.

Dad always says she'll make a great mother someday. That makes her face scrunch up weird. Like old cabbage. But she still smiles.

I can feel a bone poking out of her skin. *Acromion* the science book says. I can see them all on her. *Clavicle. Scapula. Floating ribs.* I can see them all.

I ask if carpenter bees make honey. The answer is no. I ask if Dad's burgers are ready. The answer is not yet. I ask if she's going to die. The answer is we all die.

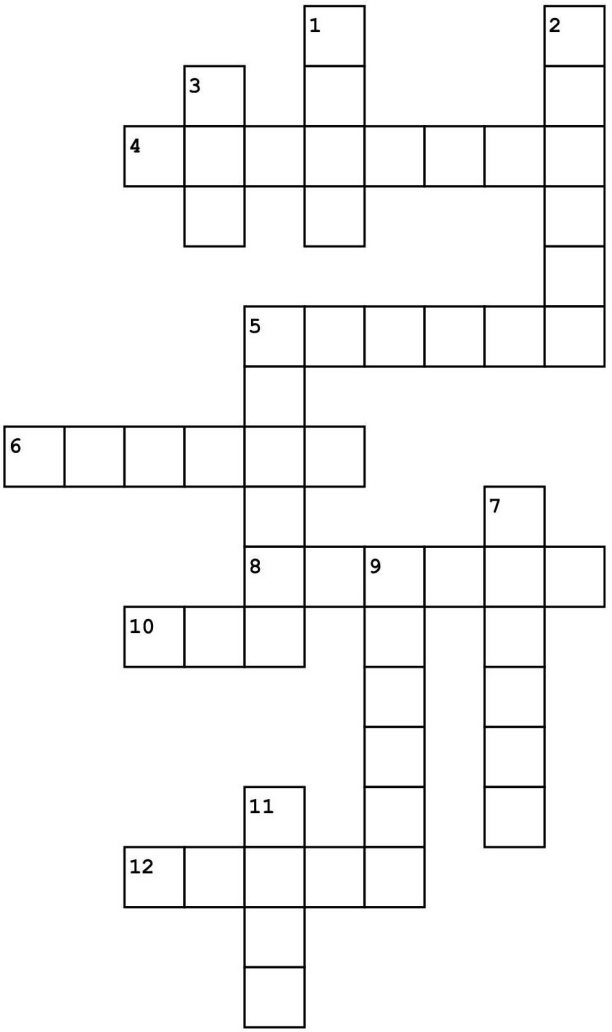
She tells me to ignore their buzzing. Enjoy the view.

The milkweed is beneath my father's feet, trying to grow. The dog is laid out, panting and dirty. The trampoline is sinking into the mud.

The buzzing is still above me.

crossword!

Thanks for reading!



Across:

4. the national novel writing month
5. an overused word or phrase
6. an Arabic verse form consisting of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets
8. a petrarchan sonnet features an octave, a volta, and a ____
10. an archaic term for "before"
12. the deposit publishes both poetry and _____

Down

1. "and they all lived happily ____ after"
2. a five-letter new york times puzzle
3. short-hand for narrative perspective
5. a group of words containing a subject and a verb
7. this is the _____ edition of the deposit
9. a comparison using "like" or "as"
11. a word that refers to a person, place, or thing