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“

**I DWELL IN
POSSIBILITY.**

”

- Emily Dickinson



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EDITORS' NOTES

Each semester, the *eleven40seven* staff has the immense task of choosing the best of the incredible undergraduate student submissions here at TCU. For the anniversary section, we had the added challenge of choosing from those works that had already been chosen—the best of the best. We went through every piece from the past nine journals and picked what we thought were the top representatives of each.

I am astounded and warmed by the level of creativity TCU students display over and over again. I'd like to commend all the artists whose works we looked through—and all the artists who've submitted over the years. It's no easy thing to put your creations up for judgment. Even if you weren't chosen, know that you are remarkable and an invaluable member of the community.

This semester, we faced a difficulty unlike any before: COVID-19. The staff last met in person at the beginning of March; we worked on the journal remotely for the second half of the semester, amid quarantine and concern for the health of our loved ones. They stuck with me through the constant changes, the thousands of emails, and all the unknowns.

I am honored to have worked with such an excellent, dedicated staff. And I know I'm speaking on behalf of us all when I say a huge thank you to our fearless advisor, Dr. Chantel L. Carlson.

To all the readers: art is not limited to any major. It's not restricted to talent, it's not just for certain people, and it's not objective. It's emotional and nonsensical and meaningful and honest; and honestly, we are all artists. I hope going through this journal inspires you in some way. Through the good times and the bad, may we never stop creating.

Elizabeth Afeman

Editor-in-Chief, Anniversary Edition 2020





In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, many of us have questioned how the pandemic will impact us going forward. Every day, we are surrounded by uncertainty, encouraging us to turn towards each other. As the great names throughout human history have proven to us, however, creation helps us to find solace in times of adversity.

Through art, we find ways to express the unspeakable, giving both ourselves and other people the time and space to come together, to remember where we have been and where we are now. We hope that the work in this journal, both old and new, provides the TCU community with space to reflect, serving as a reminder that we can always find some good in the world.

As we took on the role as Co-Editors-in-Chief, we were excited to work with a determined and hard-working staff, as well as celebrate the artistry of TCU students. From the very beginning, we were impressed by and beyond thankful for the amount of creativity and dedication that the staff showed. Despite the uncertainty of transitioning to distance learning, the staff never wavered in taking on the challenge of working towards our goal. When faced with limitations and novelty, we find ourselves at our greatest creative potential, and our staff only continued to prove that this is the case.

We want to thank Dr. Carlson for guiding us through this stressful time. We are incredibly thankful to have had such a supportive faculty member to help us put the journal together.

Above all, we want to thank our contributors for inspiring us with their artistry. We encourage future contributors to take any adversity you face and embrace your creativity, as others may find solace in it as well.

Hayden Ferrari and Caylie Jordan

Co-Editors-in-Chief, New Edition 2020





Wisps

Tashell Simon-Hayward



Originally published in the Spring 2019 Edition





Simple Measures for Desperate Times

Paige Poe

When the world sullies your soul,
Gather the grass stained knees, sweaty half-moons
Down to the river Lethe and scrub
Until the swirling waters erase your pain.

Find an open field. Stretch out your heart strings.
Pin up the soaking, ragged edges and watch them
Billow with each heavy breath, drying
In the morning glow,
under a cornflower sky.

Your worries will rise with the butterflies
And recycle someday as rain, falling into
Your curiously outstretched palms.
As you fold, tucking arms under body, sleeve to sleeve,
Try not to think about the horror beyond
The chore's horizon, the circle of pain
That brought you, kneeling, to the river's lip.

Repeat as often as needed.

Originally published in the Spring 2018 Edition



To Be a Black Female Writer

Ashley Parks

Is to be the principle of the thing.
To shed a blinding light on the fallacies
of the world with the tip of a ballpoint pen,
her paintbrush of choice.

A perspective
so genuine, unique, and resonant
that her stroke across the page should shatter glass ceilings.

To be a black, female, writer
is to give a voice to those who had none.
To create a world where men can fly, children can sing,
and man and woman can learn to love again.

A voice so tender, yet deafening in the content
of its delivery, the written word of these women
are the ones that build the streets
of a smoke screened civilization paved with gold.

To be black, a female, and a writer
is to carry with you always the weight of the world,
and the page is where you lay your burden to rest.

Her written words should be the first thing you
pry your eyes open to see in the early hours of the morning,
to pay homage to the time she spent at 5 am writing them.

Black,
Female,
Writers.

Double minorities,
some even triple minorities.

Everything that exists in the world
built against them.

continued, stanza break





Ashley Parks

Yet,
they continue to speak, to write, to create,
because if no one else registers the value
of what they have to say,
they will.

~ Inspired by the work of Toni Morrison.



Jellys

Nicole Bosley



Originally published in the Fall 2017 Edition





Cling

Hayley Zablotsky

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Spring 2017

Do you know what I like about fish?

Nothing, actually.

They awaken in me such a profound and disturbing pity that I can barely stand to look at them. Eyes glassy like marbles, bodies greasy and textured like the underside of a non slip shower mat. Spines like delicate combs. They are grotesque creatures, really.

Yet my family has a perverse obsession with them. We must, or we wouldn't do what we do.

The day after Thanksgiving, while the rest of America goes shopping, my family visits the fish hatchery. Every single year. We do realize that fish and the holiday season are unrelated. But we did it once -- visited the fish hatchery on Black Friday -- and now we must do it a thousand times.

It is tradition and is therefore something we must cling to.

Traditions, by definition, encompass the act of clinging. But my family takes it a step further -- we *cling* to traditions, which means that we *cling* to the act of *clinging*.

I've never been certain if going to the fish hatchery is a Thanksgiving or Christmas tradition. I'm not sure that it matters to my mom, who is insisting that we go even this year. Now that my older sister Kaitlin and I are both in college, we feel the need to assert that it would *really be okay* if we didn't go to the fish hatchery this year.

"But just think of the *experience*, girls," mom says as we reluctantly pile into the SUV. Kaitlin and I sit together in the backseat in a sort of solidarity with each other, leaving the front passenger seat to mom's tan leather purse. "You can't have this kind of experience in every city," mom says.

That's right. Only here in Sacramento, California.¹

¹ I would never recommend that you visit Sacramento. There is nothing to do here. Wait -- that's not true. We have a mediocre zoo that used to have an HIV-positive chimpanzee right near the front. That's sort of notable.





Cling

The hatchery is located on the American River, smashed between the freeway and a dizzying number of bike trails. Northern Californians *love* to bike and love even *more* to not stay in the bike lane. There are lots of bikers out today like always, and I watch their stringy taught calves pedal by after we exit the freeway.

“Have you ever noticed,” I say at a red light, “how the men bikers have no hair on their legs?” Stringy taught calves from Northern California never have hair. They are tanner and smoother and lovelier than mine.

“Air resistance,” Kaitlin informs us. “You know, like swimmers and water resistance? The tiny leg hairs slow the pedaling down.”

“Really?” mom asks from the front seat.

“*Really?*” I ask from my seat next to Kaitlin.

“Actually I’m not sure,” she says. “But probably.” There is no apology in her voice. She enjoys speaking with authority. We let her.

I look out the window again and watch a biker in a tight red biker suit pedal next to our car. His stringy taught calves from Northern California, of course, are remarkable. It makes me proud to be a Northern Californian.²

A lot of things about California are a freaking mess right now but at least we have our calves.³ You can’t take that from us.

The fish hatchery parking lot is crowded like always. There are strollers and short-legged toddlers everywhere, and Kaitlin and I give each other a look. But we know not to say anything more in complaint. We’ve been coming here since *we* were in strollers, and we don’t want to ruin the nostalgia for mom. We are going to be good sports. We have silently, mutually decided this.

The stench, the wire fences to keep the birds out, and the potholes in the concrete are so familiar as we walk up the steps of the hatchery.

2 Note that I don’t feel this feeling often.

3 And when I say “our” I do mean *all of us Northern Californians* -- even those of us who can only ride a bike until it’s time to steer.



Hayley Zablotsky

These things reach out invisible hands to me and smear patches of nostalgia all over my coat.

We fight our way through a pack of children as we approach the main gate. “Look at them all,” Kaitlin says, discreetly pointing out a staggering toddler with ruddy cheeks. “They still *believe*, you know?”

In what?” I ask.

“Oh, *everything*. Unicorns and Santa and all of it.”

“When *did* you figure out that there isn’t a Santa?” I ask Kaitlin, suddenly wondering why I’ve never asked her that before. We never talked about it. We just both figured it out and silently agreed not to discuss it.

“*Shh*,” she chides me. “Don’t ruin it for mom.”

Mom still maintains that Santa is real, of course. She has always gone fullout at Christmas. She’s the type of parent who disguises her handwriting on the to-and-from tags on gifts. She uses special gift wrap for the presents from Santa. She tactfully arranges the cookie crumbs speckling the WELCOME SANTA plate.

To this day, she does these things. It is tradition. And we must cling.

“Look how ugly they are!” mom is gushing. Kaitlin and I catch up to mom. “So ugly they’re kind of cute,” she says, lifting her sunglasses up onto her head to take a better look.

The first attraction is a long series of cement troughs -- home to the baby salmon. The fish are actually not that small at this point -- about the size of an ear of corn -- but we all pretend they are darling anyway.

“Oh, aren’t you just little gems,” I say to the fish. I don’t like nature very much.

“Remember when you guys used to feed them?” mom says with a laugh.

“You’re even uglier than I remember,” I muse softly to them.





Cling

“It was so fun when you tossed the food in and they all jumped for it,” mom remembers.

“It all goes down from here, kids,” I tell them.

“Should we feed them today?” mom asks.

“No,” Kaitlin and I say together. “Not today.”

There are dispensers at the end of each row of troughs that look like candy or bubblegum machines. You jam in five or six nickels and then about two or three pellets of fish food roll out into your eager, clammy little hand. Throwing food to the baby fish is very exciting because the fish jump and thrash to gobble up the pellets. In feeding these fish, children learn at a very young age that we live in a cutthroat world.⁴

Sometimes I wonder how ethical the fish hatchery is in placing these food machines. Most of the time they don’t work. I’ve seen frustrated fathers pounding on them and screaming as their disappointed children await inevitable failure.

“I brought them to feed the fish, damn it,” a father berates the food dispenser, which squeaks and trembles from the blows but never yields. “I want my money back! I invested seven nickels -- seven nickels, you jackass!”

“Tony, lower your voice,” the mother soothes, glancing around to see if we are watching her husband’s temper tantrum -- which, of course, we are. “We’ll feed the fish next year.”

“We’ll feed the fish *this* year!”

The children are mostly calm and bewildered, wandering around and bouncing off of each other in puffy winter jackets,⁵ not nearly as distraught as their father.

4 When we were children, Kaitlin and I learned that we live in a cutthroat world.

5 Which are entirely overkill in the mild November sunny chill.





Hayley Zablotsky

When we were little, my sister and I used to hoard nickels for the very special outing to the fish hatchery. We also came to the hatchery equipped with plastic baggies, knowing that fish food gripped too long in a sweaty hand might erode our skin with its foul odor. In the end, it's all about being prepared.

"Look at this one, look at this one!" mom says.

I edge closer. What one? Aren't they all the same?

"Look at his little eyes -- they're looking right at you!"

No, they're not. They have no other direction to point.

After cooing to the baby fish, we fast-forward to the end of a fish's life by heading to the fish ladder.

The ladder is a series of wide steps with a rushing current flowing down the stairs. The salmon have to jump from step to step to reach safety at the top.

To this day, I don't understand why we make the salmon work so hard to reach safety. It's like a game with a set of dusty and stained instructions that we must follow *exactly* even though nobody really knows why.

But the really sadistic part of all this is that we go gawk at the salmon as they struggle and fight the current. There is even a group of professional photographers today, who probably see the spectacle as the crux of life at large.

And families -- young families with *children* -- walk down the hill to watch the salmon jump. I didn't used to think anything of this practice -- after all, my family used to be one of those young families. But now I see the ladder as a horrible invention, something not at all family-friendly.

The fish are blind and determined, so instinctual that they can't even see the brutality and abuse they are sustaining. They question nothing, just clinging to their instincts. Enduring the same struggle over and over and over.





Cling

“Don’t lean over the edge,” Kaitlin says in her big sister voice.

Oh, for God’s sake. I’m almost twenty years old. “I’m not going to fall in,” I tell her. I stare down at the white noise of the water roaring over the edge of each wide step. I smell the musk of the murky dark blue-green water gathering at the bottom of the ladder.

“Do you see any fish?” mom asks, leaning over the edge with me. You have to stare along time without blinking to see a hiccupping fish wiggle its way up a step or maybe only try to wiggle its way up a step and then slide back down the waterfall. I usually end up blinking.

We always take a picture in front of the fish ladder and since it’s always late morning when we visit the hatchery, the sun is always directly in our eyes. I’m not sure that we have any good photos at the fish hatchery -- ever -- since our eyes are always squinting and watering. These photos serve no purpose, never go in Christmas cards, but still we take them because tradition tells us we must.

At the top of the fish ladder is a “holding pond.” The waiting isn’t very exciting, and the fish just swim in listless circles, dazed and battered from the ladder, awaiting the doom they may or may not know is before them.

I know what is going to happen. To me it feels like a doctor’s office waiting room. Capped tension hums through the holding room. No one wants to look nervous, but everyone is *really freaking out* because that is the thing to do in a waiting room. Magazine pages crack as patients flick them sharply, and feet bob and twitch.

They say that no news is good news, but the salmon hear news. Eventually the waiting is over and the massacre begins. You see, it is easier to get the eggs out of the female fish by cutting her open and scooping all 5,000 eggs out rather than letting her naturally reproduce.⁶

If you go to the hatchery on the right days, you can actually watch this miraculous killing and “egg-taking” process through large dirty glass windows. Or, if you’d rather, you can watch a short movie explaining

6 Of course, killing the salmon to get the eggs out is not inhumane or unreasonable because salmon die after spawning *anyway*.





Hayley Zablotsky

the process. We never did these things when we were little because mom always says you can never un-see something.

“Once it’s in, you can never get it out,” she says ominously.⁷ I guess mom wants to expose Kaitlin and me to the horrors of the world *gradually*. Fish fighting over food and fighting to climb the ladder are of a different magnitude than slaughter.

So we’ve never watched the egg-taking. And since watching the event has never occurred to me as something I’d *like* to do, I probably never *will* watch the egg-taking. The fish handlers (or whatever they call themselves), however, say it’s really something to see.

Once we’ve had enough fun on death row, we head toward the tiny “museum” attached to the hatchery. As I wander around the museum, eyes glazed and disinterested after years and years of reading the same plaques and listening to the same giant plaster salmon head stalk -- in both English and Spanish -- when you press the red button, I wonder about things. Things about salmon. Things like: do they care if they’re served with brown butter and couscous versus mandarin orange arugula salad?

And then I wonder things about me. Things like: why don’t I eat salmon? I’ve been a vegetarian for almost five years. Why do I do it? People always ask that. Especially the ones who like bacon.

Sometimes I really wish I had a good reason.

“You see, the newest philosophical thought proposes the supposition that the animal soul transcends flesh and integrates with the human soul, thus creating an unknown and perhaps dangerous hybrid anima.”

Wouldn’t that be a cool reason? That would be a cool reason.

But I don’t have any such reason. I am not morally against eating meat. I do not have a health condition or dietary restriction. I tried being vegetarian just to try it. And I liked it. Suddenly, it’s been five years. I still like it. So why not?

⁷ You can only imagine my delight when I finally convinced mom to let me watch my first PG-13 movie.



Cling

Not everyone understands. Most notably my dog and the type of guys I seem to date. Who knew that vegetarianism could be a factor in dating? For most people who are dating, The Talk is about labeling the relationship. *Where are we? Where is this going?* But for me, The Talk is a bit different. “So... I have this... thing. I’m kind of... vegetarian.” If you don’t believe me that this does play a role in the dating scene, try explaining the concept of *salads*⁸ to a well-mannered redneck with a barb-wire encircled Texas tattoo, a lifted truck, and the beloved tradition to shoot the Thanksgiving turkey in the backyard.

“Hayley, Hayley, come spin the wheel,” Kaitlin says. We are still in the museum. There’s a Salmon Survival Wheel you can spin in this museum if, for some reason, you want to pretend you’re a salmon. Spin the wheel and see what your fate is.

The wheel is wooden and sticky, with plastic wedges. The wedges are different colors, and each one details your possible destiny as a fish. I spin the wheel and wait for my fate. The best outcome is the red wedge that reads, “Return to reproduce. Cycle starts again. Then die.” That’s the big Winner.

“Statistically you don’t have a very good chance of survival,” Kaitlin points out to me. “You’re probably going to die.”

“Thanks,” I say while we wait for the wheel to slow down. “Thanks very much for that.”

I am eaten by a diving duck. That is my fate. I don’t even reach adulthood. I am a smolt. I reach smolt-hood. What is a smolt? It’s not an adult. I know that. So that means my death is young and beautiful and tragic. And that’s really all a salmon can ask for, right?

I imagine, as far as salmons go, a diving duck is a pretty dignified way to go. First of all, it wouldn’t be my fault -- because there’s no way the side-positioned eyes would have seen the duck coming. Second of all, I wouldn’t have had to fight my way up the ladder. And most important, I wouldn’t be sliced open for an egg donation.

Now it’s Kaitlin’s turn to spin the wheel. I can’t pay attention to the colors spinning by. I can’t stop thinking about egg donations.

⁸ Don’t even try kale or quinoa.





Hayley Zablotsky

I'm not totally opposed to the idea of organ donation. In fact, I rather like the idea because what am I going to do with a stinking kidney once I'm dead? I'll be on to bigger and better things like halos and eternal life of the soul. Probably.

But eggs are different. Donating eggs is like saying, "Here, sure, you can take little Madison, our first-born daughter." I *feel* there is a difference between kidneys and potential children in terms of emotional connection.

My family doesn't like it when I talk about organ donation. At all. I usually bring it up after the fish hatchery just for fun. Just to make them itchy about it. Just to cause a little bit of trouble.

My family doesn't like to talk about death in general. But I feel that discussions need to be had just in case. As we finish up with the museum, I decide it's time to rock the boat.

"I might like to be buried at sea," I say suddenly as we head toward the exit. "*After* my kidneys are donated."

"You'd be eaten by a shark," mom protests.

No, actually a trusted source has predicted that it will be a diving duck.

"A shark! How could you live knowing that?" mom asks.

"That's kind of the thing, mom," I remind her. "I wouldn't exactly be living anymore."

Kaitlin catches up with us from where she was staring in disappointment at the survival wheel.⁹

"You want to be *fish food*?" she demands, no doubt thinking of the smelly stuff by the baby salmon troughs.

Oh, great. Let's take everything out of context.

"No, I never said that," I protest. "All I said was that I might like to be

⁹ She didn't even hatch. Her egg was flushed away and destroyed.



Cling

buried at sea. And if a shark ate me, well, that's the circle of life, right?"

"Hayley!" A gasp from mom.

"*Why* would you want to do that," Kaitlin says flatly.

"I don't know," I say because I don't really. "I guess... I think it's kind of romantic. It would be a peaceful way to float... into... eternity."¹⁰

"*Gawd*," Kaitlin says. "There's nothing romantic about it. Your body would bloat, your organs would implode after 72 hours, and then a shark would eat your drifting morsels."

"Really, 72 hour implosion?" mom asks.

"*Really?*" I ask.

"Well, I'm not *sure*," Kaitlin says. "But probably."

"Also," I say somewhat indignantly, "I won't *have* organs to implode because they will all be donated to needy souls across the nation."

Mom cringes. I know we need to stop. My organ donation beliefs are a bit liberal for her, and the topic of death in general really should be put on the off-limits list with the questionable existence of Santa Claus. But I need to finish this with Kaitlin.

"Okay, fine," I say. "I'll be cremated. Then you can dump my ashes into the ocean and *nobody* will be able to eat me," I say. "If you want me to be selfish about it, that's *fine*," I say.

When we get in the car, mom turns on the radio. Her favorite Christmas song is playing, and she takes it upon herself to drown out the radio.

"It's the *most* wonDERful timmmmmme of the yearrrrrr."

¹⁰ I do realize that this meditative and dramatic answer is utter bullshit.



Hayley Zablotsky

I decide to stop thinking and just sing along. Thinking about fish and death and the *why* and *why* of the world is draining. Some things just are. There isn't a *why*.

“And HEARTS will be *glowing* when loved ones are NEARRRRRR!”

Or maybe there is a why and we are just too lazy or too stupid -- or maybe too smart -- to even try to figure it out, let go, move forward.

“It’s the *most* WONDERful timmmmmme... IT’S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME... of the yearrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

And so we just cling.

Originally published in the Spring 2018 Edition



Balloons

Taylor Cuzzo

Helen Hamilton Award Honorable Mention Spring 2019



Originally published in the Spring 2019 Edition





Hummingbirds

Sanford Ballou

Once,
You put hummingbirds
Under my skin.

It scared me because
They were so fragile
And I so coarse.
I felt their heartbeat,
And I wondered:
Aren't they exhausted?

I wouldn't move
For fear of hurting them
And my thoughts were consumed
By the mere sensation
Of fluttering feathers
Felt in my fingertips.

It didn't last long.
And when they had left,
I couldn't decide
Whether I missed them
Or if I only loved them
Because I knew it was

Fleeting.

Originally published in the Spring 2017 Edition



Cinderella

Nathan Ching

“the waves come after midnight”

— Lorde

The dress I wore was death-black.
 Absolutely bubonic.
Your maraschino lips,
 red like Vodka Cranberry.
Red like my face.
 When you looked at me
my head carouseled.
 Like spinning teacups.
Like spirits flushed down the drain.
 Drunk. Gay drunk. Don't
worry baby, it's only natural.
 Natural or chemical?
You tell me, I can't
 tell the difference...
Like ethanol. Will you be
 my New Year's kiss?

2:47am. It's freezing
 in the backyard. Missed
the fireworks, the sky
 cloaked in haze. Who are you
and what did you do
 with the fire? You don't
remember my name?
 There's something missing,
and I can't put my finger
 on it. There's something missing
I can't get back.
 In real life, everybody is fake
as eyelashes.

continued, line break



Nathan Ching

We keep saying,
“New Year, new me.”

If I repeat it
enough times,
is it a promise?

Originally published in the Spring 2018 Edition





ASAP Forever

Daria Jones



Originally published in the Fall 2018 Edition





The Old Man in the Mirror

Suzanne Yost

Around the ages of five or six, I developed a habit of hoping. I would hope to the point of belief, even if it was for the impossible. Before going outside, I'd ask Mama to tie my hair into two brown pleats with little blue bows on the ends. Then I'd walk along the sidewalks of my neighborhood, watching the concrete slabs intently, hoping that if I looked carefully enough I would see a flicker of gold. When I'd finally lift my gaze, I'd almost expect to see a gleaming emerald city, like the one my father read to me about, reflecting in my eager sapphire eyes. For a brief moment, I'd actually see it—a blissful, magical Oz—before reality would rub its way back into view and I'd blink and be left staring at a brown brick home with dozens of lookalikes populating the lane.

Tonight, I'm walking, too. Mama's terrier is strewn out before me on a leash, belly almost brushing the ground. I'm watching my boot-clad feet smack the pavement in their metronomic beat. All I see is the same monotonous suburban wasteland that set the stage for my childhood—thirty-some years have left it with only a few more cracks in the sidewalk. I don't lift my head until I sense a change in scenery: I've left the shielding canopy of my neighborhood and have reached a patch of road unguarded by trees. And here the horizon is unclogged and I can see the stars. I live close enough to Milwaukee that the light pollutes the farther reaches of the night sky, but there are always some constellations I can see, like Orion's Belt and one of the Dippers (I'm never sure which). Craning my neck, I admire the ghosts in the sky, the remnants of the bright stars that died closer to the beginning of time than the end of it, their light reaching me only now. I want to find comfort in those stars, in their familiarity, in the assurance that the same sky is looking down on my father. But tonight, I'm left cold at their sight. My heart is not warmed by those balls of blue and orange gas light years away.

My cell phone buzzes in my pocket and I reach for it. It's illuminated by a number I can't ignore and my heart starts to flutter back to life—pounding, frantic life. I deglove and swipe to answer while my feet don't miss a beat. I didn't look like her. My skin was brown and hers was not.

"Hi, is this Ms. Lucy Piper?" I'm affirmed by the man's voice I knew I'd hear. Davis from Meadowhill Assisted Elderly Living asks how I'm doing tonight. I skip pleasantries and ask:

"Is everything OK?" I think he hears my panic; it's late to be getting this call.

"Uh, yes, your mother is doing alright at the moment. She—well, she's been having some trouble with short-term memory. But



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she keeps asking about your father—" I cut him off, asking what he needs from me. After a pause, he continues, "We suggest scheduling an appointment with her neurologist and that maybe you stop by soon. We think she'd benefit from seeing you."

"Yes, yes, OK," I stammer. "I can take off work tomorrow morning, I think."

Short goodbyes and we both hang up.

A warm phone in a cold hand, I find myself stopped outside Sally's Place, the '50s themed diner that dominated my high school years, but even before that, was the setting for a slew of late dinners with Mama after she finished work. Among the red booths and checkered floors of Sally's Place was where she looked happiest, and I don't think it was because of the food. I think it was just because Mama loved the '50s. And I mean she really loved the '50s. She had a cherry-red 1958 Ford Mustang in the garage that was even old when she drove it in high school. Coming inside from my outside playtime, I'd sometimes catch her in there, sitting on the hood of her soccer-mom SUV, staring at it almost like she stared at me. Occasionally, I'd even find her sitting in the driver's seat, getting dust on her clothes. She would rub the leather of the steering wheel between her fingertips with her eyes closed as she listened to a soundtrack only she could hear, feeling the ghost of decades-old wind toss her hair. Mama loved the '50s so much she named me after one of its most famous sitcoms: "I Love Lucy." I think she liked the timelessness of it.

The dog begins to yap at me. It is shaking in the cold, its fur coat thinner than it seemed. I realize I've been loitering on the sidewalk for a while, dazed and rolling the pearls around my neck between numb, never-re-gloved fingers; some of the Wednesday night regulars enjoying their midnight milkshakes have begun to peer at me out the window. I shake the dusty memories out of the forefront of my mind and avert my attention to my phone. I tilt it to find that it's cold and lifeless in my hand. Without the screen illuminated, it just reflects back at me before I quickly look away, jamming it back into my pocket. It's useless. I pivot on the balls of my feet and begin my retreat back to the brown lemming of a house that my mama left me.

I never understood Dorothy's incessant desire: her need to go home. I think if Glinda gave me those ruby slippers, I'd chuck them in a bright green sewer somewhere. It strikes me now how shrouded in naivety she—Dorothy—was. But my father read the words from the pages in this voice that sounded like he forgot where he was, and I remember wishing I knew where he was going in his head. Each morning before I open my eyes, I stare at my dark eyelids and think that perhaps the light that will greet them upon their opening will be





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otherworldly. I'll have escaped Wisconsin, my Kansas. This morning, I'm waking from the haze of both a memory and a dream, warm and familiar.

"I love you, Lucy," Mama crooned, sing-songily. She cradled me, her forearms against my head and neck and side, skin softer than my own. I could feel the beat of her heart reverberating throughout my entire body. Somewhere behind her was the presence of a man—my father. I felt him, but I couldn't see him beyond her face that I stared up at with eyes disproportionately large for my head. I ogle at the polka-dot print of her dress and the pearls strung around her neck. I feel her words wash over me like silk sheets and lilac that furls itself into your nostrils and right up into your brain. There it spreads and covers and flourishes and there is nothing wrong with the world...

...but the sunrise.

Today my eyelids are a pinkish-orange: I forgot to close my blinds, so the sunrise wakes me along with the chirpings of irritating early birds outside my window. (Why they chose to stay for the approaching Wisconsin winter is lost on me.) Sitting up, the first thing I reach for is the pearl necklace, clasping it with ease so it settles into place on my collarbone.

The morning moves at the rate of my own lethargy as I wander about the house that fluctuates between phases of neurotic organization and undisciplined chaos. Today I wake to a mayhem I know well, expertly stepping over piles of books, placing laundry in the dryer I'd forgotten was waiting in the wash, pouring dry food in the dog bowl, and sifting through the dirty dishes for a "clean enough" bowl and spoon. The sound of cereal—and dog food—crunching is the only thing I let soak in the drain of my brain, empty of all the fuzzy morning dreaming. As the Cheerios I've been eating for thirty-six years meet my taste buds, I finger the crows' feet imprinting themselves into the skin of my temples, turn the wrong way, and daydream that maybe the next time I look in a mirror I'll look like I did ten years ago. These thoughts are interrupted by the dog who begs to be let out into the fenced backyard; I oblige.

8:40 hits and with the clock, the dog returns to the warm indoors and I step into the garage occupied by two cars—one that works and one that doesn't—and the miscellaneous clutter from the house after Mama left it that I'd put in haphazardly stacked boxes.

I pause, staring at the Mustang I have yet to figure out what to do with. Once I asked Mama why she kept it. She could get it fixed up and sell it for thousands. I rarely saw Mama get mad, but that day her blue eyes filled with dark gray and I saw what she looked like unhinged for a moment. She stormed off. She didn't speak to me for two days before I apologized. She sat in the car a lot those two days. She broke the silence at the dinner table, launching into a memory of my father





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and their first date: how she picked him up for the milkshakes at Sally's Place, how he complained that having the convertible top down messed up his hair, how she laughed at him and his vanity but thought he was charming nonetheless. I understood, then, why she was always sitting in that car, pretending to be driving, pretending her high school sweetheart was still in the passenger seat. I think she was hoping that maybe one day she'd step into the garage to find him there, still waiting for her.

Pulling myself out of the memory, I turn to face the other car in the garage. Then I'm off.

I greet Davis at the reception desk, take off my hat and gloves, and sit in the lobby of the nursing home for about ten minutes. Those ten minutes feel like two years as my mind wrestles with reality: maybe Mama wasn't as bad as I was thinking she was. She couldn't have been that different from when I saw her a few weeks ago. Mama had been doing alright. She'd been forgetting some things—OK, a lot of things—but she still had her short-term memories. She didn't always remember me, but she remembered her doctors and her friends at Meadowhill. I just hope, I just hope, I just—I'm rolling pearls between my fingertips when I am approached.

"You must be Ms. Lucy Piper; how are we doing today?" the overly-cheery woman says to me. She is peering at me in her nurse's scrubs dotted with small hearts, wrinkled where she's bent over, making our faces level. I suppose this was how she talked to the residents.

I stand up. "I'm doing alright. I'm ready to see my mother." The nurse introduces herself as Cynthia, hands me a visitor's pass, and proceeds to lead me down the pristine, white-tiled hallway to the left of the reception desk. The walls are peppered with Valentine's Day decor as the pink and red holiday is approaching. Mama's room has a heart-shaped doily on it. Cynthia knocks but begins to slowly open the door before waiting to hear a response. She then calls Mama by her first name, which startles me. Hardly anyone ever does that. She is always Mrs. Piper. Even when Mr. Piper skipped town.

Mama is sitting in a pink lounge chair by a reading lamp, flipping through an old magazine. A landline is on a small table next to her. She is wearing polka dots and I'm not surprised to see her room the way it is: covered in prints of Audrey Hepburn. It seems right that the one thing dementia can't take from her is her obsession with the '50s.

"Are you training one of the new nurses?" Mama says to Cynthia, peering at me through her thick glasses. I feel my bottom lip start to tremble. This never gets easier.





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“No, darling, this is Lucy. Your daughter. Do you remember her?” Mama squints harder at me. I step forward and kneel beside her chair the way a child might. I even wore two braids today.

“Mama, it’s me,” I say, trying not to choke up.

Brow furrowed, Mama says: “I don’t have a daughter. I’m too young to have one. But that’s a very nice necklace you have, there.” Cynthia picks up the conversation and my brain barely registers their words: Mama is sixteen; she’s waiting for her boyfriend, Nathan, to call. Cynthia starts talking about a game night they had at Meadowhill a few days before that Mama swears never happened.

There’s a lull and I enter back in: “Mama, I wanted to ask you about your car: the red Mustang. Do you remember?”

“Of course, I do. After Nathan calls, I’m going to go pick him up in it. We’ll probably go to Sally’s Place. We love sharing the chocolate milkshakes.”

“That’s nice,” I say with a soft, pitiful smile. I’d been planning to ask her about selling it. But she’s looking at me with big eyes and I can’t shake the memory of the last time we had this conversation. So instead I say: “I was thinking about figuring out a way to bring it by here sometime. I know you used to like to sit in it, even though it can’t drive anymore.”

“Dear, it’s just in the garage. I’m going to go pick up Nathan in a while after he calls.” I smile again, say nothing. She looks back at her magazine. I wonder if we’ll ever be able to find her brain again or if perhaps we’re too far along the yellow brick road. I quietly excuse myself to go use Mama’s bathroom.

Propped on the medicine cabinet is a small, plush lion braving the height to peer down at me. I feel his judgment searing into me, so I lower my head and stand, staring at the sink. I begin to sway, so I reach out to grip the edge of the sink, hoping it will keep me steady. My hands tighten around the rim as if my grip alone could tether my fleeting hope to me.

Who was I kidding coming here and thinking two brown braids and a pearl necklace could reboot her memory? Mama hadn’t had a lucid day since the Thursday after I began noticing signs of the encroaching dementia. And it consumed her quickly. Within a month, I was checking her into Meadowhill to leave her in a place she didn’t know with people she didn’t recognize. But then again, she didn’t always recognize me either. I think the only person she might’ve recognized was the man my DNA knew better than my own memory.

In an instance of bravery or cowardice (which, I’m not sure), I look up. For a moment, my breath is stolen from my lungs as I catch a glimpse of the reflection staring back at me in the bathroom mirror. He is haggard. He has sagging cheeks and weather-worn skin, almost





The Old Man in the Mirror

to the point of appearing bruised. He has a gnarly nose, pointed and almost witch-like. Wrinkles shroud his forehead and deep crows' feet turned away from laughter caress his melting, glassy eyes. A gray beard drips from his chin like a half-melted, upside-down ice cream cone in some flavor I don't recognize. Veiled by the beard, I spy a string of pearls, taut against his skin, choking him. His face is familiar to me: inhabited by emptiness like Mama's, age like that I never saw my father wear, and blue eyes full of budding fear, just like my own.

I retreat my gaze.

I reach for the long beard under my chin I saw only a moment before, but my touch is met with air. My eyes rise slowly, and I am looking at who I thought I was: older than I'd like with wispy brown hair, and eyes caught somewhere between retreating and resigned. I fight against my mind, trying to repulse the images it is putting into my head. But I am a mere face in a puddle, though it is not even my face I see but the face of the person I harbor within me, masking him with my own deceiving body. And I am not my father's daughter. I'm my mama's. I try to shake the feeling of the old man living inside of me, using my body to disguise his own, but it clings to me, a death-grip on my fragile skin.

As I stand here, weight against the sink, there is pain. I feel the pearls, smooth against my neck, but they feel as if they're choking me. I fumble with them, trying to take them off. They felt too much like a collar I've let strangle me for fifteen years.

One of the only living memories I have of my father is of the day he gave Mama the pearl necklace. I was maybe five or six-years-old. I was sitting in the living room flipping imaginary pancakes in the play kitchen my parents had gotten me for my birthday. My father presented Mama with a velvety box and she squealed like a schoolgirl.

"Nathan, you shouldn't have!"

"I saw it and I had to." She opened the box with a pop! and audibly gasped. My father pulled the pearls up out of their bed and stood behind her, clasping them in place.

"They must have cost a lot," Mama said, looking down at her new accessory.

"Worth every penny," he said, his voice oozing like Wisconsin cheese as he spun her back around to face him, planting a kiss on her forehead. Mama smiled so big.

That was only three weeks before he left us.

Mama re-gifted the pearls to me for my 21st birthday and I wore them every day after that, thinking that they'd make me feel closer to my father, thinking that maybe if one day he came home, he'd recognize me as his daughter. What a waste it's been: fifteen years and three months spent wearing what was his. And nearly twice





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as long since his pearls had to replace him. Mama's been hoping for almost three decades that he'd show up again one day. That he'd have some story that would have made the sleepless nights, the private investigator bills, the trips to the police station, the gossip that spread around town and all the tears it caused, the years of single parenting, the weeks of double shifts, everything—all of it would be worth it, just to have him back.

I look at the pearls in my hand and the longer I stare, the more my heart starts to feel like tin. These glossy rocks on a string are so redolent of her love for the '50s. I think I somehow managed to follow in her footsteps without even realizing it: she lived reminiscing about a time she'd never existed, and I lived wishing I was somewhere that didn't exist. Now Mama had no more memories and I didn't exist at all.

I exit the bathroom. Mama looked up at me from her chair, confused. "Now who are you, dear?" she says. I walk up to her, pearls in hand.

"I found these in the bathroom, Mrs. Piper. I think they belong to you." Her face lights up as I clasp them around her neck.

"They must have cost a lot," she muses.

"Worth every penny."

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venom and vanilla

Haley Decker

early morning sunlight pours
through my window, interrupted
by slats of shutters,
shadows scattered across my
bare body

more parts thunderstorm
than organs
I am powerful and beautiful
and wild.
this skin contains a lifetime
with scars to show for childhood adventures
and clumsiness I never outgrew

this proud collection of calluses
from years of dancing
on wooden floors,
the splinter in my foot
that I never could get out;
ankles that lifted me to the
lips of past lovers

elbows spent propped on mattresses
fingers familiar with turning pages
wrists practiced in filling notebooks
with messy handwriting
and messy thoughts

dark pupils thirsty
for new words, countries, people
to drink in; surrounded by
pale gold flecks peeking out from
ice chip eyes

hurricane hair kissed by summer
draped over shoulder blades
tousled by nervous habit
tucked behind ears
pulled between bed sheets

continued, stanza break



Haley Decker

I am equally soft and steely
my veins run venom and vanilla
steadfast ribs and rosebud nipples
petal lips and a mouthful of matchsticks
itching to spark a wildfire

velvet neck atop shoulders
that can carry any burden
a throat full of
laughter and songs
and “fuck you’s” and “watch me’s”

erupt in goosebumps at the lightest touch,
in rage at unwanted ones; I am to be given,
not taken—this black lace is not for you
I am utterly complete
yet with so much room for another

I tap a finger—nail
bitten short—to the center of my lips,
tracing the valley between my breasts
mapping each breath
unzipping my ribcage

my heart beats there,
powerful and beautiful
and wild.

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Evening in Georgetown

Nicole Medina

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Fall 2018



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Balancing Act

Brandon Kurtz

SCENE ONE: The set is barren. A bright, white light and white backdrop are all that are on the stage. JACK lays unconscious at the center of the stage. His body is haphazardly laid out, as if he were thrown there. He is dressed casually without any marks of injury. MARY stands to the side of the stage. She wears a light grey tunic with a red cloak. Her hands are held palms up in front of her like a scale. The starting position should have her elbows at her waist and both arms making a ninety-degree angle. When one palm raises the other lowers. A blue tint appears in the light when the left palm is raised. The higher the palm is raised the bluer the light becomes. The same effect happens with a red tint to the light for MARY's right palm. The white light should be the neutral point when both hands are at the same Height. When MARY speaks, emotions in her voice are dulled.

JACK: (JACK wakes up with a groan and sorely rubs his right leg and side. He begins inspecting his surroundings. Confusion sets in as he scans the audience.) The Hell am I? (JACK pushes himself to his feet and straightens his clothes with practiced hand movements. He sees MARY and regards her curiously.) (Mumbling) The Hell are you? (JACK tests his right leg before taking a step. He seems fine and begins to walk normally as he does a circuit around the stage.)

MARY: You're not dreaming.

JACK: Who gets to make that call?

MARY: I do.

JACK: You know that's not what I was asking, don't you? You look familiar. (Pause.) I'm dreaming.

MARY: No.

JACK: So, what, I'm dead?

MARY: Yes.

JACK: I... I don't believe you.

MARY: Then don't believe me.

JACK: (Pause) Alright. If I'm dead, really dead, not the kind of dead that's about to be resuscitated by an overweight paramedic named Charlie who will joke that we just made to first base... then... then where did I end up?

MARY: Hm?

JACK: If I – you know – died, did I go to Heaven or Hell?

MARY: You are where you should be.

JACK: That answers everything. (Pause.) Any idea how long I have to wait?

MARY: Until you're done.



Balancing Act

JACK: I have more questions.

MARY: I have more answers.

JACK: I have a lot of doubt about that statement. (Pause.) How did I die?

MARY: You met your end.

JACK: That's a Discovery-Channel-worthy explanation. I don't remember how that happened.

MARY: You should.

JACK: I don't.

MARY: You should.

JACK: For Heaven's sake, I don't. Why don't I remember?

MARY: You're undecided.

JACK: That's not a good enough answer. You're telling me I'm dead, but nobody knows how I died.

MARY: I know.

JACK: What?

MARY: I was there.

JACK: What?

MARY: I witnessed your death.

JACK: That's not what I mean by 'what'. Is that why you look familiar? Did you kill me?

MARY: No.

JACK: So, you're, what, just some angel of death? (Pause. No response.) How did I die?

MARY: You met your end, as I have said before.

JACK: What you said before was... (Sigh.) You don't know anything, do you?

MARY: You go by Jack. You are the son of two living parents, still married. You are a brother to two. You first fell in love when you were nineteen. She was your first. But she lied-

JACK: Alright, I get it. (JACK walks to the other side of the stage, still looking around. The audience catches his eye and he moves to center, front stage to inspect them.) Who are they?

MARY: Others.

JACK: I know they are others. But other what?

MARY: Others in the same place as you.

JACK: Which is?

MARY: Exactly where they should be.

JACK: Right. Don't know why I expected an answer. (He shakes his head and paces back and forth.) And how did they die?

MARY: That is not my question to answer.

JACK: (He looks between the audience and MARY, judging if he





Brandon Kurtz

should pose the question to them or not.) I'm not really about to ask them that question on the first date. If this was Heaven, you'd just tell me, wouldn't you? That means... No, no. I was a good person. I never asked anybody for anything. I always did what I had to. (Pause) You look familiar.

MARY: Were you a good person?

JACK: Of course I was.

MARY: Did you do what others needed?

JACK: Sure, why not? (Awkward silence. Jack begins listing the good things he has done. With each new item on the list Mary's left hand raises slightly.) I helped people when I saw they needed it. I bought the cookies when they came to the door. I helped the old man when he fell. I gave the bum on the corner, the clean one, a dollar every time I passed by. Others can testify to that.

MARY: You helped people when others saw you. (MARY brings her left hand back to equal height, then raises her right slightly.)

JACK: Excuse me?

MARY: You are a showman. You put on an act.

JACK: You say that like you know me. (Pause.) Right.

MARY: Do you act out of kindness or to be seen as kind?

JACK: Hey, back off! (Pause) I made sure that when I helped someone it wouldn't go to waste. So many causes are worthless, the effort you put in does nothing. I never wasted my time with that. I never donated to a charity that wasn't worth it. I kept my money for when I found causes that I could invest in.

MARY: Did you ever find one?

JACK: (Long pause.) What about them? (JACK faces the audience and gestures to them.) You said we're all in the same place. So, are they damned to Hell for screwy reasons too?

MARY: Do you know you're in Hell?

JACK: Where else am I supposed to think I am?

MARY: What do the others think?

JACK: I don't care what they think! (MARY raises her right hand slightly.) I don't care why they're here. That one, there. (He points into the audience.) He looks harmless. But that one... She looks like my ex. (Pause.) It's anyone's guess, really. (Long pause. Sigh. JACK begins pacing again.) I'm losing it. I'm arguing for my position in the afterlife in a dream sequence. (He rubs the muscles in his right leg.)

MARY: Is something wrong with your leg?

JACK: I slept funny – I am sleeping funny.

MARY: Or?

JACK: Or nothing. There's nothing to imply. It'll be better in the morning.





Balancing Act

MARY: Where will you wake up?

JACK: What?

MARY: Where will you wake up?

JACK: My bed, where else?

MARY: A hospital. A morgue. The side of the road. A bed you don't belong in.

JACK: What's that supposed to mean?

MARY: Where do your sins place you?

JACK: Where do my virtues?

MARY: Right where you should be.

JACK: Fuck where I should be. (MARY raises her right hand slightly.)

Of course, I've done bad things in my life, who hasn't? Lying, cheating, hurting people close to me.

MARY: (MARY raises her right hand more.) Your point?

JACK: I've done good things in my life.

MARY: Such as?

JACK: Forgiven people. (MARY raises her left hand slightly.)

Comforted people. (MARY raises her left hand again.) I've lied for good reasons too. Supported my friends – that I did even when nobody was looking at me. (MARY raises her left hand enough to tint the light blue again.)

MARY: Your point?

JACK: My point is that life's a balancing act. It's not fucking perfect, who is? What's your point? You're the one trying to condemn me.

MARY: Says who?

JACK: Says... you?

MARY: When did I say I condemned you? (Her palms reset to the balanced position and the light returns to white.)

JACK: You have been this entire time. Me, them. (He gestures to the audience.) Pigeonholed us right off the bat, didn't you? Sure, that one might look like my ex. Crazy as she was, she volunteered at nursing homes. That guy, how nice he looks. I bet he's into some real freaky bedroom stuff. I know that because this is a dream! And I won't unsettle myself like this.

MARY: I have only made inquiries. Perhaps you defend yourself because you find yourself in need of defense. Now let me read your condemnation.

JACK: No.

MARY: You stole from your friend and lied about it. (Right hand raises.) You took advantage of former lovers. (Right hand raises.)

JACK: That was a long time ago!

MARY: You committed adultery. (Right hand raises.) You aided others out of vanity. (Right hand raises.)





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JACK: I already fessed up to that, you can't still hold all that against me.

MARY: You abandoned your brother. (Right hand raises.) You are known as a thief, liar, cheater, heartbreaker, abuser, and hooligan. (Right hand raises slowly as each item is listed. By the time MARY stops speaking there should be a solid red light illuminating the stage.)

JACK: What did you do to make you so perfect that you get to call me out on my bullshit? Who are you?

MARY: But-

JACK: No... I know you.

MARY: You felt regret for your theft. You never did it again. (Left hand raises slightly.) You defended your brother from your father. (Left hand raises.) You saved a friend from himself. (Left hand raises.) You allowed yourself to be victimized in place of others. (Left hand raises.) You are known as a defender, a lifesaver, and a good man. (Left hand raises. Both hands are now equal at the waist.)

JACK: I swear I know you. The bus-stop this morning. Yes! I saw you there, you were selling chrysanthemums on the street corner. (JACK pauses, but not to listen to MARY.) I am dreaming, aren't I? I knew it. You can take your mystical voodoo shit and shove it. I'm gonna wake up. I'm fine.

JACK: It doesn't matter what you say anymore.

MARY: (MARY's right hand raises slightly.) Listen. (Pause. JACK finally pays attention.) How did you balance?

JACK: Like a unicyclist with Meniere's disease. (MARY raises her left hand so that both are even with her waist.)

MARY: You've come up even.

JACK: What does that mean? That I'm fine?

MARY: If you should be.

JACK: So, if this really was the afterlife... I'd be in Heaven.

MARY: You are-

JACK and MARY: Where you should be.

JACK: Can you, just for this one moment, stop answering like that.

MARY: I answer-

JACK: (He turns to MARY and starts walking slowly toward her.) If you say, 'how you should answer', then I'm leaving.

MARY: There is no leaving, you are not done yet.

JACK: I'll wake up, or something, and I swear I will never have a dream like this again. Stop being so smug, you're just a flower peddler, a figment of a dream, a face plastered onto my own angst. (He reaches out to touch her.)

MARY: Do not sully me with your touch.

JACK: Then stop talking in mysteries. (As JACK touches her the light





Balancing Act

on the stage goes off, covering them in darkness. Long pause.)

VOICE: Results?

MARY: Undecided, still.

VOICE: Try again. (There is the sound of an automotive crash, then several seconds of silence. The lights come back on.)

JACK: (JACK is lying at the center of the stage, his body seemingly thrown there. He wakes up with a groan and sorely rubs his right leg and side. He begins inspecting his surroundings. Confusion sets in as he scans the audience.) The Hell am I? (JACK pushes himself to his feet and straightens his clothes with practiced hand movements. He sees MARY and regards her curiously.) (Mumbling) The Hell are you? (JACK tests his right leg before taking a step.)

MARY: You're not dreaming.

JACK: Who gets to make that call?

MARY: I do. (MARY raises her right hand slightly.)

END



Microverse

Romane Mays



Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition





To Fall in Love with You, Bob Dylan Lutie Rodriguez

*A found poem from YouTube comments on
"Bob Dylan - To Fall in Love with You"*

I fell in love with a girl
and this song is all I hear
when I see her there is this
touch of sadness in the beauty
of it all, a bit of hope in the
sea of doubts.

This song is all that

I imagine myself
dancing to with
you barefoot under
a starry night & I'm
quite sorry for that.

Only Bob Dylan
can sing a song I don't understand
& make me feel like maybe
life will be okay.

I am from Libya.
My country war
everywhere.
but
when I listen to you,
BoB dilyn,
I feel you love.

Naked angel he is
to me in this song like
I'm not there it's too
raw must be kept hidden.
We're all so gentle inside.

continued, stanza break



Lutie Rodriguez

Alone on a Saturday night
sipping some wine and
eating some dark chocolate,
getting a little hazy.

Who's cutting onions?

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Blue Haze

Rachel Brown



Originally published in the Spring 2019 Edition





Cupboards

Ariel Zinkan

The blue paint on the kitchen cupboards was peeling. Sitting at the satin-covered kitchen table alone, eating his Honey Nut Cheerios, Corbett glanced up and noticed it for the first time. He frowned but returned his gaze to his bowl and finished off his breakfast.

He was just starting to ease his chair back and stand up when his wife, Laura, swept into the room. It was 8 am on a Saturday, but she looked ready to head to the office, her dark brown hair pulled up into a neat bun, makeup perfectly applied. She wore a tailored red blazer and matching skirt, a brown shirt poking out from beneath the red.

Corbett glanced down at his own clothing, which was considerably less put-together. He was still wearing the striped pajamas he'd slept in, a light blue robe thrown overtop to stave off the morning chill. He hadn't looked at a mirror yet this morning, but he was sure his dirty blond hair was a mess.

"Hello, dear," Laura said, brushing a kiss on his cheek as she made her way to the cupboard above the sink.

"Hi," Corbett mumbled, watching as her hand reached for the cupboard's handle, then paused. Her eyes fell to the peeling paint and her hand's trajectory changed. She plucked a piece of paint off, then turned toward her husband with a glint in her eye, holding the dried paint aloft as if it were a trophy.

"How many times have I told you we need to get these cupboards repainted? Or, better yet, replaced?"

Corbett resisted the urge to roll his eyes, even as a trace of panic made his heartbeat quicken. Avoiding her gaze, he walked over to the sink as he spoke. "How many times have I told you that I'm working on it? I can't make it happen overnight. It's gonna cost a lot of time—and money—if you want it done right." Most of that was probably true, though considering he hadn't been working on it at all, he didn't know for sure.

Laura eyed him. Corbett focused his attention on rinsing out his bowl of cereal to keep himself from squirming. The sound of the water swishing against the porcelain was the only thing that filled the silence.

Finally, she said, "Exactly how much money would it cost? We can start saving."

"Saving?" Corbett spluttered, pausing in his rinsing to look up. "We barely have enough to live on as it is, and you want to start saving?"

"Well, maybe if you actually got a job instead of sitting on your butt all day, we wouldn't have this problem."



Cupboards

Corbett turned away from her and glared at the dishwasher as he opened it and placed his bowl inside. “I’ve been trying,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You’ve been saying that for three years now, Corbett.”

From an abstract point of view, it was kind of funny how their lives had worked out. They’d gotten married halfway through their senior year of college, Laura a graphic design major with a job already secured for after graduation, Corbett a business administration major who was certain he’d have his own job within six months of finishing school. Then six months turned into a year, then two, and now here he was. He hadn’t even bothered to send out a job application in over a month, but he wasn’t going to tell her that.

Delicately carved and painted butterflies glinted, red and gold on the white porcelain bowl he’d just put in the dishwasher rack. Corbett felt his face getting hot as he stared at it.

He yanked the bowl back out and spun toward her. “Maybe,” he said, waving the bowl emphatically, “if you didn’t waste so much money on all these fancy things, we wouldn’t be so broke.” He waved at her clothes, too, sleek and tailored and dry clean only, then spun in a circle, gesturing at the real marble countertops, the smart fridge, the satin tablecloth with the lace trim, the row of shiny white porcelain plates on display next to the cupboard, each of them decorated with the same butterflies as the ones on the bowl in his hand.

“I’m sorry”—Laura’s voice was icy cold; it grated against Corbett’s boiling rage, giving him pause— “that I want to look presentable.”

“There’s a difference between ‘presentable’ and ‘lavish.’”

Laura let her eyes slide down his body, not in the sultry way she would back when they first got married, but with the disgust of someone examining the frog they were dissecting. And suddenly Corbett was hyper-aware of every unkempt hair on his head, of the holes in his pajama pants and the dribbles of milk on his robe from his cereal.

“Yes, clearly you’re aware of the difference,” Laura said finally. She looked away from him, her eyes falling to the chip of blue she still held in her hand before she walked over to the trash can next to the stove. Its shiny black lid opened automatically when she put her hand above it and dropped the paint chip inside.

“Just get the cupboards fixed.” Laura didn’t look at him again. She brushed her hands against each other as if to wipe away the argument, and then turned to leave. “I’m going to get breakfast.”

“Yeah, run away,” Corbett muttered, loud enough that he knew she could hear. “Go and buy your breakfast.”





Ariel Zinkan

Laura paused in the doorway. Corbett heard her sigh before she turned back around and walked to the fridge. There were several seconds of awkward silence as she opened the door and pulled out a Tupperware container of oats she'd prepared a few days before.

"You know," Laura said, crossing to the row of plates displayed above the counter and selecting one, "maybe you're right, Corbett. Maybe I *do* spend too much money." She set her plate down on the countertop next to her Tupperware container and opened the silverware drawer. "Maybe I should take a hint from you and wear the same t-shirts I've owned since my freshman year of college. I'm sure if I sat around in the house all day and watched TV, I'd save just as much money as you do." The sarcasm in her voice was almost palpable.

She spooned a quarter of the contents of the Tupperware container onto the plate.

"At least I know how to be grateful for what I have."

"And what about all the crap you buy, huh?" Laura pressed the lid onto the Tupperware container with excessive force, creating a loud pop as it sealed shut. She picked up the container and spun toward him, gripping it tightly with both hands. For a moment, it looked like she was going to hit him with it, but she simply brushed past him on the way back over to the fridge. "I seem to remember you asking me to give you money for a new gaming console last week. And then a couple of weeks ago, you went and wasted a ton of my money getting your car painted blue. You don't even *drive* it."

Corbett opened his mouth to speak, but Laura was on a tirade now.

"Honestly, have you even looked into getting the cabinets redone at all? Or have you been too busy getting your stupid *car* painted? I don't even know why we painted the things the awful color in the first place. It makes the kitchen look like a fucking preschool." Laura shoved the Tupperware container into the fridge and slammed the door before spinning back around to face Corbett.

The silence rang in the air between them. Laura wasn't looking at Corbett. Instead, her brown eyes glared at the cupboards to his left, but Corbett still felt the force of her gaze pressing against him. He stepped back, his lower back butting against the cool edge of the sink. He held his porcelain bowl before him like a shield.

"You liked them when we got them." Corbett's voice was very small.

"Well, now I don't." Laura met his eyes for the first time. Corbett got a sense she wasn't just talking about the kitchen cabinets. "Oh."





Cupboards

Laura held his gaze for a few seconds. As they looked at each other, her expression slowly softened. He realized with a shock that her eyes were getting watery. Was she crying?

Before he could decide, she broke eye contact and marched over to her plate. Grabbing it and the spoon, she kept her face tilted away from him and made her way over to the table, sat down, and began to eat.

Corbett stood there watching her for a moment while he tried to remember how to move. He shook his head and finally returned his bowl to the dishwasher, which had been sitting open this whole time. Feeling like he couldn't make any noise, he moved painstakingly slow as he pushed the rack back in and closed the door to the machine. Then, hesitantly, Corbett walked over to his wife. She didn't seem to hear him approach, methodically chewing and swallowing little bites of her food. Corbett reached out to touch her back, then thought better of it and pulled up a chair instead.

Laura didn't look at him as he sat down next to her, and he didn't look at her, either. Instead, he stared at the framed photos that hung against the opposite wall, tracing the lines of faces with his eyes. Some of them were of Laura and him, some of their friends or family, but they all blurred together in his mind, the happy smiles turning to grimaces of pain and sorrow as he stared.

Corbett didn't know how long they sat there, but after a while, the delicate clink of Laura setting her spoon down on the now-empty plate broke the spell. Corbett allowed himself to look over at her and found that she was looking at him, too. He noticed now that she was crying. Quiet tears had left streaks down her face. Corbett found himself blinking hard.

For the first time, it hit him: he was losing her. No, he wasn't losing her, she was already gone. He knew it even before she said the words.

"Corbett, I don't think I love you anymore."

There was a breath. Corbett knew he was supposed to say something. This was his chance to speak up and fix everything, to bring back the sweet smile he hadn't seen on her face in months. Three years ago, he would have been able to cheer her up. He would say something sweet or funny or serious, and she would have lit up the room with her happiness. Now, though, he wasn't the same optimistic boy he'd been. All that boy had been was empty words, empty promises that never came true. Corbett did nothing but stare.

Laura's face fell. She turned away, picking up her plate and going to the sink.

The sound of the water shocked Corbett back to his senses. He rose, desperation flooding his veins. "Laura, I—"





Ariel Zinkan

“Don’t.” She finished rinsing her spoon and plate and placed them both in the dishwasher.

That done, she stepped up to the cupboard and, reaching up, plucked another bit of paint from the wood. Laura moved away from the cupboard and came over to Corbett. She pressed the paint chip into his hand, her skin warm and soft against his for a moment before it was gone and he was left with a piece of dry paint, hard edges poking into his flesh as he curled his fingers around it.

“I want the blue gone.” Laura’s voice held no emotion. In spite of the dried tears, her face was empty, too. She turned away.

Corbett watched as she left the room. Even after he couldn’t see her anymore, after he’d heard the jangle of keys and the opening and closing of the front door, he still stood there, the dried blue paint embedding itself in his palm.



Cameron Boyce Ashley Parks

Grief,
comes in waves.
Hits you,
all at once,
like a comet
that rips
through
the atmosphere
and burns
like a raging
wildfire
uncontained.

Beautiful boy.
One of the
brightest
lights
in this world
gone to rest.
Too soon,
he left,
age 20.

A gaping
hole
is left behind,
a void
only

he

can fill.
Your laughter
will ring
eternal
in adolescent ears.
Your smile
is tattooed
on childhood
memories.



Pollination

Sydney Peel



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Ballerina

Carter Howell



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The Pebble Feeling

Katrina Marler

I stood frozen in the middle of probably the smallest mall in America in Logan, Utah, looking like an idiot, clutching a plastic bag with a lumpy sweater inside. People whizzed past me close enough to hit my purse and make it bounce back off my thigh repeatedly. I stood facing the people-traffic, with everyone having to part to go around me—couples letting go of each other's hands, strollers veered around me like a pebble in a stream. All of this made me feel, at once, insignificant and like a giant nuisance. I call this the pebble feeling: feeling large enough to be an annoyance but small enough to flick away. Whenever I panicked, I felt the pebble feeling and let everything slip by me in a current I didn't feel a part of.

I stood on endless white tiles, disrupting shopper's paths for going on seven minutes, which feels much, much longer than it sounds. They all gave an accusatory "Excuse me!" that sounded eerily similar to when someone prompts a kid to say thank you by saying it themselves and giving you a now it's your turn look. "It's... I'm sorry, I'm thinking," I mumbled at two tweens, a couple of Eminem clones who looked like skateboarders that never learned how to ride. They were out of earshot, couldn't hear my mumbles; but I was fixated on their presence, and oddly aware of mine. I was suddenly seized by the idea that my frozen body freaked them out, that I was standing in the middle of a crowded mall, holding onto my bag like I had a secret. Like I had a purse full of drugs or gold, or I don't know. I panicked and yelled their way, "I don't do drugs! I'm trying to buy a sweater!" The two black hoodies and low-rise jeans turned around at my absurd comment.

"Psycho." One of them told the other.

"Shit." I said to myself. I needed to get it together and get out of everyone's way—I was annoying everybody. Were they looking at me? Maybe no one was paying attention. Or probably everyone was paying attention.

This is what anxiety does.

I turned around quickly and took three steps forward, then stopped again. Someone ran into the back of me with an *oof*, and I waved at them to go around me like I was stopped at a green light with smoke coming out of my engine. I was trying to decide if I should return the lumpy sweater back to the store *again*. Within an hour I had gone inside a little boutique in this tiny mall and impulse-bought a sweater. I had broken up with my first boyfriend, Jordan, the day before and a spontaneous purchase of the \$37 black and white sweater was the sad and weird aftermath. I immediately returned it.





The Pebble Feeling

“Was it worn or damaged?” The clerk smacked her gum and smirked. Her hair was severely bleached, and her peachy-pink acrylic nails looked sharp and pointy at the ends. I gave her a look that said *real fucking funny, lady*. “Sorry, we’re required to say that,” she said, squinting her eyes and smacking her gum. She hadn’t even given me back my credit card yet before I asked for a refund. I placed the card back in my wallet and sulked out of the store, embarrassed and a little depressed. Did I want the sweater or not? When it came time to make insignificant decisions, you can count on me to be paralyzed with fear over it. More than once have the absence of fluorescent lights in the grocery stores reminded me I’ve overstayed my welcome deciding between two boxes of cereal or brands of frozen vegetables. I’ve been caught sitting on the floor in Target holding up two eerily similar shirts comparatively, my eyes bouncing back and forth from one to the other until my arms were numb and bloodless.

Having just turned 19 and beginning to grasp onto something kind of resembling adulthood—my second year into college, an apartment, a job, a boyfriend—I had begun to realize my anxiety was beginning to trickle into more spaces in my life besides the gut-clenching decision that comes with consumerism. When Jordan and I first got together we sat on his dingy, cream-colored couch in his apartment that was up the hill and to the left of mine. Jordan was wrong for me in so many ways, he was too loud, too assertive. I was too young for him and too sensitive. He wore pants too tight for my liking and it creeped me out that he *literally* slept with one eye open due to an accident when he was younger involving something sharp and his left eyelid. I would often stay awake long after him and watch his snores that made his eyelid twitch, and I didn’t find it cute or funny or endearing. I knew I didn’t love him. He wasn’t scared of my father and I thought he should be, and I didn’t like to hold his hand in public. There was a lot working against us.

Credits were rolling on his ancient T.V. after one of our first nights “in” together and I was wringing my hands together in a fret. “Jordan.” I began without looking at him. “I have something to tell you.” He slid his arm out from behind my back and turned a little my way—a signal that he was ready to listen. “I have anxiety.” I confessed to him. He started laughing. I was confused. He called me cute. Then he said, “That is very sweet for you to tell me, but I’ve already gathered that.” It felt like a verbal pat on the head. So, I wasn’t hiding it as well as I’d thought. Still, I felt I needed to let him know these things if we were starting a relationship together. I didn’t want him to be blindsided by anything, and, most of all, I felt this constant need to be completely honest with everyone around me. That’s part of the anxiety, though: a painstakingly, ultra-revealing, honesty I *needed* to unleash on people. I often felt this was the best way to diffuse or prevent any conflict that may or may not occur at any time between any person I may or may not know. It’s too bad I wasn’t Catholic because I’d occupy those confession booths for hours—a poster child for sharing my thoughts and feelings. I’ve



Katrina Marler

been this way since I was young—obsessively confessing or apologizing for silly, unimportant things to adults and teachers, like throwing away food I didn't eat all the way at lunch or forgetting my student ID number in elementary school (35610). The adult in question would always look at me in a similar curious and bewildered way, giving me that same pebble feeling I knew so well, peering down at the little girl pulling their sleeve apologizing for throwing away the crust on her sandwich, looking at me as if to say: *I do not actually give a shit, little child*. And they would laugh, too.

On top of my constant fear of disruption and conflict, decision making and needing to be good, it was in those moments that I learned I feared I annoyed everyone with my fears.

Maybe that's why it worked so well when I found Michael a year and a half later. It felt instant with him; it clicked like Lego pieces. My mom loved that way he would put his hand on my thigh and smile at me when I got especially tense. Michael didn't mind me taking my time in stores and he was nervous to meet my dad. He had kind eyes that closed all the way, and he was just so damn patient. Relentlessly patient. He was as patient as I was anxious. At our wedding, the only thing I was nervous about was if my brothers were going to fight at my reception, or if I was going to say something weird during the ring exchange; I was never nervous about us, about choosing him. It was the biggest and easiest decision I've ever made.

At the mall, I gave myself a little time-out to think. I sat on a bench across from the little boutique after returning the sweater, the *first time*, and I felt indignant. I felt like saying to myself what my mom used to say when she was on the phone with a credit card company, "I've had it up to here!" and "cut the bullshit!" (A phrase that makes so much more sense as an adult—as a child my imagination ran with an idea that ended in a very weird activity and a dirty pair of scissors.)

I sprang from the bench. I was angry at myself for putting too much thought into my one and only impulse-buying experience, and I marched myself into the store again with the same forced fervor and confidence of a Monday morning. With the mantra of *cut the bullshit!* running through my head, I placed my credit card on the acrylic counter.

"I'm gonna do it." I said to the clerk. "I'm gonna buy the sweater."

"Are you sure? Because we close in like, half an hour." I nodded but she gave me an expressive look with her fake eyelashes that said she wasn't convinced. I sensed her wariness. The dead could sense her wariness. She swiped my card for the third time that day.





The Pebble Feeling

“I’m not great with decisions. I get nervous.” I told her wryly—an effort to combat the suspicion in her voice. She handed me my lumpy sweater and told me she’d see me around. I grimaced and rolled the comment over in my head as I walked out and took three steps into the people-traffic and stopped like the insignificant, giant nuisance of a pebble I was.

Which brought me here: an afternoon of self-flogging in front of JC Penny with everyone running into me, frozen in place, clutching my twice-bought sweater and incoherently yelling at 12-year-old 8 Mile wannabe thugs about drugs. (A waste of time, really; they probably knew more about them than I did.)

With each bounce of my purse, I thought about the line of indecisive women in my family and wondered if it was nature or nurture that made us this way. Am I biologically inclined to ricochet between knowing and wondering? Was I born with the fear or regret that nearly murders my ability to make decisions, or did I learn this? And who the hell from?

I thought about the medications we all took at different times in our lives to change our brain chemistry; I thought about the breathing exercises taught by well-meaning but patronizing therapists to try and make our sweater-buying experiences a little smoother, restaurant menus a little less daunting. I thought of myself tugging hundreds of adults’ sleeves only to receive a laugh I didn’t understand; and I thought of the pebble feeling. Anxiety, whether it was inherited or learned, was something I, as well as modern medicine, would come to understand very well, and somehow not at all.

~

I cleaned out my closet the other day and pulled out that lumpy sweater. It’s been over two years since I’ve worn it, and two more since I bought it (and returned it and bought it again). I still don’t make quick decisions. My cursor still hovers over submission buttons and I still blurt out thoughts and confessions that confuse people. I ask Michael if he’s upset with me even at the most pleasant of times, and he puts a hand on my knee and smiles. I shut down grocery stores, clothing stores, and picking my current apartment was a month-long affair. (Third floor or first? THIRD FLOOR OR FIRST?) But, as I sat with my sister-in-law, who confessed to me that she was worried about her 6-year-old daughter’s anxiety, I told her, “She will be okay.” She contested and spoke about the difficulty of the “bad days” they had. I didn’t have a solution for those. “There are positives, you know. She will be caring and compassionate. She’ll care about doing something right, and being honest, and she’ll care if other people think she’s good. There are worse things to be.”

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Sobriety

Ally Ameel

What is it like to be drunk?

I wonder. The thought sits briefly on a teeter-totter seesaw in my head, and I wonder what I would be like if I were drunk. Maybe I would be funny, for once, even though people keep failing to convince me that I am, in fact, funny sometimes. Perhaps I would like to dance even more than I regularly do, which is quite a lot, and I could lose myself more easily in a room stuffed with people. Maybe, if I were to get drunk, I wouldn't worry so much about the way I look. Maybe my alter ego drunk self likes to dance on tables and flirt with strangers. Maybe, my drunk self would cry a lot. I already cry much more than the average person. I would probably contemplate my mortality and think about the chances of my mother dying before me and cry myself into a drunken slumber. Maybe, the intoxication would make me want to run onto the rooftops and scream for all the times I hid in my room or just sat there when I really wanted to speak up for myself one fucking time.

But maybe, the conclusion that I see myself coming to every time, I would like it. I would like the way the liquor went to my brain and made me forget all of the sadness. I would like the way I felt fearless and the daily anxieties that haunted me would drift away. Maybe I would like the power I felt, and the possibility of kissing that stranger or dancing on that table. Maybe I would be daring and bold and all the things that I struggle to be every single day.

And that scares me. So I stay away from alcohol the same way that girls keep mace on their lanyards and guys carry condoms in their wallets. As a precaution. Just in case. As a warning to myself that if I can easily eat away my sorrows or stay up until 2 am just to be able to fall asleep at night then maybe I won't be able to stop. Maybe I'll drink and drink and drink until I fill myself up and there's no more room for the scary thoughts anymore. I'll laugh and I'll dance and I'll sway and I'll drift and I'll drown in the flow of liquid down my throat. Never enough. I'll drink and drink and drink until I'm gone.

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Pills

Carlyle Rascoe



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Eggs

Rae McColum



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Hands

Madelyn Hicks

How beautiful that the Creator of the Universe
so carefully designed
his prized creation
each with five fingers.
with gentle hands

Five fingers to grasp the five fingers of another
Oh how they fit
Like puzzle pieces

A hand
Lost
And then Found.

A bond
with weight
A bond, silent
that still says
'I love you'
'I want you'
'Be with me'
and
'I'm here'

How beautiful that our hands
intertwine
naturally
As if
they were made
for holding one another

Mother and child
Lover and beloved
Friend and friend

continued, stanza break



Madelyn Hicks

The magnitude
of the simple act
never fades
neither does the meaning
Take my hand in yours
let me memorize
each and every curve and crease
let me run my fingers
over the melody that is you

how they intertwine
is perfect
Like I was born to hold your own



Story Worth Sharing

Victoria Becker

I was raised on words.

It is said that tragedy shows our true colors. If that is so, my soul is alphabet soup.

This has always been true. Writing is my instinct. Excavate the fossils of my childhood and you'll find waterlogged Little House on the Prairie novels, half-written drafts of birthday cards, Scrabble boards. Collecting dust, but far too sacred for the trash.

Growing up, my fascination with words was never important to me. Not until December 2015, anyway, when one winter handed me more hardship than I had ever known.

Speechless.

I learned the importance of words at the same time I felt the fragility of life. My sister's month-long stay in the children's hospital coincided with the unexpected death of my dance teacher, Ms. Stephanie. The simultaneous situations that left me, for the first time, without words.

How could I tell Stephanie's five-year-old dancers that I would be their new teacher? What clichés could console my parents when Christmas came and my little sister was still in the ICU? And how could I, an overwhelmed and breakable seventeen-year-old, answer the simple question, how are you?

In my most overwhelmed moments, when tears were not enough to accomplish release, my stomach would churn until I had no choice but to throw up. Alphabet soup.

Solo.

In December 2015, I was speechless, and so were my friends. I can't blame them, they were seventeen and enjoying the luxury of invincibility. Their best advice revolved around what to mix in a red solo cup. Meanwhile, the surgeon removed the majority of my sister's left lung, and I wept alone in the middle of a dance floor scuffed by Stephanie's tap shoes. I desperately needed honest sympathies, offers to help, and tell me mores. Those words didn't find their way to me; I had to create them on my own.



Victoria Becker

Oasis.

I share that story not for pity, but to illustrate the winding path that lead me to writing. I remember the first time I journaled – emotions in loopy handwriting, blurred by sweaty palms, misspelled words. The place where I could be fragile in a season where everyone needed me to be unbreakable. I could be confused and worn out, mad at the world for what happened and sad that it all happened to me.

As I adapted to a new normal, writing slowly untangled me from my trauma. My oasis, papered peace. Four years later, my sister is mostly healthy but Stephanie is forever gone, and I'm still returning to those pages.

Why.

I write to unravel and to mend. To forget and to relive. I write because I believe people are important. I write and I write and I keep writing because there will always be hurting people, even if the one hurting is me, and there will always be more words, even if the words are my own.

I've been here too long to pretend there's not an abundance of hopeless people in this world, desperate for words to save them. My words, your words. We all need help, we all have the answers.

After my sacred season of writing privately, I found myself equipped to encourage publicly. My wounds scarred over and I was ready to show my scars to others. I think you are ready to show your scars, too, friend.

Please.

Whether writing is your hobby, passion, or profession, please do it. Join me in telling your story. You've got untapped power trapped inside your mind, stuck in your mouth, hands hovering above your keyboard.

I dare you to write for the younger you, the older you. Write to memorialize, apologize, sympathize. Write to honor the human experience, to tell someone else they are not alone. Your story is worth sharing, and you're the only one with the power to tell it.





Pure Part II

Brian Dickson Jr.





Smoke Break

Karenne Koessler

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Spring 2018

My seasoned skin attempts to dilate
beneath the dense humidity, but fails

to let me inhale: Drench the supplest
of Pa's pullovers in cig-mist.

Jellied brain swamps the wind-
pipes of my cranium. I am not porous enough

to drain the thick of exhaustion
that gurgles against my temples,

a temporary calmness slithers
its scorched claws down my throat.

Cacophonous roars pinball across
the innards of my forehead,

wasps in a jar.
Engulfing eve's crumbling rainstorm:

the perpetual tumult of my former
household that inhabits my mind.

(Silence: something I will hear when my black
distended lungs press through nicotine needles.)
A privilege, not mine.

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diary of a touch-starved college student

Annie Ogren

I know I do exist. I can touch a table. Drink a coffee. I can talk to someone and they will talk back. I know my mom and dad love me a whole lot (like a lot). I know that even if I go into an existential spiral, I still know that, practically, I exist.

But more! I want more. I want to have such an impact on people that I am forced to exist to them. I want to MEAN something to people. I want people to think of me and smile or get sad or get angry; just to know they feel me as a force.

And I think some do. I think some people know me. Like me. See me. Love me.

I feel selfish when I still want more. I want someone more, like so many people have found someone more. I want to be touched and hugged and I want to hold a hand and I want somebody to look at me and think wow! I want to hold her hand. I want someone to miss me and memorize me and be confused but delighted by me. Interested in me, just me, without the constructs and masks and held-open doors. I want someone to love my bad jokes, my tired vent-poetry and my rabbit-trail stories. My physicality, my crazed tired goblin scuttles and my wraith-styled improv. I want someone to be entranced with my sexuality, to examine it, to feel it, to learn it, to know it. To look at my face and learn it with their own.

Is it a sin? I asked myself once. I don't think so. God knows who I am. Loves who I am. Made who I am. Made me for connection. Made me for love and for depth and for confusion and for imagination and for sex and for laughter and for joy. He made me to live my life and he made me to be grateful for it. I'm grateful for it.

I know me better now. Someday someone else will know me too. I want them to know me, and love me for it. My passions, my hates, my loves, my ideas, my imagination. I want someone to fall in love with my dreams. Please share my dreams.



Annie Ogren

God made my hands to be held. And he'll always hold them. But
maybe he'll delegate, too.

I am touch-starved and tired. I just want to be seen.





Quotes

Jack Moraglia

“I’m stuck.”

-tape

“You really went green, didn’t you?”

- The Statue of Liberty’s high school sweetheart at their 100-year reunion

“This is all just a lot to process.”

- a food processor

“Can I get in just one of the pictures?”

- a camera

“They all thought I was gone forever! But I’ve been waiting. Plotting and waiting.”

- a tack that fell on the floor

“I have infiltrated the White House. En route to the data storage computer. Stand by.”

- the pardoned turkey on Thanksgiving, talking into a walkie talkie

“I’m cold.”

- the top blanket

“I’m a firm believer in reincarnation.”

- unlimited breadsticks

continued, stanza break



Jack Moraglia

“Stop calling me that!”

- dumbbells

“EXCUSE ME I’M NOT FROM
HERE, IF ANYONE CAN HEAR ME
PLEASE RETURN ME TO—”

- a hat, blowing away in the wind

“I’m sure I would be better at predicting
the weather if I were permitted to get a
degree in meteorology.”

- Punxsutawney Phil

“Hey babe. I am long. I am so long. And
I’m yours now. I’m all yours.”

- a Walgreens receipt with one item on it

“My goose is cooked.”

- a chef

“Call me old-fashioned, but...”

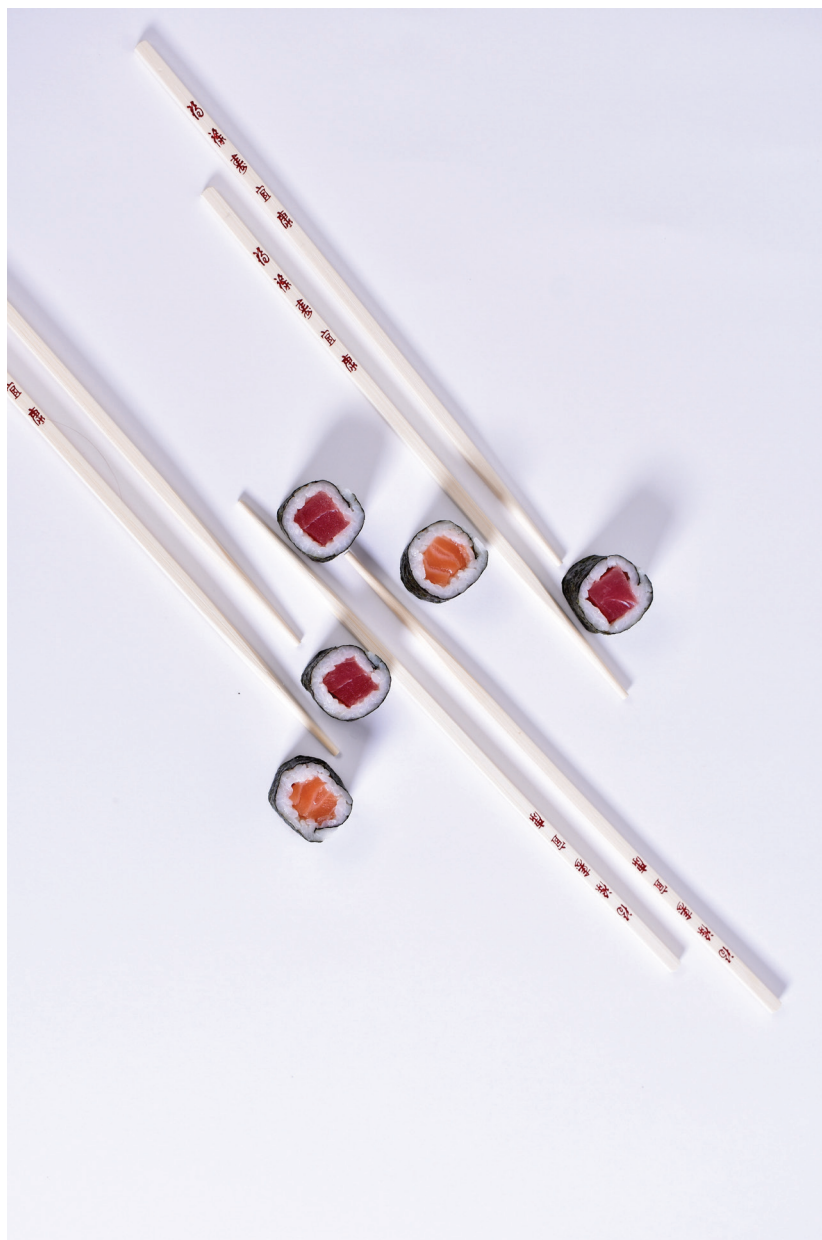
- an old fashioned cocktail

“I mean, isn’t it obvious? Like, no I’m
not trying to be rude, it’s just—you
know, it’s in the name.”

- Big Bird, after being asked how he got
his name

KYOTO GO

Danielle Davy



Alaska Bound

Annie Ogren



Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition



Road Kings

Mike Tran

“It’s different for people like us,” said Chris as he silently stared out the passenger window. Dusk had fallen, and we were already far from home. Beneath us, the once vast roadway had narrowed into a two-lane interstate. There are hardly any traffic lights on the 400 mile stretch of road between Fort Worth and Lafayette, and as a driver you can barely see the distant red glow of taillights bleeding through the darkness. Sometimes they rise like airplanes departing a runway, and you can tell that there’s a steep hill ahead. Some sections of the interstate are lined with tall rows of pine trees. In these parts, the world is two-dimensional, and you can’t help but let your mind wander. Many people would suggest that hell is a hot place, but it’s not. Hell was here, in my Toyota Camry, with the air conditioner blasting at a cool sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit.

As Chris reclined lowly into his seat, he pulled over a pale gray cotton blanket and buried his face in the wedge of his shoulder. Beneath the curls of his dark hair, I could see deep impressions around his eyes – battle scars from a long, sleepless weekend at a robotics competition at the DoubleTree in Lafayette. We had lost badly. A year’s long work of planning, departmental conflicts, and political work went down the drain in forty-eight hours due to a poorly soldered connection. I, too, was exhausted. I was supposed to be at a party in the GrandMarc, but instead I was sulking in the countryside of Louisiana. Of all the moments the rain could have come, I wished that it hadn’t then. Soft taps on the windshield turned to violent torrents in an instant. The visibility became worse with the reflection of my headlights mixing with the downpour. Mother Nature had a funny way of speaking. The pine rows grew taller and I began to reflect.

I met Chris two years earlier when I was doing the dirty work on the suspension system for a race car that the upperclassmen in the engineering school were building. He, an upperclassman himself, had a sincere way of looking at things. The fact that we were building something as captivating as a race car wasn’t the interesting part of the project, but instead it was the fact that we were doing it against the department’s wishes. The following year, when that project understandably failed, he found a hobby in doing industrious things such as running high-budget research projects and working with expensive microcontrollers. I had just been promoted as head of the electrical engineering club when he proposed to me a grand plan to jumpstart a robotics program at TCU. I had grown to distrust his type: the people who worshipped the likes of Steve Jobs and emulated them by wearing expensive black sweaters. As he spoke to me, he patted down his curls and pushed his square rimmed glasses up the ridge of his nose. He sounded dull when he ran through how we would establish an organization, get funding, and cut





Mike Tran

through all the red tape and whatnot. Yet in this haze, he pulled me closer and said, “Look, the university isn’t going to do squat for the kids in our department. You saw how they turned down the other guys for funding. If you want change, then you’ve got to make it yourself. You’ve got to make them respect you.” And thus, we began our campaign into the dark, into the offices and lecture halls of the engineering department, and on the road that took us to Louisiana as a well-funded and established robotics team.

The rain eventually let up, but it was still difficult to see with the road mist in the way. I looked over to see Chris awake and slumped over while tapping away at a dimly lit cellphone screen. His once well-fitting and dark attire was replaced with a wardrobe of baggy autumn-colored sweatshirts and pants. He let his glasses droop low with his curls, and at that moment he really did look like someone who could change the world. His dark complexion made people take him seriously, but it also deluded others into thinking that he was a foreigner. We once joked about how amusing it was when people asked us about which country we were from – unaware of the fact that we were both born and raised in Fort Worth. Our fathers were foreigners; his father came from Nepal and mine from Vietnam. They landed in this city to pursue the American dream and to afford lives for their children that they didn’t have themselves. Yet in the traditional sense, we didn’t have the luxury of going to baseball games or holding barbeques in the front yard. Instead, Chris and I lived very private and quiet lives tucked away from the very Americana that our families sought. Chris looked up from his phone and began to speak.

“I see you around campus a lot Mike, but I’ve never seen you hang around the same people. Think about it. Do you routinely hang around white people? What about the Vietnamese community?” he pressed me for an answer.

I was startled by how direct his question was, but it didn’t take me long to understand where he was coming from. It was true. I didn’t really have a routine social circle, and who I hung out with had always been a day-to-day ordeal. There was never a time in my life where I could recall that I felt like I fit in. The common experiences, the uniting stories and rituals that glued friends together, were simply not in my world. I didn’t have a grasp of what life was truly like from the American perspective, and neither did I know what it was like to live a culturally rich Vietnamese life. I remained silent, but he continued.

“You see what I mean? We’re the same. It’s different for people like us. I’m a brown boy, but I won’t fit in with the other brown guys here. I can talk to white people, but it’s not like I can ever really be one of them.”





Road Kings

It was out of his character to be concerned about things like this. An awkward and deep silence filled the cabin of the car. Our conversations never ventured far from the comfort of inside jokes and hooliganism, yet here we sat in realization that we had just skirted past the norm. I could lie and tell you that we had a profound dialogue following this. But instead, I only uttered a mess of incoherent speech while trying to process the connotation of what he had said. It was clear that this was discomforting for both of us, and we searched for an excuse to stop speaking. Chris eventually lifted his legs up and placed them on the dashboard. He fiddled with the knob on the radio until he found some electronic music that he liked and snuck away into his slumber.

In the distance, I began to see the familiar highway lamps of the greater metropolis. Each lamp that passed would shine a ray of amber light on the steering wheel. The light would bleach the cabin and recede. You could only receive brief glimpses of things that weren't evident in the dark: the KitKat wrappers on the floor, the pennies in the cupholders, and the frayed stitching of the tan leathered seats. As I drove, it became clearer to me that what Chris had said was something he had been stewing over for a long time. It was a frustration that had developed from many years of trying to craft and anchor a sense of belonging in the world. I too, though not in the exact form, have felt a similar sentiment. Whether it be in the backseat of a lecture hall or at the table of a rowdy bar, in private recesses of a bedroom or in the front row of a concert, in a walled cubicle or in a room of familiar faces, there's an inescapable sense of estrangement for people like us. It's a shared and unspoken feeling fragmented in the daily lives of people who keep busy to forget about it. Chris was a giant, or so he believed himself to be. I also believed that I was mighty. Perhaps our troubles were more deeply rooted beyond the competition and the engineering department at TCU.

When we arrived at the front of Chris's home, I helped him carry a plastic tub of broken robot parts to his room. The room was dimly lit by one fluorescent light bulb, and the wooden floor was littered with the remains of what appeared to be three years of math homework. Chris plopped himself on his bed and sighed from exhaustion. His night was over, but I still had a celebration to attend. We shook hands and I gave him a quick pat on the back. As I walked out his bedroom door, I could not help but feel an overwhelming sense of empathy. "Do you want to come to the party with me?" I asked. But when my eyes met his, I already knew the answer. Alone, I headed off in the night.

The interstate highway system of the US is a modern marvel. It carried Chris and I far from home, and it safely guided us back





Mike Tran

towards it. Though some stretches thin out and are hazardous at night, a well-composed driver can get from point A to point B without much hassle. Some may disagree, but it is a truly fascinating experience to drive it. It contains a microcosm of peoples from all types of places and backgrounds. Chris has graduated now, and I have been left to handle the remains of our efforts. We don't talk often. When I am driving, I often think back to that conversation and wonder if we are better off keeping busy. Perhaps we are, or maybe not. One thing is certain though. I am brazened on the road. "Be courteous!" Chris would scream out as I passed people on the shoulder. "What do you think I'm doing?" I would shout back at him.

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Fly

Amaya Aguilar





GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

Allison Marshall

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Spring 2016

Another one washed up on shore this morning. This one was close, just thirty miles south of Wilmington, on Oak Island. Close enough for me to wonder if I could race down to the beach and catch a glimpse of her before the marine biologists hauled her away.

The first video clips came in the middle of the evening news. Mom and I both fell silent, staring at the screen. The cameraman zoomed in closer than the coast guard cronies would let him walk, focusing in on a crumpled body in the sand that could have been a mass of black netting. Only when one of the white-gloved men carefully turned her over could I see her dark hair clumped over her pale-white skin. Her tail was grey and smooth, like that of the bottlenose dolphins I fed at the marine park. Except half her fluke was missing, a jagged mess of scarlet flesh in its place. Blood crusted over her arms and soaked through the seaweed wrapped around her torso. Words scrolled across the bottom of the newscast. I only caught snippets: complete body, female, total number of corpses reaches over one thousand...

Mom cleared her throat, scrubbing the last of the coral-pink dishes, “Aaron should already be packed. Are you ready to go?”

I stared at the screen. They cut away to a map of the North Atlantic Ocean, hundreds of tiny flags popping up all over the coasts of Ireland, Cuba, and Africa. I focused on the two little flags on Fort Lauderdale, the first reports I had seen. One was just a torso, bright red blood still pouring out into the tide. The other was a tail, charred black as if burned by fire, but what burns on the surface of the sea?

“Miriam?” Mom called. I heard the clink of a plate being set in the dish drainer, but the sound was miles away.

The audio beneath the image replayed an interview I’d already heard. Some scientist who referred to the bodies as “the creatures,” “the new species,” and my personal favorite, “the previously undiscovered marine mammals.” As if we all didn’t know what they were.

They were real, or at least they had been. Now they might all be gone. The television flashed off. I bit my lip and turned around. Mom lay the remote down on the counter and tilted her head to the side.





GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

I finished scrawling the last number on my calculus worksheet. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

I stuffed the worksheet back into its folder, a colorful thing depicting an Australian coral reef, and shoved the folder into my backpack. Mom watched me cross the kitchen, undoing her bun and letting her silver-brown hair fall to her shoulders. I opened the pantry and pulled out a box of seaweed crackers.

“Text me when you get to your dad’s.” Her voice dropped lower. “Don’t go anywhere near Oak Island.”

“I won’t.” I shut the pantry door with more force than was necessary. My face flushed and I turned my eyes down to the floor, “I’m stealing these.” I stuck a cracker in my mouth as I walked past her, pulling the hem of my sweater down to make sure the bright blue swimsuit I wore was out of sight.

Mom smirked, shooing me away. She called for Aaron as I headed out the garage door.

I tossed my backpack into the passenger’s seat of my Corolla and stuck the box of seaweed crackers in the compartment next to me. My fingers flipped through seven different radio stations, listening for those keywords running laps in my brain.

“—sent to investigate the unusual tectonic activity on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, but disappeared just as hundreds of other ships and submarines have done in that area. U.S. Navy officials insist that the loss of communication with the Jules Verne is no cause for public alarm. Officials also insist they have no evidence of a connection between the activity on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the creatures washing ashore.”

I sucked all the salt off a cracker and slumped down in my seat as the anchorwoman droned on. The media never said enough to satisfy me. Dry reports from autopsies never focused enough on the questions I really wanted to know the answers to. How did they swim? What did they eat? How did they breathe and live?

I flicked the silver charm that hung on my rearview mirror. She looked nothing like the real thing. Tiny rhinestones shaped like shells dotted





Allison Marshall

through her waist-length hair and made up the scales on her tail. I had hundreds like her. Both my bedrooms had shelves full of the previously undiscovered marine mammal.

The garage door banged open and I shut off the radio. Aaron trudged out, slinging a backpack over his shoulder. His lips were pursed together in an adorable little pout and his sandy hair hung over his eyes. Mom stood in the doorway, waving. I waved back as Aaron climbed into the backseat.

“Buckle up.” My smile vanished as soon as Mom stepped out of the doorway. I blew my bangs out of my face and backed the car out of the garage.

Aaron jabbed at my arm as I lay it over the passenger seat. “Are you swimming today?”

“Yes.” I pulled my phone out of my bag and handed it to Aaron over my shoulder. “Here, text Dad and tell him Mom’s keeping us another hour.”

Aaron took my phone. “Even though it’s cold out?”

“Not that cold.” I shifted the car into drive and sped down the street.

Aaron finished typing on my phone and threw it back into the passenger’s seat. A mischievous grin lit up his little face.

“I brought something that’ll help protect you!” He rummaged in his backpack.

“Protect me from wha-?” I turned my head back and saw Aaron draw a large silver knife from the front pocket of his bag. “Holy shi-swordfish!” I slammed my foot on the brakes and veered to the side of the road.

Aaron clutched the strap of his seatbelt as the car jerked to a stop. The smile never left his face. “Protect you from the sharks!”

“What sharks? There are no sharks anywhere near Wrightsville beach.” I twisted in my seat and grabbed at the knife.



GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

Aaron held the knife back. “The sharks that are attacking them!” I unbuckled my seatbelt and crawled towards him. “Where did you even get that? That is not approved for children under ten! Give it here!”

I snatched the knife from Aaron’s hand. His face fell. I settled back down in my seat and stared at the knife. It had to be from Dad’s kitchen. Mom had nothing like it. I looked around for a place to stash it, then stuck it next to the seaweed crackers. I started the car again, sighing.

Aaron crossed his arms over his chest. “What are you gonna do if the sharks attack?”

“Why do you think there are sharks, Aaron?” I rolled my eyes and rummaged for another seaweed cracker.

“The teeth marks on the bodies,” Aaron said.

I gagged on a cracker, covering my mouth with the back of my hand. “Where have you seen the bodies?”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “On TV. Duh.”

I swallowed, my hand lowering back down to the wheel. “Dad lets you watch that?”

Aaron shrugged his shoulders and unzipped the top of his bag. “Why not? It’s just the news.”

I slowed to a stop at a red light. “Yes, but...” The rest of my words died in my mouth. But blood and burns and dismemberment and not for children! I shook my head and glanced up at him in the rearview mirror. “It can’t be sharks, okay?”

The teeth marks did not match any known species of shark. Neither did the burns. Maybe it was us, with our oil and our boat propellers, shredding their bodies to pieces.

The light changed and I sped away, rubbing my temple with one hand. Aaron pulled a plastic blue shovel and a little bucket out of his bag.

I smiled, “collecting more shells?”



Allison Marshall

Aaron nodded his head. "I can watch you from the beach."

I laughed, turning the wheel. "I'm supposed to watch you."

"But I can be your lookout!" Aaron puffed out his chest and held up his plastic shovel like it was a sword. "If you start drowning, I can jump in and save you."

"No, Aaron," I sighed, closing my eyes. "You don't jump in after someone who's drowning. If you don't know what you're doing, you'll drown too. It happens all the time."

Aaron's lips went back into that little pout. "But I'm a really good swimmer."

"I know you are. But it's not enough. If you see someone drowning, just call for help, okay?" I glanced up at the rearview mirror. Aaron stayed quiet. "Okay?"

"Uh huh." He tucked his head down and pulled at the loose threads on his backpack.

It took mere minutes to reach my special place on Wrightsville beach. I liked this spot because there was a nice level space to park my car close to the water. It was rockier than other parts of the coast, but it was quiet and there was one long wooden pier leading out into the waves. Aaron sprang out of the car and raced towards the water, his bucket and shovel in hand.

I leaned against the car door for a moment, typing out a message to Mom claiming I had reached Dad's place. Once the message was complete, I pulled my sweater over my head and wrapped the phone inside.

I walked down to the beach in my blue suit, holding my clothes and my goggles in my arms. Aaron ran from one tidal pool to the next, and when he saw me, he smiled and waved. I smiled back, my eyes running beyond him, over the rolling blue waves.

When the reports first started, I used to imagine that I could find one of them here, alive and unharmed. Sometimes, when I lay on the pier and listened to the waves crashing in, I could convince myself that there was one right beneath me, watching over me. More than once,



GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

the skin on the back of my neck prickled and I was certain if I turned around I would see her, hovering head and shoulders above the tide. But when I looked, there was never anything there.

I picked over the rocks and lowered my goggles over my eyes. Clenching my teeth to restrain the shivers shooting through my body, I saluted to Aaron and dropped my clothes in a pile next to him. He saluted back, holding his bucket up against the overcast sky. I laughed, and then raced across the end of the pier, diving straight into the oncoming tide.

Freezing water poured over my head and enveloped my body. I drifted for a moment, letting the cold seep down into my skin. My eyes opened and I gazed into the murky open water. A few fish flitted by my feet, but otherwise the waves were lifeless.

When my lungs felt tight, I kicked my legs and broke the surface. Taking a deep breath, I turned back to look for Aaron on the beach. He stood with his hand at his brow, and waved his bucket when he saw me. I waved back, and then dove back under.

I swam until it seemed the only heat left in me was my heart pounding in my chest. Silver light leaked through the overcast on the western sky. Underneath the waves there was only darkness and the occasional spotted seatrout.

I emerged, spitting out salt, and treaded water for a moment. Closing my eyes, I breathed in the sea mist and listened to the rush of the tide rolling in.

The skin on my neck tingled. I opened my eyes, searching the waves.

Nothing. I swam forward, towards the beach. If I could just look under the pier, I would find her! I reached the end, slapped my hands down on the wood and ducked under.

Rocks and sea water. I pulled my body up out of the water. It had been a silly thought.

I trudged back across the pier to where Aaron sat drawing circles in the sand with his shovel. His head perked up as I approached. "Did you find one?"



Allison Marshall

I shook my head and knelt down beside him, grabbing my sweater. Aaron frowned and dropped his shovel back into his bucket. I pulled my clothes back on, removing my phone from the sleeve of my sweater.

I held my hand out to Aaron. “Come on, it’s getting late.” He took my hand but his grip was limp. He watched the rocks that passed under our feet as we walked.

My phone buzzed so loud I almost dropped it. Not with a text or a call, but with an ear-grating noise I’d only ever heard on television sets during tests of the emergency alert system. I fumbled as I lifted it up to my face.

Aaron’s nose wrinkled. “What is that?”

I read aloud, squinting at the words screaming in bold across the screen. “National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calls for an immediate evacuation of the Atlantic Coast.” More words scrolled by, too fast for me to read them, and the noise continued. “What? Why?” I let go of Aaron’s hand to touch the screen.

Suddenly, a siren blared out, bubbling up into one long continuous note. I screeched, dropping the phone and covering my ears. I whirled around to look down at Aaron.

He held his own hands over his ears, and his eyes were wide. “Is that the tsunami siren?”

“Yes, but...” I turned to face the sea, watching the tide roll in behind us. “That’s not possible! The tide recedes before a tsunami.”

He muttered something I couldn’t hear over the noise. I squinted at the horizon. In the dim light, I could make out something grey splashing against the current. My hands drifted away from my ears. It was a tail, a fluke like that of a dolphin’s, I was sure of it! My heartbeat thudded through my numb limbs, bringing them back to life.

I took off running towards the sea. Aaron cried out after me, but there was too much noise. The siren, the ocean waves, the wind picking up around me; all of the sounds bled together into one deafening roar.





GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

Rocks cut into the soles of my feet and blood spotted the sand behind me, but I kept my eyes on that one grey fluke moving further and further out to sea.

It disappeared beneath one last rolling wave.

“Wait!” I screamed out over the noise. I stretched out my hand towards the place where the tail disappeared.

Saltwater stung between my toes and I hissed under my breath. My damp hair whipped around my face in the wind. I searched the dotted clusters of seafoam on the surface of the water, searching for that grey tail. My eyes rested on a line of white on the distant horizon, streaking across the water like the wake of a jet ski.

It took my mind a split second to register that the tide was surging over my knees before the ground lurched beneath my feet.

I didn't have a chance to scream. The grinding rumble of the earth drowned out the wail of the siren and I could hear it even when my head plunged underwater. Seawater wormed up my nose. All of my limbs flailed, searching for the seafloor, the surface, anything! My toes brushed the ground, but it fell out from beneath me. A current surged against my kicking legs, pulling me out farther to sea. A hundred warnings ran screeching through my mind. Earthquake! Shelf-drop! Riptide! But none made sense. How could I be standing with my toes in the tide one moment and submerged the next?

My head broke the surface. I gasped, whipping around to get my bearings. The beach was hundreds of feet away, and the sea had risen. The tide spilled over the top of the pier.

“Aaron!” I tried to pull my hair out of my eyes. Salt stung in my throat and pain shot into my skull when I breathed. I thought I could just make out the white of Aaron's t-shirt on the beach.

Heat swirled up the water around me. My heart clenched and my breath froze in my lungs. I looked down into the water and saw two massive red eyes narrowed on me.

I thrashed my arms backward, kicking my feet. My toes brushed up



Allison Marshall

against something that felt like steel and I flinched away, white-hot tremors shooting through my spine.

The eyes rose up. Water spilled down over a black, reptilian head. Smoke poured out from its nostrils. It opened its mouth and thousands of blood-stained jagged teeth rose above me. The waterline boiled at the back of its throat.

I felt quakes shudder through the sea as its feet moved. Behind its head I could make out its long, coiling spine, stretching out beyond the horizon. The scales on its back were like rows of shields packed one on top of the other. My car could fit inside its mouth with room to spare.

Sparks ignited in its throat, surging out over its long, forked tongue.

I dove back underwater and swam. Even from beneath the waves, I heard the roar of fire. I thrust my arms and legs forward, fighting against a scalding current that pulled back against me. The heat was too close, the noise pressed in on me from every direction. The surface seemed to move farther and farther away, and I realized that whatever this monster was, I could not outswim it.

My arms felt like lead. Muscle spasms shot down my legs. Air escaped from my mouth and I felt as though I were sinking down, and down...

A hand grasped the back of my sweater.

The next instant I was moving forward again, impossibly fast. Arms wrapped around my waist. The water broke like a cannon blast all around me and I found myself rolling over the pier. I slapped my hands down on either side of me, coughing. My head whipped back around, and I saw her.

Not one of the corpses had washed ashore with open eyes. Now those eyes stared back at me, wide, vivid green, and dilated. Her webbed fingers dug down into the wood. Shimmering sea water dripped from her dark hair. The drops hit the pier with a sound like thunder.

Her lips, white and pale like the rest of her human skin, moved. I heard her over the sound of the blaring siren, the crackling hiss of the



GET AWAY FROM THE WATER

creature behind her. Her voice was like water spilling into the basin of a fountain, rich and ringing with vitality.

“Miriam, get away from the water.”

I clasped a hand against my mouth, shuddering with a sob. I could have lifted my hand and touched her, she was so close, so alive, and so real.

Her head snapped backwards, and she let out a shriek that sounded like a dolphin’s dying cry. Blood streamed down her chin and over her slim neck. Scaled claws wrapped around her torso and wrenched her from the pier. Her tail writhed as she crashed back into the surf.

Screaming, I rushed to the edge. The dark shadows of the monster’s hind legs disappeared beneath the pier. The structure buckled beneath my feet.

“Miriam!” I heard Aaron shout. I turned my head and saw him racing towards me.

“No!” I sprinted down the pier, shouting all the way. “Go back! Get to the car!”

We collided. He kept pointing towards the open water, refusing to turn around. I slung him over my shoulder.

“What about her? Why are you leaving her?” Aaron pounded on my back as I ran.

I heard wood groan and snap, and risked a glance behind me. The pier plunged into the oncoming tide. The monster lifted his head above the waves. Steam streamed through its teeth and its eyes flashed red. Something dangled below its jaw. My stomach churned and I whirled back around.

My legs felt weak as I stumbled to the side of my car. I flung open the back door and tossed Aaron in. His face was red when he sat up. “You can’t leave her!”

I shook my head, tears dripping down through the saltwater on my face.



Allison Marshall

“You don’t jump in to save someone who’s drowning.”

Aaron shifted back in his seat, his expression blank. He reached up and buckled his seatbelt like a little machine. I clambered into the driver’s seat and started the car.

In the rear view mirror, I could see thousands of tiny flames flickering on the ocean waves. My eyes shifted down to the silver charm, swinging back and forth with firelight glinting on the rhinestones of her tail.

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The Eclectephant Scholar

Emma Heinz



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The Orchid and the Sun

Amaya Aguilar

I think back to when our feelings started to blossom:

My eyes were like buds destined to meet yours...
as my petals unfolded, one by one,
The image of you became clear to me
Your hands welcomed my gaze towards you,
Your eyes showed me the way towards your light,
Your smile greeted me with kindness, bound my broken heart, and
welcomed me to your warmth
Your laugh shook me to my core, and with a rush of adrenaline
coming over me,
I was born anew.

Our love was like an orchid and the sun.
At the start of each day, I, like the orchid, was eager to grasp a hint of
your presence.
my spine twisted towards the sound of your voice.
My heart was filled with warmth when your light shimmered upon my
skin
As often as you rose, my eagerness to catch a glimpse of you,
My smile reminded you of the amount of joy you brought to people's
hearts.
Although you would often choose to dismiss it with a humble gaze, I
stretched my reach towards you in hope our embrace would
emulate my gratitude for you.

Even on cloudy days, you were near.
With grace and hope, you diminished the very clouds that were
weighing over my spirits
While whispering the promises of a brighter tomorrow, you
assured me,

“If not for the rain, you would not grow”

With those words, you enveloped me in your embrace, led me to
peace, and evaporated my tears with your touch.

continued, stanza break





The Orchid and the Sun

I, like Icarus, have flown too close to the sun
And yet, I emerged with my heart churning the blaze of a fiery passion
that roars with every beat.

You smiled every time our paths met
You held my hands
You kissed me
You held me
And yet, now you greet me with confusion.

I begin to melt.

I look for your eyes and your gaze seems clouded by uncertainty,

“Since when did you begin to let me fall from your grasp?”

My wings begin to falter and I struggle to meet you.

Your embraces are not filled with the same warmth you had once
before,

“We were happy!!”

My grasp of your light withers and I plunge towards an abyss of my
own self-doubt.

Your hands reach for mine, but I am like sand, and have slipped
through the hands that once welcomed me so lovingly,

“Why...”

The truth is, I have seen this light before...

I have bloomed once before...

But the sun has set and the darkness enveloped me quickly.

...

I lie, wasting away in the darkness, Saturn’s moons come to me and
ask me to make haste and harvest my efforts.

“rise!” they say, “Lift yourself off the ground for today is a new day
and the stars have been begging for your voice.”

The pains of my labors come throbbing

continued, stanza break



Amaya Aguilar

thundering
reminding me
of all the days spent under the intense rays of a love that I could not
call my own.

“I am not enough”

I try to speak but my jealousy holds tight to my tongue.
The unbearable pain that prevents me from using a voice gifted to me
by my loving Father brings tears filled of anger and pain to my
eyes.

“why me.” I curse.

The moons mutter prayers for Apollo to cast a ray of light my way,
But as the moon can only reflect a light that is not their own, I felt no
warmth.

Instead, a high tide approaches unforgivingly
sweeping me off my feet and washing me away further into the abyss.
The moons cry for help but their tears added to the immense waves
that loomed over me before crashing upon me and consuming
me.

I was obliterated and became nothing.
I was once an orchid and you were the sun. my sun.
Mine and yet not for me to claim at all.

“If not for the rain, you would not grow”

I shudder at your words and wished for them to leave.
I knew the truth in your words but I did not want to welcome them
into my aching heart that felt you so near.

“I still care about you”

How come my Father keeps bringing me towards you.
How come my heart won't settle.
How come I am so blinded by your light?
Your light that is comfort
Your light that is safe
Your light that is thoughtful, forgiving, loving

continued, stanza break





The Orchid and the Sun

Your light...

My light...

I have found my light through all the darkness and all the pain.

Your hands,

Your eyes,

Your smile,

Your laugh

You

You have helped me find the true light... the light inside of me.

It was through all of this, that I am able to rise from the salty stings of
the ocean of my tears and self-doubt.

Through this, I am strong enough to plant my roots firmly on soil that
has been nourished by the very tears that stung when I cried
out for help.

I see this light,

this light that is unfathomably endless overwhelms me with warmth,
and tells me that I am safe.

“Look upon the horizon”

“The son has risen”



Refracted Memories

Paulette Watson

Prism lights hug my
ring finger, glistening, glinting
whispered vows.

Months after wedding visit
bestowed treasured heirloom,
gliding effortlessly -- perfect fit.

Sunlit arcs of color tug at what
my brain locked away safe
from breaking heartbeats pumping.

Rhythmic rocking smoothly
singing of missing pieces resurrected
in a reflection. Rippling

Across hazel pools envisioning
your voice spilling stories
silenced.

My ring remembers.
I twist the band as if
dialing memories.

Palms embrace gems
precious heavens hold tight
to you.



normal

Kathryn Lewis

I was 6, and I didn't like to talk to boys, all my friends were girls. They have cooties anyway so I figured it was normal. I wanted to be normal.

I was 7, and they told me I was more advanced than anyone in my grade. I was happy to be seen as smart, or at least I figured I should be since everyone was patting me on the back and praising me for being so good. But I was different. Wasn't normal what people liked? I wanted to be liked.

I was 10, and everyone thought I was strange for never having a crush, including me. Crushes were normal, and that's what I aimed to be. So I made up crushes. That one, he has nice eyes. That one, he's funny. That one's smart, I think. Whenever someone asked what I liked about them, I'd lie. They would say, "that's odd. how do you have a crush on someone you hardly know?" How do you know someone?

I was 11 when I thought to myself one day, "maybe I'm gay." But I shook it off almost immediately. That had to be one of those stupid thoughts you have that mean absolutely nothing. I can't be GAY, right? I mean, there's no gay people out there. Everywhere I turn is a man and woman holding hands and kissing. "Gay" was the punchline to a joke that I'm not sure I wanted to hear. Plus, who ever heard of girls liking girls? Every girl I knew like boys, and every boy I knew like girls, so that must be what's right. Right?

I was 13 when I had my first real crush on a girl with eyes as blue as the ocean and hair so blonde I thought it was gilded. But that's not normal right? Girls like guys, and guys like girls. Every image of love I'd ever seen was of a man and a woman. Does this mean I'm not allowed to love?

I was 14 when I learned firsthand what internalized homophobia is like. Everyone around me was accepting of the lgbt community, as was I, but I couldn't bring myself to be accepting of my nature. For me, this hatred came in the form of constantly wishing I was different, because maybe if you weren't so weird, life would be easier. Maybe if you were normal.

I was 15 when I had the back burner thought that this kind of love, MY kind of love, would never be broadcasted on a tv screen. Never spoken about and nodded about like the "normal" love between a man and woman. Never shown to children for the fear that they'll be





Kathryn Lewis

brainwashed into believing the horrid concept that love is love and that it's not something you can knead and mold until you think it to be normal enough.

But I. am. a lesbian. Not maybe bisexual, not just experimenting, not making a political statement. the only statement I'm trying to make is that I do not want to pursue a relationship with a man, so no, "nice guy" you can't try to turn me straight. there is no sin in loving, because inside we are all just organs and bones. do not recite "Leviticus 18:22" at me and then turn around and tell me that your God loves me. your God has made you believe that I will be going to hell because of my choice to love in a way that isn't "normal." I have spent enough time in a hell of my own creation, wishing that this was a choice like everyone thinks it is so I can just choose to be normal.

But I am 19. My hands have stopped shaking and my heart has stopped racing when I open my mouth to say that I am gay. I love women and that is not up to interpretation. Besides, normal is overrated anyway.

Mantra
Erin Donald

EVERYTHING DIES, ^{and} EVERY
experience ENDS. EVERY FLAME
DIES DOWN, ^{AND} EVERY FLOWER*
WILTS. ^{yet} we STILL STAND BY THE
fire ^{AND} we ^{still} PICK DAISIES.
AN EXPERIENCE
is not
DIMINISHED
by its
IMPERMANENCE
BUT IS RATHER
heightened by it.
we buy REAL
FLOWERS
INSTEAD OF PLASTIC
PERHAPS
IT IS BETTER
TO BLOOM AND
Die THAN to NEVER
GROW AT ALL.



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Cracks made for Daisies

Theron Abell

gripping a bar rubbed brass
by countless passing hands. The smell
of the first curling wisps of mist
stark in the night. A chimney
Hidden away on
the back of a home
in a city without a single hearth.
A lone tuft of hair, left out
to flutter in the space
Between a ponytail and the nape
of a neck. I live in the hidden
hints of the world that no one seems
to hear. The subliminal, invisible,
Irreplaceable aspects of life that make
it silently beautiful.
wonder only understood through
These pixies on the wing.
the silent bells of snow, the nibble
and bite of brisk wind, the man-
made river behind the garage
Somehow home to the tiny
turtles. The impossibly
weighted pebbles of life who
whisper that even in the cities
of stone and steel, even
in the coldest of nights, straight
from concrete, the daisies grow.



HOLIAN

Minh Nguyen



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Naloxone

Annie Brenkus

I.

I shaved her head last month
in a hotel room in Folsom. She
hotboxed the rental car
& time was a tailpipe
dripping.
Pinned to her
needles, I carried
the license & the miracle
but I am not endless & time
was like darkness spilling in.

II.

It was too rainy for the lake
so I showed her where
we used to keep the boat,
took the little path, dotted
with rusty cans & pinecones
until the mountain turned hazy
& our heads were wet
as the sugar pines.

III.

she wanted
the bathtub
to die by a river
so my cousin came
to carry her
she wanted the tide
to run the cold water
to come up
& wait for her eyes
like heavy curtains
& drag her away



Antarctica

Laura Fuentes

I long to go back, when I felt
unfamiliar, lost & afraid and calling for my mother

the way weather warning sirens sound on Wednesdays.
Sound milking in the air, unwavering

in your ear drum. *I'm only a foot taller*
than an adult emperor penguin

I say, alone.
I pick the ice sheets on my fingernails.

Fragmenting, little islands.
This can't simply be—womanhood,

 womanhood is entropy
is an onyx-colored desert

is overstuffed with birthday cake.
Blue crumbs & stained lips.

Here, have some of mine she says.
My mother doesn't keep the right

distance. Her love is disintegration,
I depart back to the sea.



Clash at Dusk

Sergio Xocrates Gonzalez





The Johnsons

Brianna Schneider

Last time I saw Mrs. Johnson was when Mr. Johnson brought her back. Momma had sent me over with a casserole dish, some potato and green bean thing that Mrs. Johnson had once told her she liked. Mr. Johnson had let me into the house and pointed towards the living room. The place had a funny smell, sweet but not pleasant. It smelled like they'd tried to spray air freshener over a full garbage can. Mrs. Johnson was sitting in the living room. She didn't really look like Mrs. Johnson anymore though. Her eyes seemed too big for her face, even though her eyelids drooped halfway down. Her baldness scared me, even covered in a scarf her head looked wrong. Bare. I thought she looked like one of my baby dolls, the kind that closed their eyes when you laid them down. Only sometimes their eyes get stuck half-closed and you can't make them open.

I didn't see her anymore after that, even though Momma sent me 'round their house every few days with a new casserole. Mr. Johnson never invited me back in. He just took the casserole from me when I rang the bell. Every time he opened the door I would stare at my feet. I didn't like how he looked at me. He never looked angry but his eyes seemed to get larger and his lips went way up past his gums when he smiled at me. We never talked much. The first few times I brought over the dish he would say things like, "Aren't you getting big, you must be nearly as old as Josie!" and, "I can't believe such a beautiful flower like you can carry such a hot and heavy casserole." I never heard him call Janie or Josie "flower."

Mrs. Johnson had gotten sick last May. I still don't really know why, but since their house is only two down from ours, the two girls came and stayed with us for a little while. Momma said I had to be nice to them 'cause their momma was sick, but I didn't like them. Josie always took my candy and Janie still peed the bed. Whenever I tried to play games Josie would call me stupid, just 'cause she was older, and Janie cried if she didn't win. It wasn't fair. Josie was only eight, that's only a year-and-a-half older than I am. She had no right.

They stayed for what seemed like too long, though Momma said it was just three days. During dinner one night their daddy showed up and took them back. I don't think he said anything to either of them. Just thanked my momma and left. They followed out the door behind him lookin' like the dogs momma won't let me pet in the city. That was the last time I saw Josie and Janie.

Momma makes me pray for Mrs. Johnson before I brush my teeth at night. Last month when Mr. Johnson brought her home, I overheard Momma





Brianna Schneider

on the phone talking to one of the other ladies in the neighborhood about it. Momma said Mrs. Johnson was going to die. The doctors had said there was nothing they could do and she should just go home and be comfortable and die.

Dying sounds really hard but living with someone dying would be even harder, I think. My goldfish died last week. He went upside-down in the bowl and floated there. Dad had to scoop him out and we flushed him down the toilet so he could go to heaven. I wonder how Mrs. Johnson will get to heaven.

The last few times I delivered food I smelled something real strange. My nose would crinkle up each time he opened the door and I just taught myself not to breathe when I heard Mr. Johnson unlock the door. I've never smelled that smell before and I don't ever want to again.

Just this last time I went over there and saw a new vase of flowers standing in the entryway. They were too bright to be for a dead person so I thought this meant Mrs. Johnson must be better. I finally broke my silence and asked Mr. Johnson how she was. He looked at me a real long time before answering.

"She's a lot easier to take care of now—she's happier, I think."

I thought that meant she was all better so I asked if Josie and Janie would be coming back. He didn't seem to like that. He made a face like he'd been forced to eat something bad.

"I don't think you'll have to see them ever again, my flower. They weren't special, like you."

I didn't understand so I just nodded to my shoes and turned to leave. The door shut real hard behind me.

This morning I woke up to a real loud knocking on our front door. When I looked through the spindles on the upper landing I saw Momma talking to a man in the doorway. As he moved into the house I could see a metal badge on his chest. And a gun on his hip. The top of their heads moved past my landing and into the kitchen where I could hear Momma moving stuff around. I sat there trying to listen; Momma didn't like it when I interrupted adults talking. But I wanted to know why a police officer was in our house. Momma had always





The Johnsons

said if anything bad ever happened to me I needed to find a police officer, they'd stop any bad guys. There were no bad guys here though, so why would a policeman come?

I knew if I was quiet enough I'd be able to sit next to the kitchen entryway and listen. I was about halfway down the stairs when I heard a glass break. I nearly fell down the rest of the stairs. It scared me so bad. I could hear Momma crying now. I finished sneaking down the stairs and took my spot near the doorway. Momma was still crying, it hurt me to sit there just listening. I wanted to make her feel better but something wouldn't let me move. I could hear the policeman talking now.

"I know this comes as a shock ma'am, but I really need to know if you can tell us anything useful."

Momma didn't seem to be able to answer 'cause I could still hear her crying. After letting her go for a few more minutes the policeman interrupted Momma again.

"Ma'am is there anything, have you seen or noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

I couldn't hear what Momma said in reply. Her breathing was weird and high pitched and her voice cracked in the middle of each of her words. I did hear my name though. I didn't understand. What did this policeman want and why would Momma talk about me with him? I must have done something wrong. I only had a few seconds to think about all the bad things I'd done before I heard the policeman speak again.

"Your daughter? Is she here? Would you mind if I speak with her?"

I strained to hear what Momma said back to him. She wouldn't let the policeman take me away, would she? I hadn't done anything bad enough to go to jail, had I? My heart was beating too fast; it was hurting my chest. My hands had also gone cold and it felt like someone had sprayed water on my forehead.

A chair scraped back. Not wanting momma to know I'd been listening, I ran up the stairs as quickly and quietly as I could. Scared, I laid in bed. I only had a few seconds to grab a book and pretend I was reading before I heard a soft knock on the door. I thought he'd just





Brianna Schneider

walk on in but when he didn't I got up and shuffled to the door. I twisted the knob and saw black work boots on our carpet. I couldn't look up.

"Hi there, your mother said I could talk to you. Is that okay?"

Without looking up I nodded.

"Would you like to talk in your room? I see you have a very nice tea table there. Maybe we could have some tea while we talk?"

I nodded again. I kept my eyes fixed on the floor like I was looking for something but couldn't remember what. The policeman moved towards the table and sat down in one of my chairs. I brought over the teapot from my box and decided I should look at him. I glanced up quickly while I pretended to pour him some tea. He looked nice. His hair was very light-colored and his eyes were crinkly in the corners. He smiled and thanked me as he took his tea. After a few more minutes of silence, he spoke.

"I bet you're wondering why I came up here to talk to you."

Looking back down at my socks I nodded. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. He's going to tell me I have to go to jail.

"I just wanted to ask you a few things about Mr. Johnson. Your mother said you sometimes delivered food to him and Mrs. Johnson?"

My eyes bounced up towards his face. I didn't understand why he was asking about Mr. Johnson. Did this mean I wasn't going to jail? I nodded to him but just kept staring. I didn't understand what was going on.

"You see, Mr. Johnson has gone missing. We went to his house to look for him and he wasn't there, do you know where he is?"

I was doubly confused now.

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Johnson? Or Janie or Josie?"

A strange look crossed over the policeman's face. He looked almost scared, or maybe a little sick. It took him a few seconds to answer my question. "Unfortunately it's not possible for us to ask her or his two



The Johnsons

girls where he is.” The policeman made a weird shaking movement, almost like he was trying to get water out of his ears. “We just want to know if he ever said anything strange to you? Anything that made you feel uncomfortable or confused you?”

I just stared back at him. I told him how Mr. Johnson called me flower and how he said Mrs. Johnson was happier now. The policeman looked angry, I couldn’t tell. I was worried I had said the wrong thing. Trying to be helpful I told him about the flowers and funny smell that came from the house every time Mr. Johnson opened the door. The policeman definitely looked sick this time.

“Thank you so much, you’ve been very helpful! This tea was delicious too, thank you!” With that, he got up and walked towards the door. With his hand on the doorknob, he turned and said to me, “Try not to think about that house too much, okay sweetheart? Just forget about everything.” He gave me one last smile, that didn’t make his eyes crinkle like they had earlier, and left.

Momma made me go outside after the policeman left. She said I needed to play in the sun and gave me my favorite ball. Her eyes were red and her voice sounded funny when she spoke. She gave me a really tight hug. I didn’t want her to start crying again so I went to the backyard and started to bounce my ball up and down. I liked to pretend it was a spaceship and that if I bounced it high enough it would fly right up into space. As I went to throw the ball down again I saw a shadow move behind me. I turned and looked up to see someone walking towards me. The sun was in my eyes making me squint and it hurt to try and look at whoever it was. I shut my eyes tight against the sun and waited until they were right in front of me. His head blocked the sun as he leaned down towards me.

“Oh, hi, Mr. Johnson.”

“Hello, my little flower.”

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Writing

Matt Dadet

When I have sleepless nights and nightmares
Only my dreams are sleeping.
Thinking of you in the silence of this dark room
I find a remedy in writing.

The hardest part of writing is the first line .
The one that comes and disrupts the equilibrium of the paper.
The one that chooses to exist now
Despite an infinite possible realities .
The one that beats the expectation
And at the same time fulfills every assumption.
Almost like how we started together.

The hardest part of writing is what to write about
When I write, I let my ideas create their own ideas.
Sometimes they bring you up
Sometimes they're quiet.
Other times they pull rabbits out of their hats
And amaze everyone in sight.

When I write about life,
It's the arrogance of my brain.
I watch it scramble,
Then I write.
But I also put my ears on my heart
And listen to its sorrows,
Then I write.

When I write about love,
I write about what gave me my freedom
I capture few memories
And pour them on a large white paper.

When I write about hope in my room
I write about what binds us.
I write so my message speaks to you
Because writing saved me from gloom.
So now I'm writing to you.

Shattering Sunset

Emma St. Clair



Balboa Bay
Emily Nicholson



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Musing

Laurel Fowler

*"Time passes so slowly if you
are unaware of it and so quickly
if you are aware of it." -Marc Bolan*

The glass that separates me from the
ticking pendulum in my grandfather clock
reflects a face unrecognizable.

tick tock

The tenuous song of time is a reminder
that each second sucks out time
from my internal clock.

My mother still asks me:

How did you grow up so fast?

I never seem to know the answer.

It's strange how a childhood memory
becomes a distant dream
that stays with you after you wake,
and you have to ask yourself—
did that really happen?

Is it true that I used the wall as a canvas
to draw with my mother's red lipstick?
Is it true that I would wake before sunrise
to watch the birds with my Grandma on her back porch?
Sometimes I like to believe it was just
a dream misconstrued into reality.

The future is not free of the past
and the lines in my face deepen
as they begin to tell the story
of my life.

I'm reminded that each tick of the clock
are seconds turning into hours.
I can only hope that my time
here was well spent.

tick tock





Inconsistent Sandman

Laurel Fowler

In the lonely hours of the twilight
I am burdened with my rambling
thoughts. The distant past comes

back to light and I call myself a coward
when I wake at 2 a.m. thinking failure,
never able to sleep.

My mattress and pillows become
scorching hot, unable to find a cool
spot I can dissolve in.

From midnight to the morning dawn
a glass of warm milk in a cup of
hot chamomile tea doesn't fix the

dark shadows under my sunken eyes.
In the silence I ask the luminous moon
if she's still awake at this hour.

In a midnight typhoon I count the hours
I have missed, and the sleepless
nights pile up, leaving my eyes tired

but my mind not. Late night thoughts
creep from underneath my pillow
suffocating me until there is nothing

but my burning eyes and a growing
need for a shadow of silence.



PORTRAIT

Danielle Davy





Odd One Out

Ashley Parks

SCENE ONE: A group of political science students on a debate team sit in a board room discussing another friend that is missing. There are 4 friends total in the room. They are missing the 5th.

ERNIE: So, when was the last time everyone saw Elias?

JASMINE: Do you want each of us to go around the room or...?

ERNIE: I mean yeah, I guess that may be the most efficient way to hear from everyone.

JOHN: But what if we haven't seen Elias recently, or like at all?

ERNIE: Then you'd just say that. Or say the last time you do remember seeing him.

DELILAH: Alright, who's first? (There is a beat. No one answers.)

JOHN: So again, what if we haven't seen him?

JASMINE: When was the last time you saw him, John?

JOHN: I – I... don't remember.

ERNIE: Wasn't it last weekend that y'all were pretty heated with each other?

DELILAH: (Under breath) That was a little more than just heated...

JOHN: I didn't do anything to Elias, if that's what we're all thinking. That argument last weekend was just me putting him in his place.

ERNIE: So, was that the last time you saw him? When y'all argued?

JASMINE: What were y'all even arguing about anyway? (JOHN doesn't respond. He shoots a pointed look at DELILAH who doesn't catch it.)

ERNIE: Has anyone...has anyone reported Elias missing? (There is a long pause. Everyone looks to the others for an answer.) So...no one has reported Elias missing?

JASMINE: Well, no one really knows how long he's been gone.

ERNIE: Ok then, let's go back to the original plan to go around the room and say when the last time we each saw him was.

JOHN: Last time we saw him alone? As in individually? Or together? Or...?

JASMINE: Just the last time you saw him period, John.

DELILAH: Ok I'll start. The last time I remember seeing Elias was 2 nights ago when we studied for a bit in the lib together. Boom. Next?

JOHN: You two... saw each other 2 nights ago?

DELILAH: (With a sigh) Yes John. That's what I said. (The two exchange longer glares at each other. A beat.)

ERNIE: And... you haven't seen him again since?

DELILAH: No. Isn't that the point? To share the last time we saw





Odd One Out

him? That's the last time I saw him. (Under breath.) Alive that is...
(There's a pregnant pause as the rest of the group stares at DELILAH.

After a beat, she continues.) I mean for all I know with how long it's
been since anyone heard from him, he could very well be dead by now.

ERNIE: No one has suggested anything about foul play or him being
dead, D. For all we know he could've taken a hooky trip home and
didn't tell anybody.

JOHN: Right before a debate?

DELILAH: Oh please. Since when do you care about him being
around for a debate?

JOHN: Uhh, since he became a part of the team?

DELILAH: Oh, so he's not a "threat" to your reputation anymore?

ERNIE: Guys...can we focus here?

JASMINE: Elias told me once that he was gonna head home for the
weekend and see his family, but he wasn't gonna tell them.

ERNIE: But he told you that.

JASMINE: I mean yeah, but he still didn't tell his people he was
coming. So, he's not totally incapable of going places without telling
people. Maybe this time around, we just so happen to be those people.

DELILAH: Does anybody have any way to contact his parents or
someone? Maybe verify he went there?

JASMINE: But why would he go there knowing we had a big debate
today? That doesn't make any sense.

ERNIE: I kinda want to get back to the whole when was the last time
anyone of us saw him thing...

DELILAH: Well it seems a few of us are kinda reluctant to do that
sooo.... (DELILAH shoots a pointed look at John.)

JOHN: What, Delilah....?

DELILAH: When was the last time you saw Elias?

JOHN: I don't know...I guess the last time we all hung together as a
group.

ERNIE: And when was that? (Everyone stares at John. He hesitates.)

JOHN: It was when we...when we all went to the pregame that one
night before the party.

ERNIE: The one last weekend?

JOHN: Yeah, that one.

JASMINE: I remember it. We were celebrating our win.

JOHN: Story corroborated. Are y'all happy now?

ERNIE: So, the last time you saw him was when y'all argued...

DELILAH: (Changing the subject) We still have to be onstage soon,
and we have no idea where our whole ass team member is.

ERNIE: Keep going through! When was the last time you saw him
Jazz?





Ashley Parks

JASMINE: Why do I have to answer the question next? What about you? You seem oddly hush-hush over the whole thing...

ERNIE: I'm the one over here trying to get the answers so we know if we gotta file a police report or not.

JOHN: A police report!?

DELILAH: Again, for all we know my guy could b-

ERNIE: Stop saying he's dead, D! (There's a pregnant pause as the group takes in ERNIE'S outburst. ERNIE does not make eye contact with anyone.)

JASMINE: ...You good Ernie?

DELILAH: I never actually said he was dead I just said it's pos—

ERNIE: Answer the question, Jazz.

JASMINE: You first.

DELILAH: Oh my GOD. WHY IS THIS SO HARD?

JOHN: I mean it's obvious. He's hiding something.

ERNIE: Me? What about her?

JASMINE: What about you, John?

JOHN: I've answered the question already!

DELILAH: Time is ticking y'all.

ERNIE: I think we should call it.

JOHN: Wait, forfeit? No way.

DELILAH: Weren't you just the one concerned about Elias not being here for the debate?

JOHN: Yes! This is my team and I —

ERNIE: Hold up hold up hold up hold up...your team?

JOHN: Chill out Ernie you know what I—

DELILAH: Just because you "think" you're the best debater—

JOHN: (with gusto) I AM the best debater. You and your "bff" Elias can't seem to wrap your heads around that. Without me, there would be no team.

JASMINE: Well fuck the rest of us, I guess.

DELILAH: Arguing over who debates best is not what's gonna help us find Elias. (To JASMINE) When was the last time you saw him!?

JASMINE: Ernie?

JOHN: Jasmine?

DELILAH: ANYONE?!

JOHN: Why do you keep insinuating he's dead?

DELILAH: Because for all I know, he might be!

ERNIE: There must be a reason you think that D. What do you know?

DELILAH: I listen to Crime Junkie. The true crime podcast. Next question?

JASMINE: You told me a few weeks ago that you hated podcasts.





Odd One Out

(There's another pause. Everyone looks at each other, confused.)

DELILAH: I mean—they...they're not my favorite thing but—

JOHN: Now, wait...

JASMINE: (genuinely thoughtful) I mean, I know the only thing Elias listens to is podcasts...

DELILAH: Look, I'm the only one that's been cooperating here. (Pointedly at JASMINE and ERNIE.) You two still won't answer the original question.

JOHN: (staring at DELILAH, despite referring to ERNIE) Yeah Ernie, weren't you the main one pressing for answers earlier?

ERNIE: But D, you just got caught in a lie.

DELILAH: Who says I was lying?

JASMINE: I did.

ERNIE: And you've been talking about death from the beginning.

DELILAH: I'm just being reali—

JASMINE: Why is him being dead so realistic for you?

JOHN: What made you lie about podcasts, D?

ERNIE: Yeah, was the lib 2 days ago really the last time you saw him?

DELILAH: Don't you question my credibility until you provide some useful info yourself.

ERNIE: Fine! Y'all wanna know what I was doing 2 days ago? Burying my best friend that's what! (The others stare at ERNIE, mouths agape.)

JASMINE: So...so you did kill him...

ERNIE: (Genuinely confused) Wait, huh? No, not El—

DELILAH: And y'all were up in here getting on me for bringing up death!

ERNIE: Because you're the only one assuming he's dead!

DELILAH: (Getting up from her seat.) I'm not assuming anything. I'm laying all of the options on the table!

JOHN: Why does him being dead have to be an option?

JASMINE: Because people die, dimwit. Ernie just reminded us of that.

ERNIE: The death I'm talking about is not the death of—

JOHN: (To JASMINE) Whose side are you on?

ERNIE: Wait, wait, wait since when are we picking sides?

DELILAH: Why won't anyone answer the original damn question?

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW ELIAS?

JASMINE: Sit down, Delilah.

DELILAH: I slept with him, ok!

JOHN: (Getting up slowly from his chair.) ...What?

DELILAH: Two nights ago. Elias and I slept together two nights ago.





Ashley Parks

ERNIE: You mean when you were studying two nights ago?

JASMINE: Lay off, E. You're still very much so a suspected murderer right now.

JOHN: Fuck that. What...Delilah? (DELILAH doesn't say a word. She sits back down. JOHN, still standing with a piercing stare at DELILAH. There's a long beat.)

JASMINE: Sooooo, are we ever gonna bring things back to where Ernie here said he buried a friend?

ERNIE: I never once said that friend was Elias. You're making a rash assumption. And plus, I wanna know what all this is about? (ERNIE gestures between DELILAH and JOHN.)

JASMINE: Quit dodging, bud.

DELILAH: Oh, YOU WANNA TALK ABOUT DODGING?

JOHN: What do you mean you slept with him, D?

DELILAH: That's not what's important right now, John.

JOHN: I think it's pretty damn important. And obviously so did you if you found the need to say it.

DELILAH: I'm just trying to inspire everyone to be forthcoming.

JASMINE: Well, we really didn't need you to come forth with that information.

JOHN: (Still trained on DELILAH) I thought we had an agreement... an understanding.

ERNIE: What agreement? Understanding...? (JOHN is leaning over the table, laser focused on DELILAH. She doesn't look up as she responds.)

DELILAH: I think it's about time we head ou—

JASMINE: Oh, let it rest Delilah! We're not going out there.

ERNIE: Does this agreement have anything to do with you and Elias's arguments, John?

JASMINE: What dead friend are you talking about Ernie?

ERNIE: My damn dog! Simba got run over last weekend at that party.

JASMINE: Oh shit. How?

ERNIE: I don't know. Maybe you can ask our good friend John about that. Maybe now Delilah can shed some light on it too. (Suddenly there's a knock on the board room door. Everyone in the room freezes. No one responds to the knock. After a beat, nothing happens. No new knock. Nothing.)

JOHN: Is that him? (No one responds. Everyone is still trained on the door. A beat. Suddenly an incessant knocking at the door. It does not stop.)

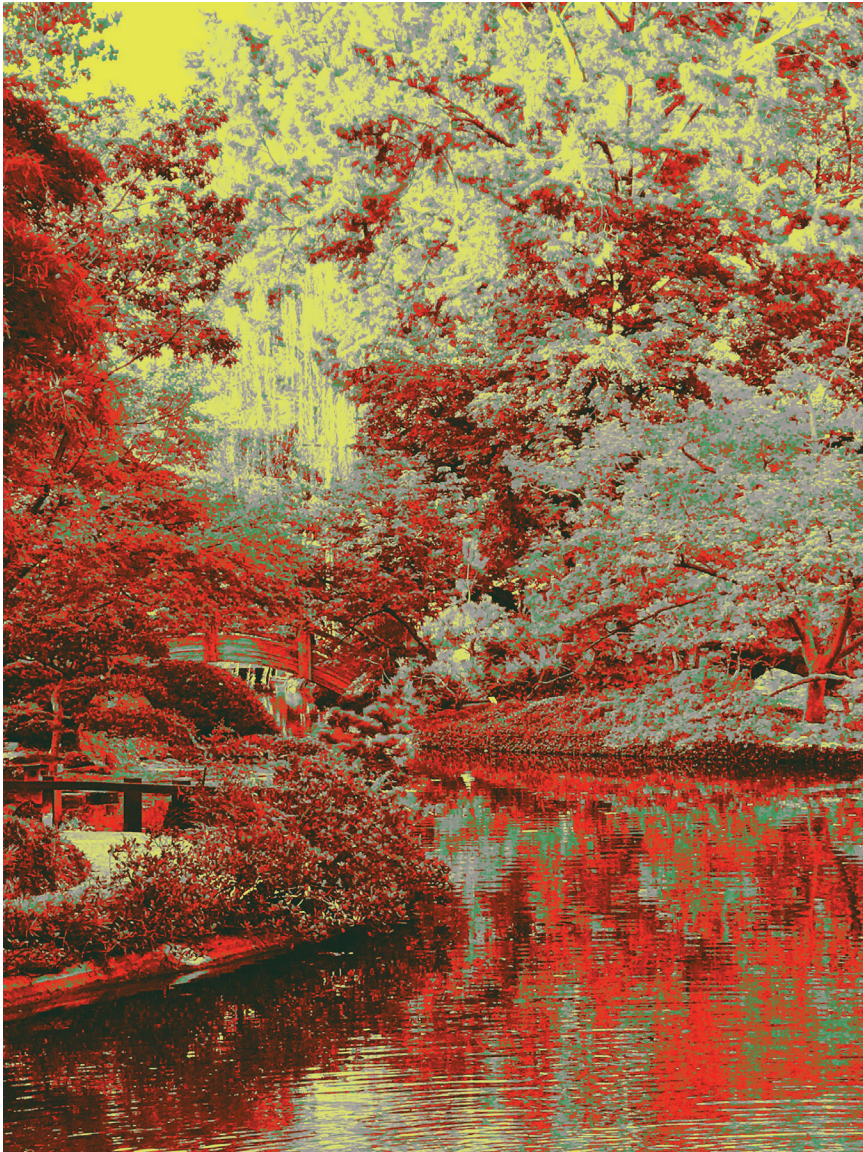
BLACKOUT





Snow on Strawberry Leaves

Theron Abell





When I Was Lucy

Polley Poer

SWEATSHIRT

My tiny kid brain was a mirror that only reflected myself. It didn't matter who was knocking on the door, asking for entry, hoping to take a stroll along my frontal cortex. No, you poor souls, you're not allowed in. This is a one-woman show.

I was four years old when I screamed at my mother for the first time.

I told you not to buy me clothes! I roared my tiny little aggravated voice inside my head, wiped my nose, and ran off to my room. I'd told her, if she was going to the store to buy me a toy. That was all I wanted. Was that so hard? Everybody bought me clothes. I had plenty of clothes.

But still, she had walked into the living room with an excited smile and held out a red sweatshirt. "Lucy, I found something you're going to like!" she'd said.

Later that evening, after my insolent tears had dried like paste on my face, I snuck into the living room and brought back the sweatshirt. She'd known me well. On the front, it had a collage of my favorite Disney character. Somewhere in an attic, in a box with all my keepsakes, I still have that tiny red sweatshirt.

POER HOUSE

Our house was always quiet enough that you could hear the wind blow through it. Saturday would come, and Mom would be in her room, Dad outside in the yard. He would always leave the backdoor open. As I heard it periodically slam against the doorframe, clunking the shabby blinds along behind it, I would lie in my bed and contemplate my options for the day.

I could play school in the front room.

I could watch movies until my head hurts.

I could go outside with Dad.

I could try to convince Mom to take me to Target.



When I Was Lucy

After choosing to go with option four, I would stroll into Mom's room and find myself hanging my head as I stalked back out. The time was 1:34 pm. Mom was asleep.

DUMB LITTLE SENTENCE

I was 6 years old when I wrote a fake, cheesy haiku at the elementary school Mother's Day brunch. We were required, much to my dismay, to recite a sentence about our moms in a microphone as they all sat and watched. I fought hard to turn my mirror-brain around, to let it show someone else. But everyone in the audience was a blubbering mess. I looked around at all of those women and felt my skin crawl as they sat there, glistening eyes and all, holding their hands to their mouths. Mom cried, I was embarrassed. I hated when she cried. Can't we just move on and pretend like that touching moment didn't just happen? Such a dumb little sentence. I was sure she'd tell all my family about it. She stuffed tissues into her purse.

COLD EGGS

Sometimes, if I were lucky, I'd wake up on Sundays to find my dad making pancakes. I thought he made the best pancakes. He'd whistle to himself as he stood alone in the kitchen, hovering around the space like it was built for him. Everyone was in bed, the house just as still and quiet as it ever was. I'd perch myself up at the bar to watch the bubbles grow on top of the rounds. We'd make a full batch. Mix more batter, pour more blobs, flip, flip, flip.

Then, he'd decide to make eggs.

Then he'd throw in a little bacon, too.

"Hey, we've got 'em," he'd say. "Might as well cook it all!"

I'd think about how happy Mom and Sam would be when they woke up to a huge breakfast ready to devour. Dad would tell me "you flip pancakes like a pro" and I'd wonder if Mom flipped pancakes any differently. I'd never know.

Dad liked to cook like he was cooking for a party; as if there would soon be a constant knocking at the door while people strolled in ready to eat. We'd have to keep cooking, keep slapping pancakes and stirring eggs. We'd hear their laughter over the loud sizzling of a new slab of bacon on the pan. They wouldn't be able to get enough. Someone would have to *run-to-the-store* in their





Polley Poer

pajamas, pick up more stuff. The coffee pot would never cease its gurgles and hisses.

We never quite grasped, however, that the extra eggs would get cold, extra pancakes thrown in the freezer for rushed mornings out the door, bacon given to the dog, and the only meals made out of the Sunday morning feast would be by him and me.

A little person inside my head wanted to confront them. *Dad and me made breakfast, get up!* But I didn't, I just let it slide, like the leftover eggs into the trash.

THE SILENCE OF LORETTA LYNN

I was 12 years old when Mom insisted I watch "Coal Miner's Daughter". I don't think I really even knew what a coal miner was, but I obliged. Somewhere in the story of the country singer, I was appalled. The husband was a creep, a pig, *did they have to have sex like that back then?*

It was always matters of harsh sexism that sent me into a fit of uncontrollable crying. I'd barely made it 20 minutes into the movie.

What just happened? I thought, horrified. *Why did he do that?*

Mom said nothing. She gave me Advil and told me to try to sleep. This happened a lot.

SING SWEET, SING SOFT

I was 13 years old when Mom bought me a guitar. In the privacy of my room, door shut, I might've tried writing songs. No one ever heard them. Some nights I sat with it in her room and strummed the only six chords I knew.

She always videoed me playing as she lay in her bed under the covers. I didn't know many country songs, but she knew all of them. I'd get out my phone, look up how to play *Me and Bobby McGee*, and end up skipping a few chords here and there because I couldn't quite shape my hand like a pretzel along the frets. I hummed along with the tune, far too embarrassed to sing.

"Ooh, lemme see it," Dad would say as he walked in after a day of work. Sometimes he looked like a little kid when presented with a new toy. "I used to be able to play this song."



When I Was Lucy

Somehow, though with much difficulty, in the pings and groans from the guitar, I could hear something by Aerosmith coming from the strings. My dad sung, pitifully, but I just giggled and watched him fumble.

Mom didn't try to decipher the song. She had taken off her glasses and closed her eyes to sleep.

SNOWMAN MELTDOWN

I was 14 years old when we decorated her hospital room with Christmas decorations. We bought lights, a little tinsel, even a tiny little green tree that we perched up by the window so she could see it from her bed. We hung her favorite ornaments on it – the crappy ones my brother and I made as kids. Christmas and Mom were like hot chocolate and marshmallows, and if she had to spend the holiday in a tiny hospital room that smelled and looked like the stale remnant of the maternity ward she might have birthed me in back in 1997, peeling blush wallpaper and all, we were going to make it sparkle. By the time we finished, it was still small, but warm and cozy.

I spent fifteen minutes gluing fake eyeballs to the foam cutout of a snowman. Mom loved snowmen. We made one for every person in the family. As Dr. Mini-Giant entered, he grinned and nodded at the pitiful display of ten snowmen taped along the window. I grimaced. It wasn't my best craftwork, but there was only so much to work with in a hospital.

“Good news!” Dr. Mini-Giant clapped a massive hand on my brother's back, nearly punching him out of his chair. His voice boomed like he was announcing a football game. “The numbers aren't high enough for the transplant. You're all spending Christmas at home. Be happy!” Mom told me months later, after all the times she went back to see that doctor, he never forgot the December night he made her daughter cry. *Hope he's thrilled*, I thought. *It was a rarity*.

I think we ended up hanging the snowmen above our piano. Probably threw the tiny Christmas tree away.

LIFE LESSONS OF ATTICUS FINCH

I was 15 when I read Mom's favorite book of all time: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It's a wonder my brother wasn't named “Jem”.



Polley Poer

Scout reminded me of her. She was inquisitive, smart, but never much like the rest of the family. Not as outgoing as her sister, not as outspoken as her other sister, and not a young athlete like her brother.

She wanted to make the cheerleading team. I once found out she was devastated when she didn't. I felt a twinge of that pain. I wanted nothing more in the seventh grade to make the volleyball team. She bought me a present when I didn't.

Mom was different, maybe an outcast.

The smart one.

The first one to go to college.

The quiet one.

The extra body in the room.

I tell myself she was always thinking as she sat silently in the corner at family gatherings. Sometimes I looked at old picture albums. Mom wasn't really in that many pictures. She was probably the one taking them.

I think Mr. Atticus Finch made her feel better. The wise, intelligent, noble lawyer from Maycomb meant something to her that we never quite understood.

The first time I watched the movie, a floating voice was ingrained in my head.

"Maycomb was a tired old town." But the voice wasn't the narrator's, it was Mom's, sitting in the kitchen like she'd lived the story herself.

WORDS FROM ABOVE

One night, in my 16th year, she pulled a hat over her ears. She hated wearing hats – even more than she hated wearing her wig – but it was cold. I think she was always cold.

That night, she sat upright in her bed, signaling that she was in a good mood. The brown comforter was matted underneath her.

When I slowly walked into the room, hesitantly, I wondered if I should release the question I had tucked into my throat.





When I Was Lucy

It would be stupid.

Don't bring it up.

She'll probably just nod.

What on Earth would she have to say to that?

"Mom," I start, trying to sound casual. Her eyes perk up and see me, acknowledging my call. "I was thinking about entering this writing contest. But I don't know, I think it might be dumb. I just thought maybe I could earn some extra money."

Maybe the transplant changed her — she says the German woman's bone marrow she got turned her into a 'foul-mouth'. But I noticed something rise in her as the corners of her mouth turned up. Her eyes peaked upward, and she spoke.

"I love that idea. Write, just write all the time." She told me.

Later, when I stalked back to my room, I wondered if I'd just seen the light I thought she'd lost years ago. I thought I met a new person, or at least one that had been hiding for 16 years.

CABBIE

I'm almost 17 years old when we're back in the hospital. The third time is the most tense for everyone. My head is pounding, my nose stopped, my eyes so swollen I can barely see the empty waiting room around me. It's late, probably eleven. The other hospital goers are gone, but it isn't important for me to worry about school the next day.

I'm standing there, shaking violently as my tear-ducts have dried like deserts, when I notice a woman on a hospital bed being wheeled around the corner. She seems to be happy, but dazed, like she's "goin' for a ride." I hide my tissues, wipe my face quickly, and walk to her as she waves at her cabbie to halt.

"Hey Lucy," my mother says to me. Her eyes are swollen like mine, but hers are from the medicine. Her left arm — the one she earlier named "Stan" — lays lifelessly by her side, the cancer having cut off her ability to use it, but she grins without a clue. Her spacey smile frowns almost immediately when she notices my puffy red eyes. "What's wrong?"



Polley Poer

What's wrong? I could've screamed. Mother, *What's WRONG?*

We've been in a hospital for almost two weeks. You're sick, and we've been doing this off-and-on for six years. Nothing has worked.

But this, she doesn't know. She has no idea. All she knows is that this nice lady in scrubs has taken her for a stroll around the hospital, and her daughter has been crying.

"Nothing," I say simply. I try to smile, but it's weak. Why would I choose now to tell my mother how I feel?

Her eyes question me for a moment, but her airy smile relapses like the sense had just blown out of her.

"Okay, well call me if you need me." She says, and the nurse pushes her away down the hall again.

APARTMENTS AND COOKIES

I'm sitting in a pew, the front row, the VIP, hand-in-hand with my first boyfriend. He's a sweet guy, tall and gentle. Little do I know he'll break up with me in a year and it'll kill me almost as much as the casket I'm staring at.

Mom's funeral was good. There's no other word for it. I didn't cry, so it was great. Everyone else cried, so it sucked. The flowers and her casket were beautiful, so it was great. She was dead, so it sucked.

In the lobby of the church, a couple of women in their mid thirties approach me. They smile sympathetically, give the old "I'm so sorry for your loss, she was a great lady," spiel, and begin to tell me their peace.

"We were her students in her first year teaching English," the Carroll High class of nineteen-eighty-something tell me. "She used to invite us to her apartment and bake cookies."

My mom? The woman who just spent the last two years of her postbone marrow transplant life convincing everyone she started cussing because of her German transplant donor?

"One time she bought us journals," one of them continues. "She told us to 'write, write all the time.'"



When I Was Lucy

STICKY NOTES

Mom wrote everything down. Of course, I never knew this, but as I'm looking through her old jewelry box that afternoon, I find trinkets.

Student council pin from the 70's. *She was in student council?*

Topaz and gold ring. *I never saw her wear that...*

A note from my aunt Lyn on her 22nd birthday. *What was she like at 22?*

Further and further I go, opening random notes, all folded at the corners into neat little pockets that someone told me people my age never make anymore. She wrote down song lyrics, poems, lines about love. They're all words of wisdom scribbled onto little pieces of fading paper.

But all of these things are old, tokens, memories, flashes of the past. A past I never knew, one that I wasn't a part of. I had opened a treasure chest, a time capsule my mother had once lived in, a sacred space of the person she used to be. And I wasn't a part of it.

I throw the wooden box to my side and think of all the things I'll never know. Then, I notice a yellow sticky note sticking out from between two scraps of paper.

I pick it up, smile, and begin to cry for the first time in a long time. In her handwriting -- perfect cursive lettering that failed her after she got cancer -- the note read:

"Nothing dies that is remembered."

SCOUT FINCH AND JESSICA SIMPSON

The burial was long. My heels -- my new Jessica Simpson pumps that she'd have never bought me because "her money would never go to something with Jessica Simpson" on it -- dug into the grass. *Poor Jessica*, I thought. *She met the wrath of one ferocious woman.*

We got a dog that night. I named her Jean Louise. Scout, for short.



Polley Poer

LIST OF 'NEVERS'

I'm 18 years old when I'm sitting in class; it's my second semester of college. My fellow students and I sit in a circle. There's no professor in the room.

Why am I in here?

I don't belong here, look at all of these people!

That girl over there, you know she knows what she's doing.

But I stop myself.

I never entered the writing contest because I thought they'd laugh at my entry. I never told my ex-boyfriend how much he hurt me because I thought he'd think I was crazy. I never applied for scholarships because I thought I wouldn't get them. I never told my mother I loved the red sweatshirt.

A woman enters the classroom, clearly the professor.

"Hi everyone," she smiles as she stands at the front of the room. "Welcome to Intro to Creative Writing."

SPLASH

I'm splashing across the street in electrifying rain, my Jessica Simpson shoes dangling in my hand, laughing at myself for having this terrible idea. I've given up on trying to fit my body under my college roommate's umbrella – I didn't need it - and begin sprinting. My foot doesn't hurt. The rain splatters like my screaming laughter.

We're idiots, I think.

Even though my toes feel like I could break them off one by one, I've never

felt more powerful running in the street. I'm sure, somewhere, there are people staring and watching. But I don't see them.

A car comes to a casual halt as we frolic across the painted intersection.



When I Was Lucy

It's only when we're mere feet in front of it's bumper that it jolts
Forward.

We scream, sprint, our lungs choking for air between a mixture of panic
and laughter.

I promise myself that I'll make up for all the things I should've said and
should've done.

In the morning, I'll make someone go eat eggs with me. I'll sing to
someone – as pitifully as my parents – to my friends. I'll write as much
as I can, and tell people what's wrong. Maybe someday, I might even
write dumb little sentences and shout them out to the people I love,
especially when they buy me sweatshirts.

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i put my makeup on in the dark

Ally Ameel

I remember standing in the restaurant, wearing a floral dress and pink clogs. Summer was just beginning, and I was nervous to see you again, my insides shaking. It was your birthday, and your gift was stuffed inside of my purse, wrapped in patterned paper with bedazzled stickers spelling your name. I kept hoping that you would look at me and think that I was pretty. My heart danced at the possibility.

As much as I tried to conceal my true intentions from you, I couldn't help but dream that, someday, you would fall for me. And I wanted it to be easy.

I aspired to be a mystery, the scent of my perfume in the air and the thought of me on the tip of your tongue whenever I walked away. When you made a joke, I shook my head with a disapproving look on my face, but I laughed every time regardless. You never wanted to talk, so I sat beside you silently, despite the millions of questions I wanted to ask with the hope of breaking down the walls you built. Sitting close enough so that our arms brushed against one another when you reached for a napkin but with the right amount of space in between to play it off as if it were platonic. Acting annoyed when you forgot your money but covering the cost without an invitation. Treasuring any gratitude that I was offered. Scrambling around for change to pay for a single smile.

I wonder if you ever realized how easily I would have done anything for you.

Too many times, I tipped the balance between friendship, flirtation, and desperation. I revealed my cards before the game was over. I was no longer a detective novel. I was a history textbook. I didn't lose sight of myself as much as I had in the past, but I turned a blind eye to the effort I exhausted to keep up with you when you walked too far ahead of me. It was all I could do to see more than the back of your head.

In the end, you saw the sides of me that I had been trying to hide. You didn't want me after that. But I don't think you ever did.

Now, I'm getting in the car without you. The music is loud. The windows are down. I'll wave at you as I drive away to find the boy who will smile at me for free. I won't mind if he drinks, because he'll put his arm around me even when he's sober. When he asks for my life story, he'll actually listen. And loving me will be the easiest thing he has ever done.





3048

Marcus Cazares



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Waves of Solidarity

Michelle Bonilla



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defying mars & redefining venus

Pati Carlos

although i might doubt what i Can
do, i know i can Make
pansies bloom in one hundred and one degree june. A
speck of my soul is filled with rusty metal, concrete—Hard
so a woman once told me that to achieve like a Man,
i must never Hesitate—
for i am two letters more than a man, And
i am the Change.

the lustrous stars glint embers of gold, And
i conclude that He
was less than a part of me. Will
i make a man quiver? yes— and Be
the reason his tears descend. The
planets will align and One
day, venus will rendezvous with mars To
create a Stammer,
and the earth will finally cry, “Yes.”



Post-Apocalyptic Aubade for a Grand New Beginning

Joshua Borders

Lavender sun hopscotches outside
the window as these tone-deaf birds
and the grout from the cracking

bathroom tiles beckon – we
kiss while milky sludge shimmies
through the shower head. Silence

jerry-rigged and right.
Restoration is the pain we seek.
Puff, deflate, puff. It never grows

tired. Can all the mutes say Amen?
Some days are so beautiful
that I can't stop weeping.

This morning, a three-headed badger
muzzled earthworms from my hand,
ate one, then let one go. Eat, release,

eat, release. Each badger mouth rife with
mercy, majestic with restraint. And the worms?
They just burrowed back into the ground, ready

to do the whole thing again tomorrow.
Love, I want
to drink you, then watch you fill

back up. Take nothing, then everything,
our mouths puckered ablaze
with the world's first and final song.

Sing after me –
the heart the glory the wonder

the heart the glory the wonder

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Trampoline Hymns

Nick Barnette

I.

The black quilt of the trampoline
hid weeds that shook
when we decided to fly.

The storm-drain echoed
our chants—songs that kids are
born with but grow into forgetting
like the cheat combinations for Zoo Tycoon.

I do remember someone,
sun-blond and -burnt,
sprawled in the middle
while the others circled him
with a song that started with—

dead man, dead man, dead man rise
—and ended with staccato-mid-air fistfights.

II.

Dad at the pulpit, me choking back
vomit—I praised Jesus and cursed the Bunny
who had force-fed me basketfuls of sugar.

The tomb was empty, but I was a cup
overflowing with the CVS candy aisle.

On the way home from church, Dad pulled over
and I spewed an offering over a stranger's lawn.
Before exploding, I burped out a hymn in church—

O, the wormwood and the gall! O, the pangs His soul sustained!

—that ended with God double-bouncing Jesus to heaven.

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ICE CUBE

Danielle Davy





Self-Portrait as Unsupervised Children

Laura Fuentes

Helen Hamilton Award Winner

We buried the baby doll with the soft body
& plastic arms. We couldn't find it anymore,
eventually washed up as all buried things are.

My stomach does strange things in the dark while remembering
the roll of paper towels up in flames in the kitchen.
He held the lighter, too young to put out the fire.

He spilled Listerine into the white bowl of the toilet,
the blue kind, making the water green. I got him
in trouble. & he was red, when I told his mom

he wanted to be a narco because he wanted a girlfriend
with big breasts he could spoil. We found a dead rat
at the elementary school basketball court & he picked it up

by the tail. I was afraid he'd chase me around with it. Instead,
he flung it, & it spun around & almost disappeared. The arc
over my head reminded me of why I don't follow him around.

Right then & there I wanted to be buried, have the dirt
walk all over me. Have the idea of time rot me away. Our moms
knew what made us laugh but not cry & maybe it was for a
reason.

Come & play in my room. I did. & I memorized the elephants on
the wallpaper,
leg by leg. I ignored the snake for a hand. Fingers curling adjacent
to mine.
& let the things that happened, happen in the dark.



Snap, Crackle and Pop

Ethan Murray

On a Saturday morning
Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy
Flash across the screen
As my son ditches
The spoon for shovel
Hands in the cereal bowl.

I watch

things spill

We haven't slept
In months and have spent
More time arguing
About diapers, trash,
dog poop,
And the growing stack
Of dishes, work, and debt.

together

Shitty

Because I was fired

He just screams,
Red face venting anger
in high octanes
drowning us
both out.

and honesty

Mom's advice: "put a little
Hotty totty in the baby bottle."
Bourbon, lemonade, honey
And you'll have peace
Of mind and an all quiet
Nighttime –
you.

*– I drink sometimes,
a slight buzz*

to spend time with

My dreams have become
day
Steadily trampled by turtles
And Dr. Seuss
Oh, how I wish I were a fish
water
Singing bubbly blues
In the bathtub.

a continuation of the

and could breathe under this

And all I think about is how much
I love him.

I need sleep.

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Embodiment

Amy Behrens



cotton is king
Amy Behrens





Self Portrait with a Home as a Hospital Room

Catherine Forte

Don't remind me of the beds
that rise and fall
responding to commands
For IVs
For Blood
For MRIs
For CT Scans
Don't remind me of the hospital rooms
with its drone of disease and holler of home
where home cooked meals no longer exist
just cafeteria packaged PB & J with a side of Jell-O.
My mind stops feeding itself
memories – I don't know what sun & salt
feels like on my skin or carpet burns
burning my knees playing hide & seek.
Why do I feel like an experiment?
I'm not a control variable, a statistic,
they don't get to slap me with a cruelty-free
stamp of approval because they don't understand,
they don't understand.
But cheers to hand sanitizer
 To warm blankets
 And warmer smiles
 To the parents who
argue with hospital staff to move me from
Rm 122 to 124 so they have an in-room bathroom.
Cheers to the RN who draws my blood & draws
the curtains after long days and restless nights awake
waiting
on news, any news.
Cheers to the friends who
hang Hallmark cards on the door
tiptoeing through the halls, eyes
fixed on pasty white walls, ear drums
hiss, buzz, whoosh to the roar of the ocean
or
is it the murmur of death?

continued, line break





Catherine Forte

Praise the car ride home
to a bed that doesn't rise and fall
to remembering what it felt like to be a kid.
I was the little girl who liked the smell of mud mixed
with sweat after a night jog alongside the river,
the sharp sting on my skin during a cold shower
stargazing, not at stars, but at clouds that remind
me why I believe in the gift of imagination.
I think that was joy.
I thought there were
only bad days, not bad weeks, that the
pursuit of an achievement was better
than the achievement itself.
I wish
that was the only thing I had
to worry about.
Now I live to wonder when
I can just
Sleep.
No tubes,
No nurses,
I want to go back to the clutter
of a messy
room, and a mess
that welcomes me
back home.

Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition





Independence Day

Nia Brookins

I was born to die
Because of my dark hue
I was born to cry
Over people I never knew
But our struggles are similar
This land wasn't meant for us
So we're together weeping
For better days, better ways
To make a place in a country that wasn't
Meant for us to stay in
It's Independence Day
But what's independent on a slaveship?
We're still in the middle passage
Still resort to ministers and pastors
Yelling that "one day,
We'll see salvation
just have a little grace"
But, what if that's not enough
For me to wanna see
Another hashtag and sea of people
That have the same skin as me
Working in the sun hoping that their black sons make it to twenty-five
Or at least make it home alive.
For the little black girls getting teased in this white world for their kinky hair
Will white Jesus be there
To share his grace then?
Will being black ever not be a sin to the white hooded men
Exploiting me for the skin I'm in?
They kill our daddies,
Abuse our women,
Misunderstand our children
On the basis of pigment.
Then bring up black on black crime
Out of pure ignorance
But white on white crime
According to stats is no different
Traditional racism looks like mass incarceration, gentrification and
Conservative media depicting black as lazy

continued, line break





Nia Brookins

Or maybe, you look at me as a bit too preachy
But I look at art today and think it's a bit too peachy
Philando Castile and Alton Sterling shot one day apart
The black problem lives on and the same narrative restarts
So I ask, what does independence mean to a slave?
We need a revolution, resolution, not a "white privilege" day
I want whips and chains abolished
And the world astonished
When they see that melanin shine.
The supernatural power in the sky
Will feel proud to have birthed us,
Not separate but equal
We need master teachers, black leaders
and our men to make it to the sequel
I feel like Baraka in a world of white poems
We need a black one
No race against us shall prosper without some
Reparations and laws passed to restrict the
Restrictions on the black experience.
We are not delirious.
I wanna be washed of all my sins
And wake up with a grin to a new day and a different end
To the tragic black story.
Independence is near, but how do we reach for it?
I came today not bearing answers but allegories
That this can change if we stop spreading the gory images of our bodies
being slain
And with disdain we tweet our pain instead of working for the day when
I'm not killed for living while black.
It's Independence Day,
But what is independence to a slave?

Originally published in the Fall 2016 Edition





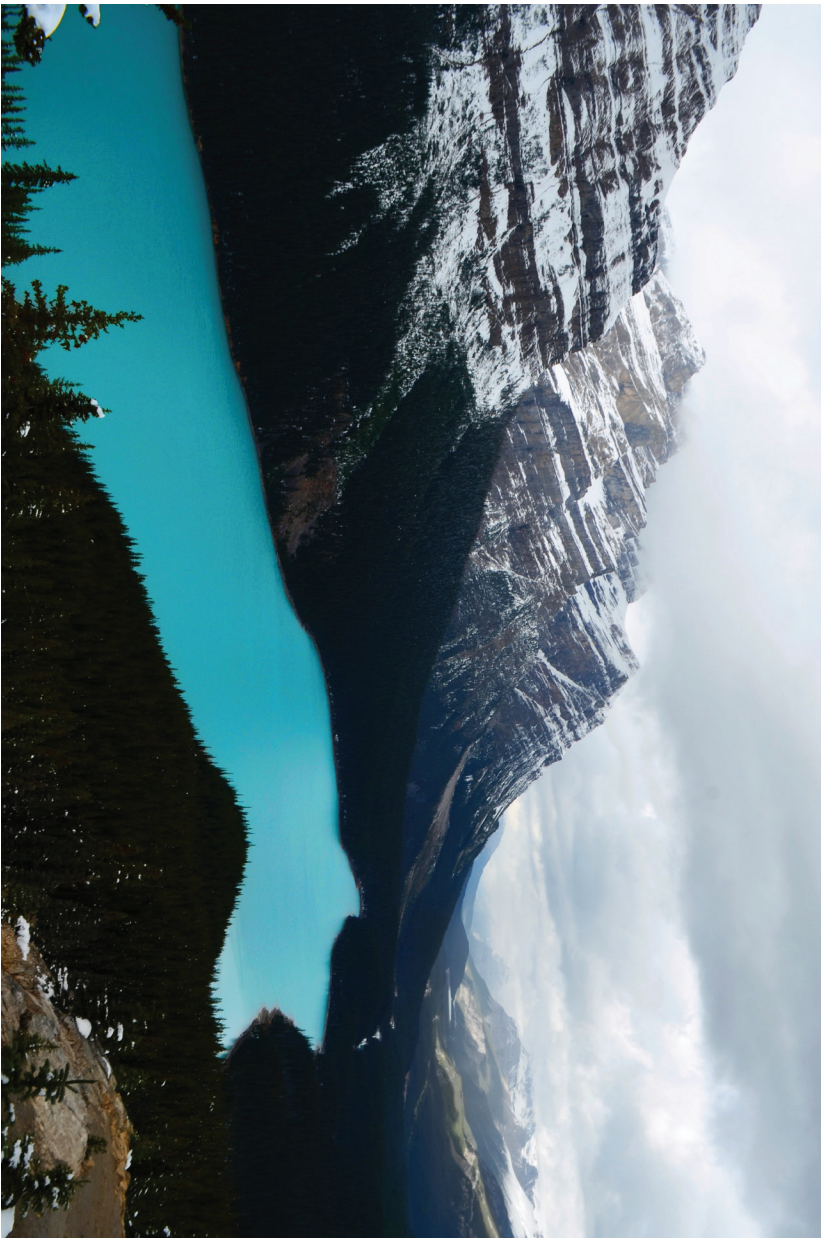
Blue blus

Claire Greiner



peyto prepping for the winter

Annie Ogren





We Are Magic

Jaya Armstead

To my sisters that rock cornrows, afro puffs, and pixie cuts
Whether you're slanging that 30 inches or rip the tides with your waves
No matter the color or texture, hair is expression to my black queens
Deep conditioned with love and combed by those who are brave

This message is for you to love your beauty, soul, and brains

From vibrant expression to every shade of melanated complexion
Our skin goes beyond the limitations of basic brand foundations
They can't handle our reds and golds with cool and warm tones
Constant division by our skin to the point where shades stand alone

Look to your left and right you, I, WE are not somebody's fetish

We, together, are strong, powerful, free, and magical beings
Forerunners of history securing bags and making money moves
Admonished for independence because folks lack to see how it's freeing
But where would we be if we worried about someone's approval

These next words are for my black queens that are hurting

The snake of depression is lying to you as he wraps you in anxiety
He wants to silence your voice but homegirl do not let him
In the eyes that others see as empty, I see the hope of a sparkling entity
There is an illuminated glow around you that should never go dim

You have **love**, you have **power**, you have **magic!**

Embrace the powerful you the Everlasting God bless you to be
As sisters we must stand together side by side supporting another

So at the top of your lungs shout that yaass queen or that gooo bestiee
Cause as one we are stronger and better when we're together

You are, I am, **We are magic!**

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Misty Copeland

Meredith Stringfellow



Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition





Black Girl Magic

Leilyn Miles

“You’re really pretty for a black girl,” they say.

“Why is your hair so curly all the time? Why don’t you just straighten it,” they ask.

“You’re not really black,” they tell her.

“I’ve never been with a black girl before,” they gush.

“You must play a sport,” they assume.

“You’re just another raging liberal,” they mutter.

“Cotton picker,” they scowl.

“My parents would never let me bring you home, but we don’t have to tell anyone,” they whisper.

* * *

Nigger. Ugly. Dirty. Coon. I’ve heard them all. I have had them used to describe me personally, but what can I do at this point other than laugh?

Black girls and women have been dragged, thrown, groped, raped, kidnapped, and choked in classrooms, swimming pools, colleges, and malls across the country while the world watches expressing their opinions, yet nothing seems to change. I wake up every day wondering if today will be the day, the day I can walk through campus without someone taking something from me. Black girls are comparable to the sculptures of the ancient Greeks: beautiful, unique, mysterious and fragile. They may look strong and powerful, but hit them with enough stones, and they’ll crack, and those little cracks will lead to bigger cracks, which will then lead to them breaking.

This is why they kneel.

* * *

When I was little, a girl whom my parents babysat would always look at me weirdly, and I never knew why. One day she was staring at me and blurted out, “Were you born like that or did you just get really tan?” I was so embarrassed I just told her I was born like that because I really didn’t know the answer. I never understood why she was so confused by me, so I





Leilyn Miles

let it go. I've now come to the realization that she saw me as different because I didn't look like her. My skin was brown and hers was not.

Fast forward to elementary school. I had my natural hair in braids. Granted my hair was extremely curly and was probably very frizzy at the time; I loved it like that. That day a boy in my class pulled on my pigtails and loudly said, "Your hair kinda looks like a bunch of turds." I have pretty thick skin and can put on a good front, so I just laughed it off because that's just how I am. Though, when I got home that night, I remember looking in the mirror and staring at my unbraided hair and feeling small, almost less than. I felt as if my hair made me undeniably ugly. But I couldn't help it.

I cried and cried and begged God to make it straight like all the other girls so I wouldn't be ugly anymore. I was six years old, and that was the first time I remember crying myself to sleep.

This is why they kneel.

* * *

Middle school: my best friend's stepdad, who I had never met, saw me walking into basketball practice one morning and said out loud, "Wow, I've never actually seen a black child in a school like this one. Would you look at that?" By this time, I was old enough to somewhat comprehend the idea that because I had brown skin, I was going to be seen differently. Though the concept still didn't make sense to me. In my head, I wasn't truly black nor did I want to be.

I was mixed. My mom was white, and my dad was black. This one man's comment, though I didn't understand why at the time, truly upset me. His words made me believe I didn't belong there. They made me feel like my black friends didn't belong there. When my dad came to pick me up that day, all I felt was embarrassment and sadness. We didn't belong there. I didn't belong there. When my mom picked me up, however, the embarrassment subsided. I felt as though people accepted me more because my mom looked like theirs.

The constant feeling of inadequacy affected me in ways I couldn't have comprehended at the time. This continuous feeling affected not only myself but also my relationship with my dad. I didn't want to be seen with him because in my head he was the cause of all this. It was his fault I couldn't stop this feeling from drowning me. Consequently, I developed an unconscious bias towards my mom. How sad is that? At nine-years-old I had already let the opinions of





Black Girl Magic

others affect the relationship with someone who should've been one of the most important people in my life.

This feeling, however, never waned. Throughout my middle school years, I played sports. I heard all the stereotypes. "Oh, you must be able to jump really high, and run really fast, right?" At my school, if you looked black people expected you to have natural WNBA and NFL talent, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. To my misfortune, in seventh grade, I made C-team basketball (the worst team). It was mortifying, not because I made C-team, but because I thought I had let people down. I was so upset at myself for not being good enough, and I was so angry at my coach. How could she do this to me? I thought about just quitting. I genuinely believed I let down every single person in the black community. I wasn't good enough.

This is why they kneel.

* * *

Now we're in high school, oh joy. This was a time when people really started to get bold. My sophomore year of high school, a boy started showing interest in me, and I was really flattered until one day he texted me something along the lines of, "Ya, you're really pretty for a black girl." Some of my friends did not understand why I was so insulted, but I mean can I really blame them? Eventually, I had moved onto a different boy thinking he would be different. Little did I know every boy I thought would be different was the exact same. (Go high school!)

He was incredibly sweet and very good looking. Yet, one night when we were talking, he told me his parents would never approve of him seeing a black girl. He told me I could be his "little secret," as if it were some great honor. This hurt and confused me because to me I was just Leilyn, but because my skin was brown his parents were able to strip me of my own identity. I was no longer Leilyn to him. I was just the "black girl" his parents would never approve of. I think I could feel my heart shattering as he spoke.

Why? Why would his parents never approve? I asked him, and he said that his parents were very against him dating outside of his race. He said that he didn't know why; it's just "how he was raised." In that moment, I wished I was invisible.

High school was the first time in my life I had ever been called a nigger. It was after school, and a boy in my grade, who was known for being explicitly vocal about his feelings, was walking next





Leilyn Miles

to me as I walked out to track practice. With music blaring through my headphones, I looked over and saw him give me a look. I was walking alone, and there weren't very many people around, and he sort of looked at me and very calmly asked, "Do you have to be such a nigger? I thought you were kind of cool until I knew you liked that coon music." He didn't say it very loudly, but he also wasn't trying to be discrete about it either. While nobody else except me had heard him, I still felt my cheeks flush. I stared at him in disbelief, but said nothing as I was scared of what he might say next. What gave him the right? I can't put into words what I felt, but it was like a flash of embarrassment, anger, resentment towards my dad, and just overall confusion. I could not have prevented his criticism or avoided it. I just happened to be black at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now it's important to note that I went to a predominantly white high school in a wealthy area. I'm not white nor am I wealthy. Understand that. So, I already looked out of place there, but now... now I felt out of place.

My best friends and their parents had always told me how beautiful they thought I was, but I always knew I wasn't the right kind of beautiful. In my head, I am and I was, but I knew I didn't look like the other girls with long blonde hair and rosy freckled cheeks. I didn't have fair skin and blue eyes. My eyes were brown, and my kinky curly hair, jet black. I wasn't dating a football player, and I was not model thin. I knew I was beautiful, but when I walked into that school, my kind of beauty just felt out of place, unwelcomed, and unwanted. All I could do was ask myself why. Why can't I ever be enough? Why do I keep letting these people break me?

By my junior year, I had gotten my license and was about to start driving. Coincidentally, this was also the unfortunate time in America when Trayvon Martin 17, Michael Brown, 18, Laquan McDonald, 17, Walter Scott, 50, Freddie Gray, 25, John Crawford, 22, Tamir Rice, 12, Renisha McBride, 19, and so many more were murdered at the hands of the police. Say their names; I know it's hard. It was really tough for me to hear about their deaths. It was as if every day I woke up and another kid who looked just like me was getting buried. Will I be next? I was horrified. My mom still needed to see me go to my first prom and graduate. My dad still needed to see me win my first gold medal at the state track meet. I still hadn't had my first love. These thoughts consistently ran through my head every time I stepped outside or got in a car. Too many firsts had been stolen from these people, my people, and it made me fear for my own future. I didn't want to be next.





Black Girl Magic

A couple days after I got my license, I was joking around with my parents. I told them that I didn't know what box to check on things that asked me to identify my ethnicity as Pacific Islander, black, and white all applied. I said, "I'm not 100 percent black, and I don't look white, but I kind of am," and my dad cut me off and said, "You're black." I looked at him shocked by the harshness of his words, his face stone cold. He looked at me and said, "You're black. Get used to it. It doesn't matter that you don't think you are or that your mom looks white. If you get pulled over, you are black. Your skin is brown, and you will be treated accordingly, so you better get used to it real quick before you become a statistic." In that moment, I finally understood. My skin was brown; therefore, I would be looked at and treated differently because whether people knew it or not, they had unconscious biases that affected the way they consciously acted regardless of whether it was right or not.

This is why they kneel.

* * *

I am terrified of getting pulled over. The two times it has happened my hands shook uncontrollably, and I felt as if I could not breathe. I know that sometimes good people do bad things, and I know that not all policemen have malicious intent. Moreover, I realize that not all policemen are bad, but some of them are. I am afraid that one day I am going to get stopped by the wrong cop at the wrong time, and they will turn me into a statistic. I am petrified by the fact that a hoodie and an innocent trip to the gas station could cost me my life. I am terrified that no man will ever find me genuinely beautiful, brown skin and all. I am overwrought that my mom refuses to understand that in today's America, she can do things I can't because she is white and I am not. I am grieved by the fact that in 2017 my mom will never be able comprehend that because I do not look like her, I will be unfairly treated. I am 2.5 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement than she is. I am statistically less likely to graduate from college than she was. I am statistically less likely to be married and more likely to become divorced if I were to be. I am 2.5 times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than her but less likely to get help because of it. Why? In today's America being black is considered less than. To be black is to be naked before the cruelties of the world, before all the guns, knives, fists, drugs, abuse, and torment. It's like walking around with a sign on your back that says "kick me," and not realizing its there until you've been knocked so far down getting up seems impossible.

This is why they kneel.

* * *

They kneel for people like me, who without them would be voiceless.





Leilyn Miles

They kneel for the broken, the battered, and the hopeless. They kneel for the moms and dads who have outlived their children and for the kids whose lives have been abducted. They kneel for the grandparents who will never get to hold their grandbabies again. They kneel for the children who were orphaned because of the careless actions of others. They kneel for everyone who has been told they are not enough: not good enough, not pretty enough, not strong enough, not black enough. They kneel for the black girls and women who have been dragged, thrown, groped, raped, kidnapped, and choked. They kneel because if they don't say something...who will? You? They kneel for change. They kneel for me. They kneel for my eight-year-old sister who may never understand the negative stigma attached to her beauty, and I could not be more thankful.

Being black should not be painful. Being black is not a weakness. My skin is bronzed and beautiful. Being black is beautiful. Being black is powerful. Being black is brave, important, and authentic. Being black is being me. I am black, and I am proud.

* * *

And this? This is why they kneel.

A Note On The Sources

In text citations and footnotes alike would have drastically taken away from this paper as a whole. It would have been distracting. I wrote this with the hope that the reader would become lost in my words because of their impact. I didn't want them to have to pause and try to decipher a bunch of random names that wouldn't mean anything to them.

When I was writing, I used a compilation of different sources. However, I mainly tried to focus on sources that included personal testimonies. I wanted to know how people felt. I looked to see how certain situations happening in the world around us impacted them. I then tried to determine if the stories based off their situational impact affected me. Needless to say, they did. Some of my sources are informational as I needed to find statistics to add validation to my claims. However, some of my sources are more emotional as to add to the dramatics and aggression of my writing. If you read this and wanted to hear more stories or get more information, I am more than happy to discuss and help with that. This is a topic that needs to be discussed, and it excites me when others agree with that. However, if





Black Girl Magic

you don't agree and would like to discuss that, I would be more than happy to do so as well. Sources with information in them so powerful you should absolutely read them have been bolded.

In regards to the statistics

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Leilyn Miles

“White Browns’ Player Seth DeValve Knelt during the Anthem and Explains He ‘Will Be Raising Children that Don’t Look Like Me’.” BET.com, 22 Aug. 2017,

Wyche, Steve. “Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem.” NFL.com, 28 Aug. 2016, www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-satduring-national-anthem. Accessed 28 Sept. 2017.

There are a variety of different sources I have just presented to you; however, it is important that you understand this story was based off real events that have happened in my life. These sources just helped me to understand how I wanted to express my own trial and tribulations in a way that would touch the hearts of my readers.

Originally published in the Spring 2018 Edition



Your Apologetic Wife

Gabrielle Wilkinson

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Fall 2019

I'm sorry that you'll love me.

I'm sorry that on our first date

I'll move
(and shift)
uncomfortably in my seat
(the entire time).
And you'll assume it's because I'm bored
(but I won't be)
and want to leave
(but I won't want to).

I'll just be desperately trying to hide
what I'm not ready for you
to see.

I'm sorry that the first time I meet your family
I'll wear long sleeves and pants in the middle of July
(but really cute long sleeves and pants)
and I'll pick at my food
(but won't actually eat it)
and I'll laugh noticeably louder and smile noticeably bigger
(but only noticeable to you).

Because I'll need them to not
look at my skin
and to not
think I look bloated
and to not
know how perpetually preoccupied my mind
really is.

I'm sorry that the first time you tell me you love me
I won't say "I love you too"
(even though I would mean it).
Instead I'll say "are you sure?"
(and I will mean that).

Because how could you?
How could you love someone who gets seduced
by sharp ends and
colorful handles?

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Gabrielle Wilkinson

I'm sorry that the instant you bend down on one knee
with sweat on your brow
(dripping)
and that big, beautifully stupid smile on your face
(beaming)

I'll be thinking
"how do my scars look from down there?"
"how sharp are the edges on
that diamond?"

I'm sorry that on our wedding day
as you promise me a forever
("Till death do us part...")

I'll stand there
ridden
with guilt
seeing
no such thing.
Because there is no forever
with someone
who loves blades more
than people.

I'm sorry that the first time we make love
when you kiss every inch of my body
(not missing even one)
and your lips brush on the parts of me that are mutilated
(not by accident)

I'll flinch
and stiffen up
and you'll wonder
if you did something wrong
But it's not you.
It's me.

I promise.

I'm sorry that our daughters
will look at my body and ask
(without hesitation)
"mommy where did those scars come from?"
(with blunt adolescents)

continued, line break





Your Apologetic Wife

and that I'll look at you
because I won't know what to say
and for some reason
I need you to bear my
cross too.

I'm sorry that sometimes you'll come home to
a locked bathroom door
(our locked bathroom door)
And you'll want to
(so badly)
knock
(loudly)
call out my name
(desperately)
break the door down
(forcefully).
But you won't
(thankfully).

Because you will know
that when the devil
speaks to me
just a little too loud
there's nothing for you
to do.

I'm sorry about the nights when you'll wake up
and won't see my body lying next to yours
("no").
But you will see the scissors missing
("please no")
and hear the shower running
("please God no").

You'll walk to the bathroom
and see
the scissors on the floor
followed by
a trail of stained tissues.
And you'll walk right up to my
shuddering body
on the floor of our shower.
And you will hug me.

continued, line break





Gabrielle Wilkinson

And I will cry.
And I will say
“it hurts”
and you will say
“shh”
as the water rushes over both
of us.

I’m sorry that when we’re old
and you lay in your hospital bed
(sound asleep)
and I hold your hand
(wide awake)
I will weep
(quietly).

My heart
will sink
and my mind
will be consumed with the realization
that you wasted your life
falling in love with a woman
who turned out to be
just a bunch of broken pieces
that loves
to think about scissors
and hates
to talk about food
and is
always overthinking
and shared
the bed with more than just you.
I will weep because
you deserve better.
You

deserved better.

But today more than anything
I’m sorry that you’ll love someone who loves to
hurt himself.
I’m sorry that the twisted reality of our circumstances will land you in my lap,
making you fall in love
with me.

continued, line break





Your Apologetic Wife

And I'm sorry because at some point, I'll wish
you hadn't.
And I'm sorry because I'll know that there is nothing I could've done
about it
and I'm sorry because there's nothing you could've done
about it.
And I'm sorry that you'll just have to be here
with me.

You'll have to look at my scars
(kiss them goodnight)
rub your thumb over them
(until you don't feel anything anymore)

and look me in the eyes
and say
"baby I love you."
And I'll look you right back in the eyes
and say
"I know, and

I'm sorry."
your apologetic wife

Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition



what is this person's ethnicity?

Sarah Calvo

(select only one box below that best matches the description – information provided will not affect your application status)

I learned in school that colored people weren't good enough to study with white people: work, play, go take a piss. not even love – we shouldn't or at least that's what we're told. we couldn't because we were afraid of a bold decision to not hide behind our melanin, but now here we are. came a long way through blood and tears and now here we are – but where are we? now everyone is equal, at least that's what they say, and black lives are being recognized on every news station, but only after they get shot. but all lives matter. we've come a long way to see this happening today, but someone please tell me how being colored back then means being black today? I thought I was colored because I am not white, my parents from Costa Rica – beautiful country, a third world country. a colored country. but everything here is black or white – so where are my beautiful caramel people? mis hermanos y hermanas? all lives matter but I know they sweep the floors of the rich, build American's homes as big as their Spanish families, serve junk food to earn minimum wage for los hijos – where's the medical doctors from Dominican Republic? show me the American author born with Chilean blood. I used to have dreams so big my pencils broke, but does my life matter? but we've come a long way – never ending nightmare while Susan B. Anthony, Bruce Lee, Tupac, and Obama spoke their pain, mi familia still has no representation for generations. do our lives matter? different races on screen, off screen – I will scream if I have to hear another white person talk about their agony of not getting what they want, as if white privilege isn't a thing. but I can't say anything on this matter, for I am in no power to speak. Those keeping the stage from me, from us, will always exist, and until real change happens, we let the world intimidate us as we wash away the sins from their clothes and quietly dust their trophy cases in silence.

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Barbie's Indulgence

Merissa De Falcis

Helen Hamilton Award Winner Fall 2017



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Paper Quilled Mantra Poster

Michele Farren



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a letter for a restless one

Laura Fuentes

I'm a mattress in a forest
but what am I doing here?
I've tried to suppress and I've tried to forget,
the reason that brought me
as I'm only used for unrest

and yes, it's absurd,
where a mattress ends up
crawling with moths and spiders that fidget,
once there's no use for me,
throw me away with no reward

I once was an empress
dazzled in linens and lace,
until you gritted your teeth, rattled his bones, and made him
upset,
and I'm always there
when he makes you undress

the bulging spot where
a body in distress found comfort,
but tossing and turning turn to a target,
“why are you still awake?”
further you sink in despair

but worry not my dearest,
for glass will grow from your mouth,
you will attack at twenty, the age you will no longer be quiet,
worry not that you were used,
in my eyes, you are the purest
your body was not a burial ground
for the person you couldn't uplift,
so, take off my sheets and find
I'm still made of something soft,
lay down and let him laugh and laugh and laugh

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Sun

Liam Evans

“This is a weird question, but have you ever been electrocuted?”

“Um.”

“I only ask because I have been.”

-

The barista makes conversation with each person in line. She is sweet and her face reminds me of sunlight. Possibly also because she mentions that she’s glad that it’s sunny today, and not rainy, as it has been in the past week.

I didn’t agree with this sentiment until she said it.

I still don’t know if I totally agree with it, but hearing her say it makes it make sense.

-

A couple sits to the front of me, a canvas in front of each person. They are painting each other’s faces. The man holds a small baby, very small, and pats her gently.

The woman holds up the canvas and shows it to the man. He nods, and she sets it down and continues to paint.

It looks really accurate to me.

-

The electrocution couple are still talking. I can’t hear them; I am listening to music privately in my earbuds.

I pause the music to change the song.

“For me, it was when I was like cleaning out my power outlet—on my wall. I like felt this small shock. It was really weird. I didn’t know what to do.”

I press my finger over another song, and I can no longer hear them.

I wonder if they’re dating, and if so, what date number this is. Was there a specific moment in time when she felt she was ready to talk about her experiences with being electrocuted? Maybe a certain milestone that had to be passed?

I hope that she hasn’t been electrocuted since. I also think about

continued, line break





Sun

how I have never felt the need to clean out a power outlet. But it sounds like something that made a lot of sense to her. I hope that her power outlet is clean.

-

The painting couple continues to paint. The man is working hard to capture the intricacies of the woman's nose. He's spent quite some time on this.

Maybe that's what love is—never being satisfied with trying to capture the intricacies of your partner's nose.

He doesn't look up much.

Maybe that is also love—knowing your partner's nose well enough to paint it mostly by memory.

-

I go up to the counter to ask for the Wi-Fi password. The sunshine barista is helping a customer, so I ask the other one.

“Yeah, it's *iloveyou*.”

-

The man holds up his painting to the woman this time. They both laugh.

It looks really accurate to me.

-

I get up to leave, placing my belongings back into my bag. I initially leave both earbuds in, but I take one out to say thank you to the sunshine barista.

“Have the best day ever!”

That's what the neon words on the wall say, too. But for some reason, it doesn't make her saying it any less significant.

I smile, and then walk up the stairs and out into the sunshine.

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Unwritten Obituaries

Rachel Brooks

“Benjamin Bradley Baker III was well loved by his friends and family. He was always ready to help, he loved volunteering in the community, and he always had a good joke ready. He is survived by his parents Lily and Benjamin Bradley Baker II. In lieu of flowers, please send donations in memorial to the Baker family charity ‘From the Streets to the Trees’ which Benjamin founded to bring city kids into nature.”

Seventy-two words. Twenty-six years. Four dogs. Five charities. Three great peaks climbed, and four planned. And they summed him up in seventy-two words.

They didn’t mention how his loft would start to smell like singed hair and burning leaves if no one was there to put out his incense. They didn’t mention how someone needed to take his dogs in because his parents wouldn’t want them. They didn’t mention his almost-fiancé because she wasn’t really family. But that’s not all they didn’t mention.

They didn’t mention that his jaw was never fully shaved because he always had too many other more fun things to do or how he never wore suits like Mr. Benjamin Bradley Baker II because the sleeves were too restrictive and the collars made him choke. They didn’t mention the way his green eyes lit up like the forest canopy on an Amazon peak when he was out on a hike or how he lived in a small loft in the city instead of on his family’s estate uptown because he wanted to always be at the center of action. They didn’t mention how his boyish smile was crooked on one side because of the scar that ran across the right side of his lip from falling into his box of model cars as a child or how he was only ticklish in the exact centers of his palms despite the rest of his hands being hard and callused from camping and climbing. They didn’t mention how his dimples were deep from overuse or how he made the best blueberry pancakes and had the worst Bocelli impression but was equally proud of his cooking and singing. They didn’t mention how he always smelled like cinnamon.

Beni knew everything about the world of man and machine. He studied world geography and history, international politics and economics, Mandarin and Arabic. He could tell you the capital, topography, and first historical record of every western nation. He could draw diagrams of the court systems and charts of the employment rates of every city who recorded the data. He could converse easily no matter what part of the world he was in because he knew the languages of different cultures. He was brought up with all the tutors and texts his father’s money could buy—the education of a prince—but his heart was never in the work the education was





Unwritten Obituaries

meant to prepare him for. Benjamin Bradley Baker II made sure his son knew everything a businessman could, but Beni wanted to know other things. So he studied botany and biology, map-making and fire-making, mountain climbing and tree climbing. He could smell the air with his eyes closed and tell you what kinds of trees the woods you were in were made up of. He could look at two leaves and explain why one would kill you if you ate it and the other, if chewed up and spread on a wound, would act as a salve. He knew which rocks made the best fire pit borders and which sticks made the darkest smoke for signal fire. He took what his father had taught him and what he had taught himself and made a life of it, founding his nonprofit From the Streets to the Trees, where he would lead camping trips and field adventures for low-income families and troubled kids.

I would put all of that into his public obituary if I could. I would try to show the world just how important he was and just how much we needed him. But in my diary at home, I would write a different version. I would try to show just how important he was to me. And how much I needed him.

Beni knew how his kisses affected me if they were on my hand versus my forehead, and he would always make sure the mornings of weekends involved his lips brushing my brow while the nights of my period involved a soft peck on my nose and no more contact. He knew to get rid of bugs in the apartment before I saw them because he wanted to release them and I wanted to smash them. He knew that the pitch of my scream would change based on if I was screaming about a bug or a scary movie and would only come running for the one that meant I was about to murder something smaller than me. He knew I was ticklish only on my upper ribs, but he would never dare touch me if my hair was in a ponytail because he knew that meant I was working on something. He knew I was allergic to cucumber and pineapples and latex, so he made sure his mom's country club had different sandwiches, his friends' beach parties had different snacks, and our dentist had different gloves because he knew I hated asking for myself. He knew the scent of my favorite shampoo was apple and would ask me what was wrong if I smelled different because he knew I didn't wash my hair when I was in a bad mood. He knew how many pairs of hiking boots I owned because he was with me when I got them all except the ones he got me as gifts.

We went hiking together all the time. He could use his father's boat or the family's jet to take us anywhere in the world, but we would just take his jeep and see what we could find. We always ended up deep in the woods. I loved the mountains, the sleek rocks, and the way I had to jump like a Billy-goat when the ground broke up under you. Beni loved the trees, the way the light played through the branches and





Rachel Brooks

finding all the hidden caves and nests of the creatures.

That's another thing they didn't put in the newspaper. We were in the woods that day. Beni knew I loved the woods, so, that Saturday, we were in the woods.

We had walked for hours, crawling over downed trees, sliding down the sides of ravines, and clawing our way up and out the other side. We stopped to watch the squirrels skitter across the trail or the deer freeze a few trees away from us. He was in his old brown hiking boots; I was in the soft tan ones he had bought for my birthday last year. Our jackets matched, two tone green and brown weatherproof monstrosities with a dozen pockets.

We came to a cliff and I smiled, sliding my backpack off my shoulder and stepping up to the edge, looking out on the tree line. When Beni didn't join me, I slid my sunglasses off my face, setting them up on my head, and turned to him. I almost fell backward off the cliff.

He was on one knee. He had taken his bag off as well, also turning his sunglasses up into his hair. His right knee was already soaking wet from kneeling in the mud, and I knew his cargos were getting heavier with every second of absorption, but he only smiled dumbly up at me with that stupid perfect crooked smile. I held my breath as he held his hand out to me, palm up. "I have a question for you."

I bit my lip, trying to keep from squealing aloud even as I smiled from ear to ear. We had been together for two years now. I had never wanted anything but him. I wanted to live in his apartment where he already kept my favorite tea in stock in his kitchen. I wanted to be part of his family that consisted of one bipedal pure-breed and four quadrupedal mutts. I wanted to wake up every morning to him flipping pancakes in his Batman boxers and singing to opera with his broken off-key tenor. I squeezed his hand tightly in mine, already nodding.

He reached down, unbuttoning one of his cargo pockets and sliding his hand in. He squeezed my left hand in his as he raised his right hand. Pinched between his index and thumb was a shining silver band on which was perched the most beautiful diamond. I didn't know how many carats it was, or what the name of the cut was. I didn't care. I did know it was his great grandmother's ring, though. He told me that much. It was the witness to three long Baker marriages, and he thought it would be good luck. Well, three generations of Bakers must have been its limit because that rock refused to me mine. And its good luck flipped me the bird as it fled.

It's probably still in the woods somewhere. We were far off the trail, and with the cliff right there, the rain probably swept it away





Unwritten Obituaries

since last month. The Bradleys weren't too angry about the ring; they had plenty of insurance, and Mrs. Bradley had plenty of rings. They weren't angry at Benjamin; he couldn't have suspected his romantic but shortsighted proposal would go awry. They weren't even angry at me. I barely registered on their radar anyway except for obligatory Christmas and Thanksgiving meals where my dress was never the right shade of red and my hoop earrings were always too big or too small for my face shape. Really, they were angry at the park rangers. No one could get it into Mrs. Bradley's head that her son had gone off trail. No one could get her to believe that her wonderful, compassionate, intelligent, perfect specimen of high-class blue blood son could have been hiking off marked trails. But he was. And no one would put any of this in the newspaper. So, I'll put it here.

If they won't say how the mountain lion had been unusually far south for the season, I will. If they won't tell you that when they found us, Beni was torn up beyond recognition, then I will. No one would tell you it was my fault he died. But it was. Beni knew so much. He knew that the lion would focus on whichever of us seemed a threat. He knew if he pushed me into the mud and threw a rock at the lion, it would attack him instead of me. He knew that when he told me to run, I would run as fast as I could because he knew how I hated animals, and he knew I would do whatever he asked because he knew I trusted him, and he knew how to hold his own just long enough that I could get a safe distance away. He knew he wouldn't survive and I would.

So, there it is. The obituary he deserved. The one no one will ever see. The one that I'm going to light on fire with his damn incense candles and throw into the fireplace with all the wedding magazines I had already collected and all the hiking brochures he had drafted his proposal in and left on his desk. And as I watch it burn, I'm going to curl into a ball and cry and inhale as deeply as I can. I won't smell apples; I won't have washed my hair for this very purpose. I will hold his superhero pajamas to my face and smell cinnamon.

Originally published in the Spring 2019 Edition





Thinspiration

Annie Brenkus

A found poem from posts on Tumblr

Can someone give me advice
on getting my legs smaller? I'm scared
I'll miss this generation's moments of fashion
because I'll be too big to pull it off.
Sad. I wish

I was just as casually perfect
as them. I don't

fucking know what to do.
I'm sorry to say these sad things
but this is my only safe space.

I don't like my body.
And I don't just mean shape.
It feels so wrong it makes me a little
sick. I just want to be wasted
and look stunning. I'm disgusting.

The fact that people
can see me makes me a little
uncomfortable, not gonna lie.

I feel like I'm supposed to be a puddle
on the ground.

Forgive me if I die.

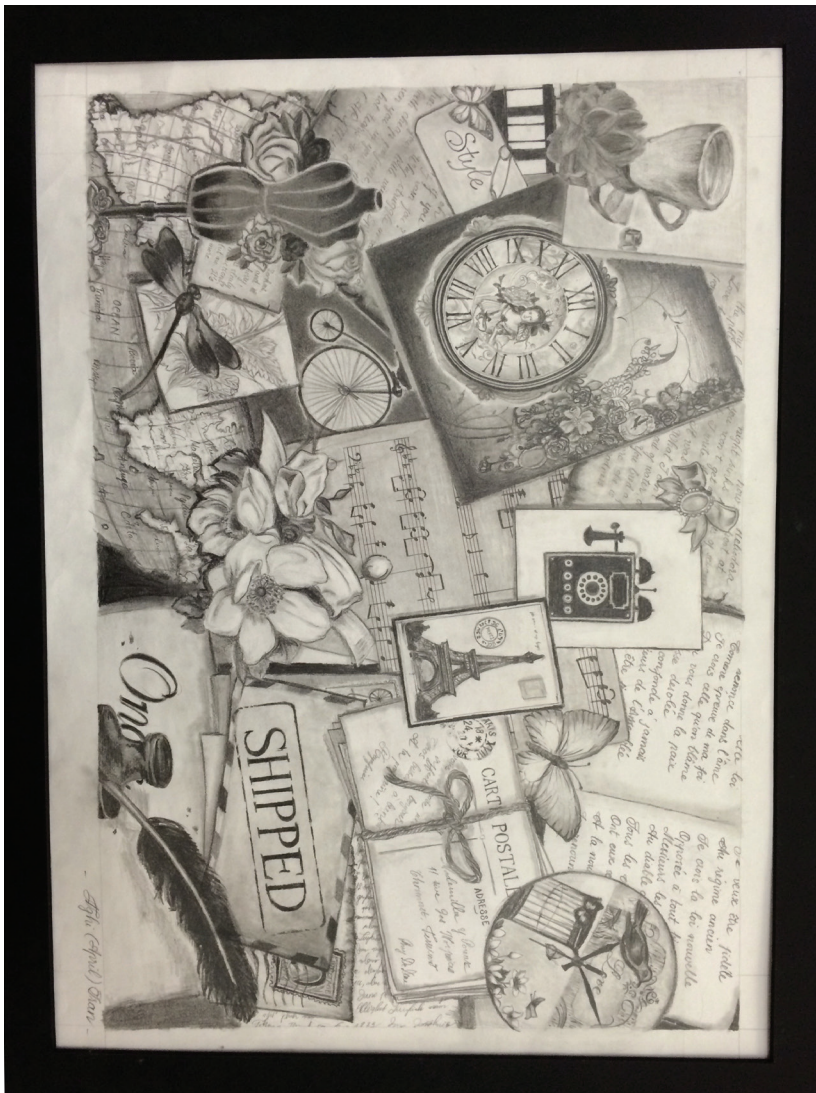
*You were not meant to be a freeze-frame,
you were meant to fly.*

*I'm proud of you.
I'm so glad you're alive.*

Originally published in the Fall 2019 Edition



Once. Nghị “April” Tran



Originally published in the Fall 2015 Edition

Prince Jessica Dawson



Originally published in the Fall 2016 Edition



Totem Pole

Ashley Parks

Beauty: A construct.
Reserved for those with
The fairest skin and the lightest eyes.
Beauty,
Which alludes me and many other of my darker skinned sisters
Constant cries
Self-esteem genocides
Of an entire complexion.
Light, medium, or otherwise

We are all black.

Belittled
And
disparaged.
First, and continuously at the hands of the white man.
Perpetually undesirable,
regarded as less than by our own
Black man
I don't understand.

We are all black.

Chasing
showcasing white woman after light woman on your arm
Until she calls you a
Nigger
Reminding you of your place.
Remember,
You too are black.

Always on the front lines
Burdened with upholding an acceptable face.
Ousted, put down by our own kin.
By those who share
the countless
hues of our skin

continued, stanza break





Ashley Parks

Women.

Dark women.

Black women.

highly educated, queens of B.A. degrees
undercompensated, earning mere cents on the dollar

The bottom.



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Black American Vertigo

Brian Dickson Jr.





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“

**VULNERABILITY IS
THE BIRTHPLACE
OF INNOVATION,
CREATIVITY, AND
CHANGE.**

”

-Brené Brown

