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EDITOR'S NOTE

Hello everyone!

I want to thank you for picking up this book and giving it a read. Some incredible artists and an incredible team have come together to make it. So it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Spring 2024 edition of Eleven40Seven: “Beauty in the Unattractive.”

I also want to say thank you to everyone who submitted their work. I am sure I speak for my whole team when I say reading the submissions was a highlight of this semester. It is because we consistently receive such high-quality work that we resorted to a theme. “Beauty in the Unattractive” is all about breaking apart what we think of when we hear terms like “beauty,” “ugly,” or “creepy.” We were looking for pieces that spun conventions on their head—as we, ourselves, were shaking things up—and that brought us something we wouldn't have thought of. I think the outcome is something pretty great.

Of course, changing things up does not come without obstacles, but this small yet mighty team rose to the occasion and I am ever so grateful to have had them on my side. When I decided to transfer universities in Spring 2023, I thought I was walking away from my only opportunity to be the Editor-in-Chief of an undergraduate publication. I have never been this happy to be wrong. I have spent the past two semesters with Eleven40Seven and I am forever grateful for the opportunity to grow with this publication.

But enough about me, I hope you enjoy all of the amazing art that lies ahead.

Elena Butterfield

Editor-in-Chief

Golden

Erin Crittendon

Golden cases and grand rooms,
Have been my reality,
For what feels like an eternity.
It feels grand,
It feels purposeful.

But most of all, do I really deserve this.
Merciful opportunity.
To sit in these rooms and bask in the glory,
That is royalty.
Relaxation
And remorse.

For so long people have made me feel I
Wasn't worthy.
That these opportunities weren't meant for girls who look like
me.
That this was just a handout.

Not knowing that I spent years manifesting,
Building,
And making myself into the
Student,
Worker,
Traveler,
And poet I am today.
I earned this whether you like it or not.

Medusa

Reagann Zimmermann



Jane

Ellie Evans



Waiting

Jessica T

blue dawn seeps in
the bedroom of a woman
who begs for time
that offers not comfort,
but distraction.
a numbing,
a muting,
a masking
of the tired spirit beneath
layers of overgrown self-pity and self-hate.
hate, hate, hate.
the woman hates
the moment her heavy feet must bear
the first steps
of a dance that finds her back in bed,
facing the window
and dreading when blue light will come in again.

Afterword

Jessica T

Broken is a lock
Once tightly fixed on a cage.
A fledgling cries
Out for damaged wings
That paints a pale sky
With speckles of red.
Dead is a promise of return
And anger fills the fledgling's lungs.
Screeches of desperation
Ring the hushed forest.
Chunks of flesh
 skin
 and feathers
Were the fledgling's only comfort.
Frosty wind gushes in through rusty bars
Humming a farewell
 Humming a goodbye.
The fledgling could only whisper a weep
And stretch out bruised wings.
Naked and weary
The fledgling nears the edge of tattered sticks
Frightened of a descent that ends in self completely shattered
A gust of courage—
 or foolishness
Brush against the fledgling's bare wings.
As if swept by a guardian
 angel
A bird is gone.
Far-reaching wings pierce the boundless canvas
And fly towards millions of trees

 Searching again for a song returned.

Mortification

Emma Kate Howard

How soon after biting into the fruit
did the first people reach for the fig leaves
to cover themselves?

there, in the garden,
as they hid themselves
from God and each other,
did Adam's palms grow sweaty?
did the blood rush to Eve's cheeks?

for the wages of sin is death,
but first must come shame.

the word "mortify" literally means
"to put to death."

oh, to be human is to be mortified

to die of embarrassment,
to wish to be swallowed up
by the ground
beneath one's feet.

to wish for a savior who might
put to death my shame,
who might mortify
that which mortifies me.

*Helen Hamilton Award
for Excellence in Creative
Expression*

Enough Eyes For Tears

Reagann Zimmermann



Save For A Starry Night

Mark Rose

Is it night time? Are you sure? Because it's a pretty important requirement, hence, you know, the title. If it is, great, we can move forward. If it's not but you still really want to keep reading, then fine. You'll just have to use your imagination. To start, it'll take maybe 5-10 minutes (easy enough) and a view of the night sky. You can pull a chair outside, find a rooftop or balcony, or simply just open your blinds, that works; just find a place for you to see the sky.

What do you see? Yes, I know that for many people, they just see black, just nothing above except for maybe the lone moon. Light pollution sucks, I know, but it can't be helped (unless you're so committed that you're willing to drive out to the countryside. In which case, I thank you for your dedication). If, however, you can see more, study it. Maybe some stars, some a bit bigger, a bit smaller, a bit brighter, a bit dimmer, what else? Maybe you're in a rural area, and can see a little more than that, like our very own Milky Way galaxy, a brilliant streak of vivid colors that slash across your view and wrap the horizon. Great; it sure beats straight black.

Now take a moment to just reflect; do you realize that your gaze is technically covering millions of light-years? Some of the stars you see (or are imagining, for the curious rebels) are hundreds, thousands, millions, of light-years from you. It would be incredibly useless to convert that into miles (after all, can you fathom the difference between 1 trillion miles and 2 trillion miles? At a certain point, an extreme number is just a number), but just know that for the light of the stars to reach your eyes, they had to travel so many years without encountering any obstructions. What does that mean? There's a whole lot of emptiness above you.

That's the next thing. Not to spark a feeling of cosmic horror, but can you feel that? The sheer infinite void of nothingness over your head which is simultaneously home to everything? Every single thing in the universe is up there; quasars with the power of a thousand exploding suns, black

holes that could easily swallow galaxies, nebulas with the deepest hues of blue and pink you could ever imagine, even planets that have diamond rain due to extreme pressure (still can't compare to finals season though). If this was a video game, humanity would have .000001% of the "universe" map discovered (it's much smaller, I just can't fit enough zeros to capture it. Again, extreme numbers). We are an iota of a speck among a vast ocean of stars. You know what the kicker is? This infinite ocean contains an infinite amount of wonders, treasures, mysteries, horrors, and everything in between, yet we will never be able to explore them all. We won't even be able to explore a fraction of a fraction of a sliver of them. And by "we" I mean us mortals who have absolutely no way to travel at light-speed or beyond it, and even if we did, space is so huge that to get anywhere would take way too long for us to survive. Just to leave our home galaxy, our good-ol' Milky Way, would take over 900,000 lightyears. And us? We have an average lifespan of under 100 standard years. We know there's a cosmos full of the unimaginable out there (have you seen the famous Pillars of Creation photos? If not, take a moment to look it up. It's absolutely stunning), yet it's impossible for us to ever explore it all (unless we're able to "crack the code" and invent faster-than-light travel within the next few decades. I wouldn't hold my breath though). Hell, pretty much all of us won't ever leave the surface of our planet, save for an occasional plane ride. We're resigned to spend our flash, our minute, 100-year spark of life, on our iota of a speck, never getting to truly adventure into the universe around us.

It's easy to simply chalk this up as the most existential case of FOMO ever; "In the grand scheme of things, in an infinite space billions of years old that will be here long after we are, we're trapped on one Pale Blue Dot. We're a grain of sand at the bottom of the dune that'll never see the sunlight. What's the point?" Well, maybe we need to take a different perspective. Try this: As you're staring into the night sky (or imagining away), think of a person you'd like to share the view with. Is it a family member? A friend? Significant other? Why pick them? Great memories? Is it out of love, or care, or friendship, or simply because you know they'd appreciate some quality time and a nice view?

The thing is, there is nowhere else in the universe where you'd know that person. Why? Because none of that exists anywhere but here. Friends, family, partners, you can't find that anywhere else but our little iota of a speck.

In fact, you can apply that to almost everything on Earth. Dogs? Sorry, they're not on Saturn. Your favorite coffee shop? I'm sure there's no extrasolar locations available. Your favorite genre of music? Considering sound can't travel in void vacuums, it's safe to assume it's exclusive to our planet. Everything great about humanity, everything that enhances our existence just a bit more, like food, movies, fashion, art, sports, singing, pets, games, hobbies, doesn't exist in any far-flung corner of the cosmos except for ours. Even broader concepts like compassion, joy, empathy, pride, selflessness, learning, are only for us to enjoy.

With that, though, comes the pitfalls of humanity as well. Greed, anger, heartbreak, grief, violence, sickness, none of that exists anywhere in the universe but here. No comets zooming through solar systems will ever be guilty of our sins; they're our unfortunate burdens to bear. But isn't that the nature, the reality, the double-edged sword, of life? It's lovely, ugly, chaotic, messy, stunning, full of the absolute best the universe has to offer and the worst as well. Love entails sorrow. Pain entails growth. This potency of both greatness and awfulness is what makes life on Earth so special in the infinite cosmos. The Sun burns hot, but there's nothing warmer than a hug from someone you love when you so desperately need it. No icy asteroid can ever match the coldness we show each other every single day, but none can match the speed at which we'll drop everything to help someone we care about either. Love can pull people together harder than a black hole, and also leave your mood darker than one too.

As you finish sky-gazing, I hope you realize that life on Earth really is a flash. But it's no less important; far from it. It may not seem like it when you're stuck in I-35 traffic or calculating what grade you need on the final exam, but we're a precious ember floating in the cold, unfeeling nothingness of space. Even in the mundane, there's something to marvel at. It may occasionally feel like your time here can't compare to the wonders of the night, and you're right. It's more than anything you could find in the universe.

More boring, more painful, sure. But also more vivid, more beautiful, and more full of life. Just remember: everything about your flash on this tiny iota of paradise is more special than anything among the ocean of stars above you.

A Brief Introspection

Samuel Williams

You often think how strange life can be
in moments such as these,
where, this time, you idle on the highway

in a long procession bounded
by the horizon and the woods.
You start to explore the world

when you decide to leave your metal mount
and the endless fumes of her kind
and relieve yourself among the trees

where you spot a Hercules
beetle laying her eggs on
rotting wood, her horned

figure pinching your nerves
as you turn away to see
a Wolf spider and thousands

of little eyes on her abdomen.
Her children stare at you
run to your metal beast

as your skin crawls
further and faster
than your feet do.

You begin to ponder your reaction, and know
when human babies are born from eggs
inside their mother, they grow within her

and swallow their urine. You think it
a natural process that babies come
out their mother like waste, or cut

out like a parasite. Their warmth
is your warmth. You often think
how strange life can be

when you know the beetle
and the spider and the
human mother are all

fonts of life, yet distinct in the
beholder's eyes. Born into
their world

with a heartbeat.
Born into our world
with a ranking.

Deus: Fetal State

Micah Matherne



The Real Wax Figure

Hollywood Wax Museum, California

Angelina Leonardi

DiCaprio is shorter than I expected,
dressed in a Gatsby tux.
To his left, a Jack still frozen on a door.

What did their makers think?
The artists that crafted these figurines,
giving special attention to the nose and brows.
Even the eyes were obsessed over,
each strand of blue in the iris
positioned by a pair of tweezers.

Were they disappointed?
No matter how hard they tried to conjure life,
their creations would never truly be real.

I hate to say it, but I'm let down.
With half a mind to go back to that salesman
on the street,
the one that gave me the card to this con
in the first place.
I want to yell at him for promising amazement,
when all I got was a room full of wax
that felt more real than me.

I don't feel amazed.
DiCaprio probably wasn't too awed either,
knowing they shaved off some of his shin length.

It makes me wonder if he stood in front of himself,
seeing a wax figurine attempt to be real.
Then turned to its maker and said,
I hate my body.

The Real Wax Figure

Can I say the same too?
What did my maker think,
when He made my toes, knees, and ears.
When He sought to create life,
disappointed when I remained wax.

We're not allowed to touch,
but still, I get up close.
Leaning over the displays red roped barrier
to snap my fingers in front of their eyes.
Wanting to make sure that they are wax.

I pinch the side of my arm,
to make sure that I am real,
and not just attempting to be.

Dear Dr. Frankenstein & Monster, Angelina Leonardi

I too, know how to be monster and man
and confuse myself between the two.

I've learned how to build my life
out of severed parts that no longer work.
How to stitch myself back up
with things that do not belong.

I too, know how to pretend to be something I am not,
and how to be persecuted for being who I am.

I've learned to conform to the people
who see me as lesser.
From the clothes I adorn
to the otherness in my speech.

They do not throw stones at me
but words break something
more precious than bone
that I cannot stitch back up.

I too, consider myself creator and creature
and more abominable than others think.

There was no science to this,
I think many would confess the same.
How society uses my life as an experiment,
taking bits of my heart in their teeth,
cutting the tongue from my mouth,
and setting my body on fire.

Then they blame me for turning into a monster.

Scarlet Spring

Brazos Hopkins

on “I See Red (snowman)” by Jane Quick-to-See Smith

The air is chilly, children chortling in the street,
Snow crunching beneath their feet.
The white light luminescent as the sun strikes the snow.
White warriors stand guard in each child’s yard
Martyring the Indigenous who rightfully play their cards.
But maybe you don’t understand.
So you try to lend a hand, of course that’s after you stole
their land.
The day is May 5th. You didn’t know?
Today, all I can see is red.
Scarlet beauty that not even snow can stow.

Fiery Cloud Canopy

Sarah Fritch



Open Windows, Yet I Breathe Suffocattion

Yash Tyagi



Rough Week

Lydia Welling



1/7

Rough Week

Lydia Welling 2009

It's Like A Disease.

Cora Van Y

It overtakes my
body, like
an incurable malady,

 slowly
 rotting
the flesh from my bones.

Forming my skeleton
into something
horrifying
and grotesque.

It isolates me.

Blocking me from
being truly known,

as I kick and scream
to be released.

I am tethered to the floor
with a chain constricting
my neck.
It makes me tired.

I want
to give in.
Lie down,
rest
in someone's arms.

But where would I go?
Whose arms
can I rest in, knowing
that I will only infect them?

What if I give in?
Hurt you
the way my mind pleads?

Nobody knows me.
They see what's beautiful,
what I know can be loved.

They don't see the disease.
They don't know
what it makes me think.
Nobody ever will.

They say to do
horrible
despicable
things.

Things I would
never do.

The thoughts aren't me.
They can't be me.
It must be the disease.

But
How could anyone ever
love me

hold me
cherish me
if they knew the effects of this plague?

You look to my decaying form
as though you can.

A friend
who actually understands
my broken mind.

Like you might be the one
to finally let me sleep.

You're a fool.

You cannot love what you don't know.
And you will never know me.
I'm too sick.

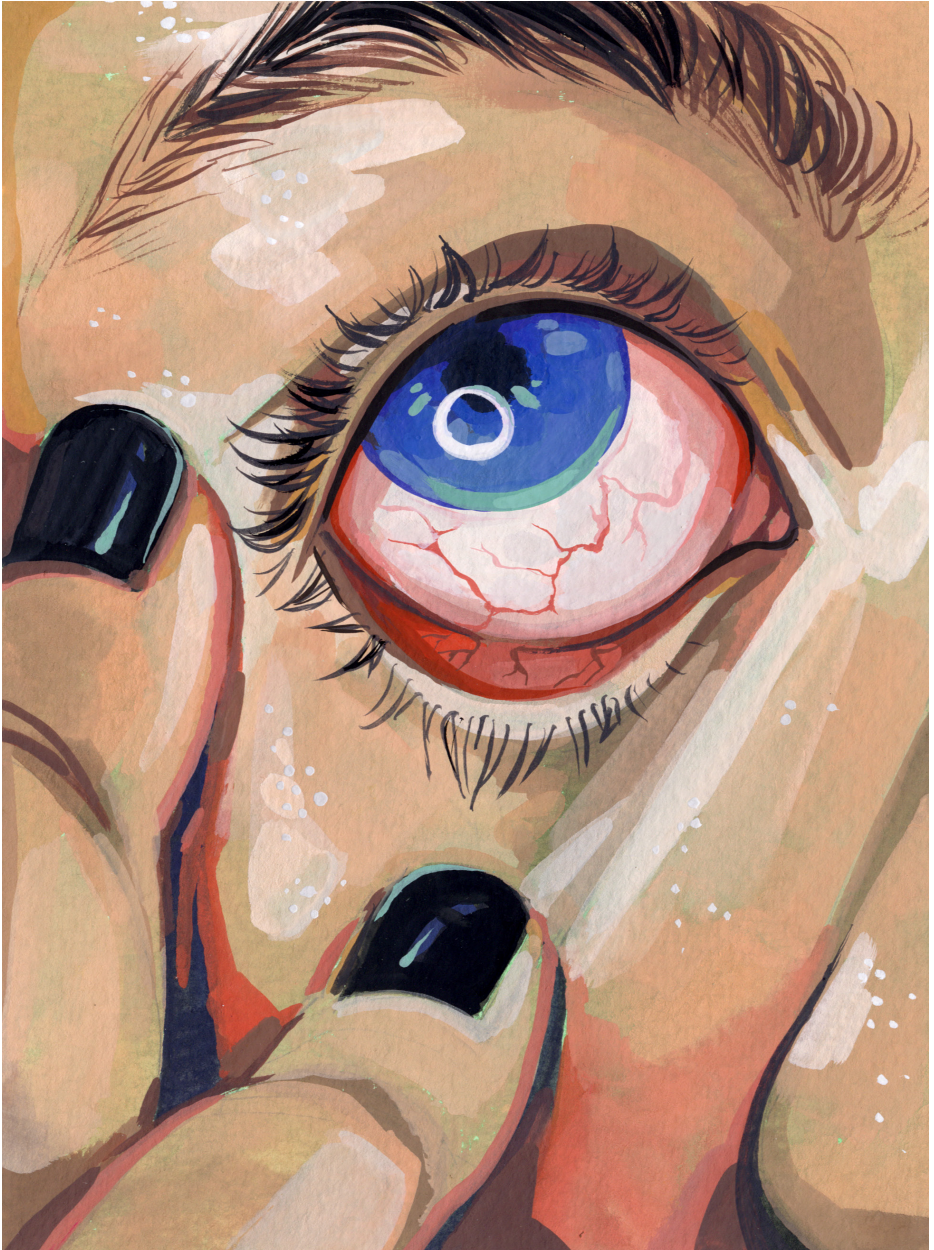
Spinal Tap

Micah Matherne



Insomniac

Micah Matherne



Hazy Dreams

Jaden Ross

The air hung disgustingly thick, blanketing us with an unseen moisture that felt like it could clog arteries, not unlike the veritable feast of fast food that lay strewn across the picnic table. The smell of greasy processed food mixing with the heavy stench of fry oil, cigarettes, and cheap beer was intoxicating yet pleasant, comforting almost in its deep familiarity.

My company-branded t-shirt clung uncomfortably to my torso due to the lethal combination of sweat and humidity that coated my body. I probably reeked. Ten straight hours of working the fryers will do that to you. Standing before a wall of volcanic liquid bubbling up and out of the rusty vats that would contain it; behind you a grill cook throws a dozen “meat” patties onto a steaming metal plate that definitely hasn’t been cleaned all day. Your face to the witch’s pot, your back to the primordial furnace. The combined heat creates a vortex that envelops you until you no longer feel hot, until the uncomfortableness fades into your subconscious; your mind becomes blank, your thoughts suffocated by the heat into a dull, mindless drone that operates on autopilot. Every morning I dreaded this, dreaded stepping into the narrow metallic dungeon, feared the zombie-like state that enveloped me while inside the dragon’s den, that deeply primal coping mechanism of the brain that rendered me a cog in the great culinary machine of American fast food. I hated it. Hated the heat, hated the resulting brain dead, hated all of it. But it was a fate crueler than most in its determination to devour all that it claimed. This was probably true for most jobs. Even here, outside in nature - or at least what might have once passed for a park but now was a sea of litter, broken appliances, rusted swings, and a couple picnic tables soggy with perpetual rainfall – even here I couldn’t escape the heat, couldn’t escape the sweat, couldn’t escape the oil and grease. It used to nauseate me. Now in my numbness I almost liked it.

I haphazardly picked at some fries, washing down each bite with a hearty swig of crisp, watery beer. Dinner of champions. Across the table from me, Rick was devouring a cheeseburger in one hand while balancing a lit cigarette in the other. Greasy sauce was running down one arm and dripping off his elbow. Face smattered with ketchup and mustard that clung to his mustache, hair slicked back by some oily concoction that no doubt he had made himself now glistened even brighter with sweat, all obscured partially by the smoke that danced off of his cigarette; he looked like if Picasso had decided to paint an Italian immigrant from an old 40's film.

You're gonna get cancer and diabetes, you know that right?

A bit of a hypocritical point to make.

Eh, so what. We live once anyway, might as well enjoy the delicacies of this great country while I'm at it.

Enthusiastically licking his fingers while he said this, Rick punctuated the thought with a long pull of beer, tossing the can over his shoulder when he finished.

Very classy. I said with a chuckle.

Another shrug. Just helping the aesthetic around here.

Laughing. Fair enough.

The refreshing sound of another can being cracked open. Almost angelic, that sound.

You get that pay raise you mentioned? Rick's mouth full of cheeseburger as he posed the question.

Nah they're still jerking me around with that. Manager said they're delaying any pay raises until next year due to "budget restraints".

Rick shook his head vehemently. Another swig. Bastards.

Yeah. Fuckin ay. Could've really used it.

I hear you brother.

We should have just been dishwashers in Italy. Make enough to keep a tiny ass apartment and just travel Europe, spend our time in little cafes, play chess with the village elders and drink wine. Eventually find some gorgeous Italian women and settle down. Now that sounds like a life. That's the life brother. Some good, hearty Italian cuisine – a little prosciutto, capicola, parmesan cheese, real pizza! Good wine – and the women! mmmhm!

We laughed. A deep, resounding laugh that came from the soul. Some part of our selves that still clung to the youth and vibrancy that we had felt not so long ago. It felt good. There was a lull, comfortable and heavy, in the quiet evening air. The occasional roar of passing traffic was, for a brief few moments, the only sound that punctuated the near silence.

Rick checked his phone, scrolling mindlessly through ESPN while sucking absentmindedly on the straw in his 40oz diet coke.

I pulled a pack of Marlboro reds from my jacket pocket. Retrieved my lighter with a similar motion. Watched the flame dance in the stillness. A deep, peaceful inhalation. I sighed, relaxing as I exhaled the cloud of smoke; watched it curl, snaking listlessly, and dissipate into the growing dark.

Looking up at the winking, newborn stars in the sky. The magnificence of those infinite astro-bodies never ceased to baffle me. Clearly, as if in the present, I could see Rick and I sitting at this exact same table looking up at that same sky all those years ago. Humbled. Inspired. Boldened by our youth and filled with the enthusiastic vigor of the untamed, unexplored potential of our lives. Today it just made me feel small.

I exhaled deeply, the cloud of smoke slow to die in the thick evening air. Stamped the cigarette on the moist wooden surface of the table.

Seems like just yesterday we sat here and plotted our entire life's plan. I sounded more weary than wistful.

Our traditional way of conversating, just speaking words when the urge came, unprompted, when we had something to say; unburdened by the duration of silences or normal societal norms governing conversations. Such was the bond you developed after more than a decade of friendship.

Yeah. It really does.

He reached for the pack of cigarettes I had left on the table. I pushed them closer to him, without taking my gaze off the stars. What answers to questions I couldn't even fathom did they hold? So majestic, regal, in their brilliance and beauty that it seemed a blasphemy to even hold their gaze. Yet I continued. Such was the arrogance and folly of man. We are capable of anything. That's the mantra at least that we created. Was there any truth to it? Or was it merely another way we coped with the finiteness of our lives, distracted ourselves from the horror of the unknown, the afterlife. I couldn't figure out this life, what right had I to turn to the next? To find comfort in the final despite my failures in the present? I deserved nothing of the sort and yet that too did not stop me from turning more and more to the idea of an afterlife, of Heaven, and placing my hope in such a place. Somewhere my pointless struggles and hopeless failures wouldn't hold me down. A place I could finally rest. Finally find peace. My mother believed in Heaven, had always instilled in me the belief that this life was a mere steppingstone to the next. That this was just a trial stage of sorts to be allowed the experience of eternal happiness. If that was the case, I didn't like my chances. Hoped she was both right and wrong. Hoped that God had some mercy left to spare.

Eyes still on the heavens, pondering how Rick would react to what I had prepared to say next and knowing exactly.

Maria's been bringing up getting married again. Dropping a lot of not-so-subtle hints.

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subtle hints.

Rick stared; phone lost in his grasp. His expression a mixture of mild shock and annoyance.

Seriously?

I nodded. Reached into my jacket. Retrieve. Relight. Repeat. He ran a hand through his greasy hair, shaking his head. A succession of heavy sighs.

What did you say?

Nothing yet. Just kept using my impeccable skills of dodging unpleasant conversation topics.

What are you gonna do? She's just gonna keep asking, hell she's been talking about marriage since high school.

I don't know man. Marry her, I guess.

You know you've almost ended things with her like three times. And that's just recently.

I know I know. But what else am I going to do?

Another pause.

I mean I do love her. I know we've been rocky to say the least...but I've loved her since we met. I still do.

This was true. I had always loved her. Some part of me, recently buried under the turmoil and strife of life, knew I always would.

Enough to marry her though?

I don't know. I think maybe.

Oh yeah, that's the right attitude.

I laughed.

Can you imagine what my mom would say if she found out we were hooking up before getting married?

Rick chuckled.

That would be a hilariously awful conversation. Let me know if you tell her I wanna listen in.

Nah, ain't no way I'm telling her. It would break her heart. She's too innocent.

That's fair. Probably a wise move.

Yeah.

Sighing, I rested my face in my palm, ignoring the sweat that had accumulated there from the humidity.

I always thought that if I decided to get married it would be under much more...romantic circumstances. This said with a bitter laugh.

If you don't think she's the one, then don't marry her bro.

There are thousands of other hot chicks out there. Plus, you aren't even thirty yet dude, plenty of time to find a girl before you're old and sad-

Thanks man. Really comforting.

But if she is the one, fucking marry her already. You've been dating for like eight years.

You're not wrong.

Just saying man. You're always talking about how you feel you aren't where you want to be in life, but where do you want to be?

I feel like we've talked about my life goals a lot-

I know what the you in high school wanted. I know what you at twenty-one wanted. What do you want today? Here. Right now. Because high school you couldn't believe you scored a girl as hot as Maria, wanted nothing more than to party and live in the moment. Senior year you wanted to marry her as soon as you graduated, spent every waking moment with her. Not jealous at all, I've gotten over that.

We both laughed.

Post-graduation you said you were putting off getting married until you got into a more stable, secure job. Which I totally get. For you at the time. But all you've talked about for almost ten years now is how much you wanted to find a beautiful girl, settle down, and raise a family. You never cared about your job. No offense, because neither did I, but that part of you, the obsessive, thoughtful part of you that's gonna make you such a great father and husband, is the same part of you that caused you to never focused on career aspirations and is honestly the reason we're still sitting in

this park. I mean let's face it, I was never getting out of here. I'm a Walmart night manager. That's as lofty a height as the Bernardi clan could ever hope to achieve. But you, you could have been a fucking CEO bro. Except that never mattered to you. For as long as I've known you all that mattered was family. Past. Present. Future. That is where you focused your devotion, your obsession. Fuck, you turned down culinary school to stay here in this dump and take care of your dad. All I'm saying is, if the you today is even remotely the same as the you I've known for over a decade now, then I think we both know what you want. But hell, what do I know. I'm just a bum sitting on a park bench who's about to shit his pants from all this crappy food.

We laughed riotously at this. I felt tears welling up in my eyes as I almost fell off my bench, shaking with laughter. It felt just like old times, like we were teenagers again. Somethings never change.

Night had settled over the small, dilapidated park, blanketing the surroundings with a soft darkness; kept partially at bay by the warm, mellow light of the streetlamps. Rick and I had dumped all of our trash into the one remaining metal cylinder in the park that could still somewhat pass for a trash can.

We should really clean this place up one of these days. As I stubbed my last cigarette out on the metal rim and tossed it inside.

But then people would want to come here, and we'd have to find another park to smoke at. Fair point.

As we approached my truck, 2004 model and still going strong, we both waved to the old man who was setting up his tent in the corner of the park.

Bobby, a friendly, grizzled man and a fellow enthusiast for fast food hamburgers, had been living in this park since we were in high school. It was tradition for the two of us to bring him dinner every Wednesday when we came to the park. Long ago we had tried to get him some kind of help or rehab but he had refused. Said he liked living out under the stars, had gotten used to it. So, we settled for bringing him dinner once a week and slipping whatever cash we could spare into the paper meal bag.

We handed the paper bag over to him, two large meals and twenty dollars cash each inside, with a familiar nod.

Have a goodnight, Bobby.

He performed his usual bow of thanks and went back to setting up his tent.

Inside my old Toyota, I plugged my phone into the aux cord and put on my country music playlist.

We drove in a familiar, comfortable silence, meditating on the wailing words of the melancholy guitarist.

I pulled up outside the Walmart Rick worked at.

Clasping hands, we gave each other a back slapping hug.

Go make that paper man.

Oh, you know it bro. Someone's gotta tell them which shelves those boxes go on.

And hey-thanks for the talk today, man. I needed it. Really set my mind right.

Anytime man. He said with a wave.

The truck door slammed shut.

Somethings never changed. Sometimes that was good.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, my phone rang. It was Maria. Suddenly I recalled the first time she had ever called me. It was after our first date. Eight years ago. As I had picked up the phone that night and heard her voice, heart soaring at the sound, I had known instantly that this was the girl I was going to marry.

I answered the phone.

THE END

Dog Fight

Mia Vu

Careful, don't be deceived
Sinful smiles are no friends of ours
They will pander and flatter
To hide the bloodlust simmering within

Bittersweet growing pains
I didn't know the world could be so
Cold, callous, cruel
A lesson learned too soon

Eyes skyward, climb climb climb
Limbs and hair and nameless faces
I claw and scratch
To reach the top that doesn't exist

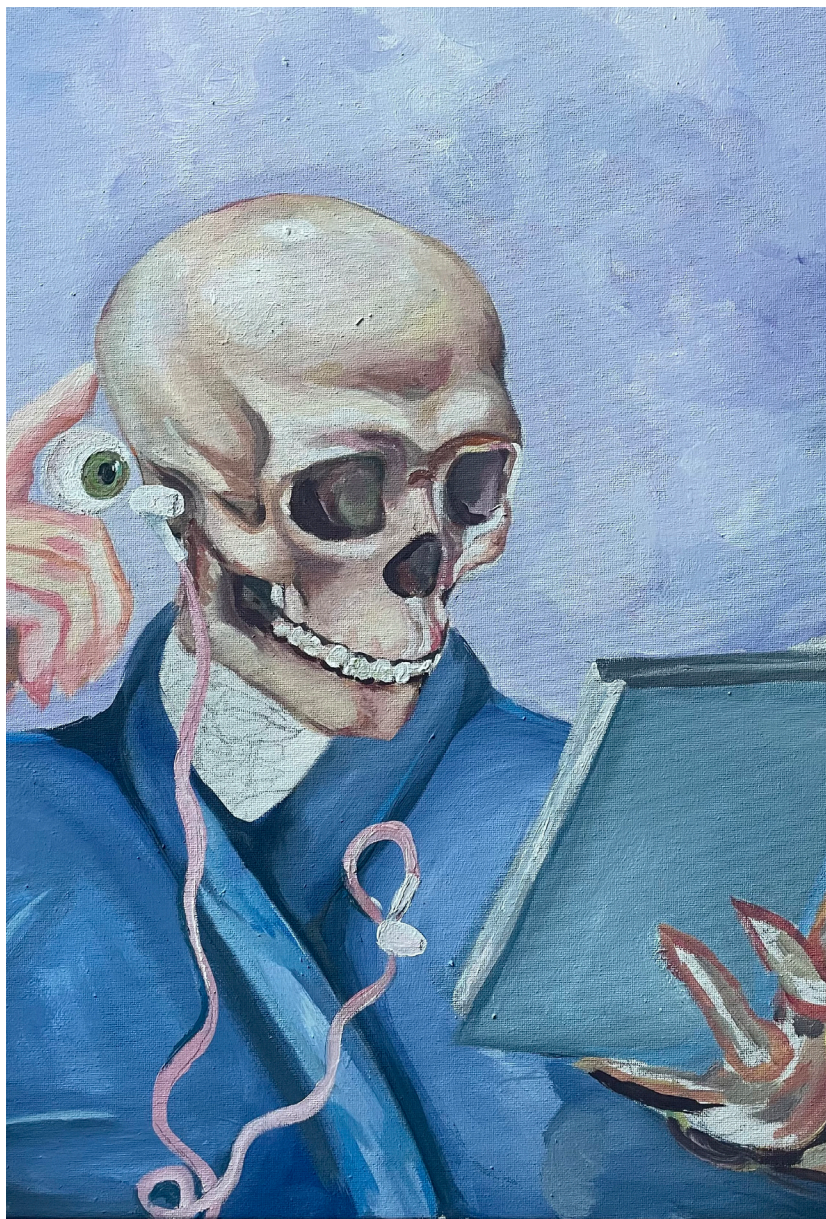
Coveting so much
I'm left with nothing
But the drip drip drip of poisonous Greed
Which takes no prisoners

Time is waiting for me to slip up
Purring and taunting me to look down
But this isn't the life I want,
Of never having enough, being enough

So I let go.

“Refresh”

Reagann Zimmermann



Freudian Slip

Angelina Leonardi

He asks, How are you?

And parts of me leak out
when I least expect it to, or want it to,
in a force of nerves that has me vomiting

every thought passing through my head,
without asking permission from my mouth to be said.

He asks, Who are you?

And parts of me trickle out
when I know the timing is off, but I do it on purpose,
wanting him to cup my cheeks in his hands.

To catch the emotion that drips from my eyes,
needing him, to cradle these confessions.

He says, I want to know you.

And parts of me spill out
when I am too slow, too selfish to dam the river,
every word a slash to my armor and, Oh--

here comes my liver and guts,
here comes my spleen and spine.

He says, I love you.

And all of me floods out
when I am too yearning, too desperate to stitch the
wound,
and a puddle of my self, unfurls at his feet

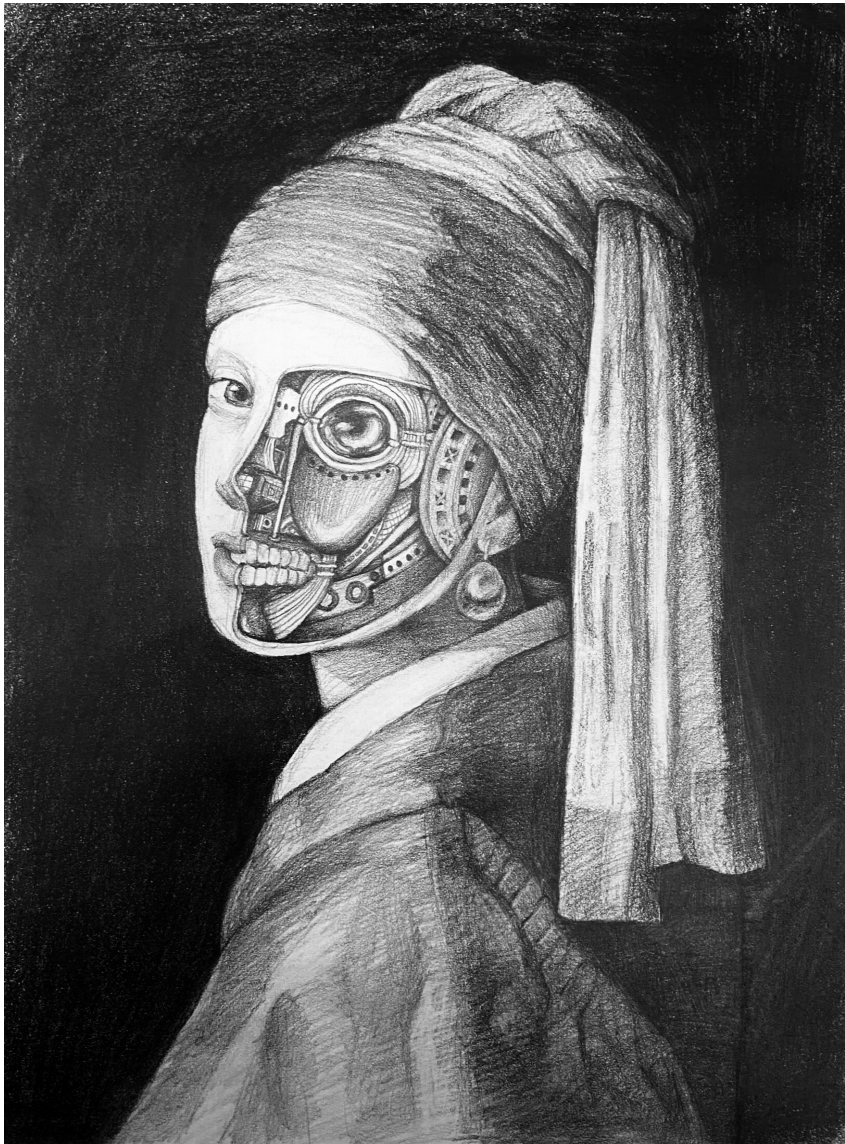
my past, truth, and beating heart laid bare
lying in a heap on the floor.

I say, I need you.

And all of him floods out.

Girl With A Pearl Earring

Anh Nguyen



Too Young

Raina Armstrong

Death washed up like gentle water
Like the ebb and flow of a tide
Borne away on the sea like an otter
Asleep, lying soft on his side

Blue Bodies

Lydia Welling



The Jade Butterfly

Mark Rose

There once was a sharp butterfly of jade,
That came from a caterpillar of silk.
As hardened as stone, heart black as nightshade,
From light as a feather, soul white as milk.

The larva's beauty was without compare,
Drawing the ire of moths and wasps akin.
So they stung, poked, bit, and battered to scare,
Till the larva spun a chrysalis thin.

Endless beating made the pupa grow thick,
And the larva inside strong to endure.
What emerged was monstrous, brutal yet quick,
Forced early to mature from pain so pure.

But now, the ground-bound larva roams the sky,
Free to find peace as a jade butterfly.

Citrus

Mia Vu

My thumb presses into its flesh.
Using my nail as an anchor
I peel back the perforated skin
Filled with tiny pores that escape notice
Creating a false sheen of smoothness.

A part finally gives way
breaks open
and lays on its back
Insides exposed.
Never to be made whole again.

Zest scatters into the air
Like floating dust revealed by sunlight.
It tickles our noses
Overriding the other scents of the room.
Tangy. Citrus. Summer.

I work methodically.
Feeling the white pith build up under my nail
Zest settling into my skin.
Dry and cracked.

Pouches full of pockets of juice
Bursting with flavor
White webbed lines with no end in sight.
Picking off as much as possible
Strand by strand.

I am reminded of my mom
Peeling oranges at the table.
Home.

Cicada

Paige Murdock

She suddenly stopped and threw her arm to halt me. Lowering herself down towards the ground, not taking her eyes off a spot on the pavement. She said nothing. She just examined the spot. Her lips pursed and her brow wrinkled.

From where I stood, I could not see what she interrogated. So, I bent down alongside her. Both our thighs pressed up against our chest, our palms resting on our knees.

“It’s a cicada,” she said, reaching her hand out from its perch to point at the bug.

The bug was ugly. I’ve only ever heard the noisy insects. Their choir would begin at sunrise and last ‘til the moon was high. I’ve not seen one out of its seat, flying through the midday air. For all I knew the ugly bug wasn’t real, but there it was, rolled over on its side before me.

She removed her backpack, setting it next to her. Reaching inside one of the many patch covered pockets, her arm fumbled around inside without removing her eyes, which were glued to the dead cicada lying between us. She pulled out a clean bag of blue doctor’s gloves before diving back in for more. Moments later, a small cylinder container was pinched between her fingers. She handed me the container. It had see-through walls stained a gross brownish-green, the color of mold or rust. Tiny, unidentifiable objects rested at its bottom. On the lid, in a smudged sharpie, was her name: MYRA.

When I looked up from my examination of the container, she was staring at me. Her eyes were a light hazel in the fleeting sun. They were studying me as much as the dead bug that lay at my feet. Her iris slowly moving and her lips releasing their hold on each other.

I twisted the top off the container.

Those doe-eyes darted to the bug. Her hands had found their place in the doctor’s gloves. The gloves pinched and pulled at the true shape of the hands in a way that pained me to watch.

Nonetheless, she ever so carefully moved her forefinger and her thumb to the height of the cicada. Then, the fingers crept forward. They were millimeters from the bug's hard exoskeleton, hovering in place.

Now. I thought, hoping to see her take the thing.

She was still. Her eyes glazed over. Her brows dug into her face and her lips caught on her teeth. I stopped looking at the bug. I began to notice the little freckles dotted under her eyes. The rich purple that swam in her eye bags before fading to a beach of pale skin. Her eyelashes were short, bold. In the middle stood her nose, petite and slightly upturned. It was a button that called out my name. What I would give to drop this gross container filled with bug leftovers and press that button, to see her rich chocolate eyes meet my own. I would melt into a puddle, nothing left but my hideous glasses and this stupid container. Right then, I wanted to speak so badly. I choked, my words stuck at the back of my throat. What would I say? How would she respond? Did she see me? At that moment, I saw her as a painting and, myself, an observer. I knew everything presented on the painting's flat surface, but how could I jump through the canvas?

"Can you hold the container upright?" she asked. The bug so carefully floated in the air, held up by her fingers.

Like a dog, I did so. And she leaned closer. She lowered the cicada into the container; the thing barely fit. I was the one to find the lid and twist it on for her, passing her the container. She eagerly wrapped her blue, cicada infected, doctor's gloves around the container and my two hands that were still cupping it.

I tore through the canvas.

She was so close. Her breath blew hot air into my face. Those eyes reflected in my lens. That nose reached out for mine. She studied my face, like she had done to the dead cicada. Her slow-moving eyes jumped from part to part as she memorized everything about me, as I did her.

Her lips released, dropping down to let the humid air in. The brows retreated to their resting place. The painting moved towards me. Her movement sudden. The viewer could only watch.

Her breath bled into mine. Our noses interlocked; our eyelashes kissed.

A panicked buzzing and a violent shaking came from between our hands. Both of us pulled back, letting each other go. The container crashed to the ground, and the cicada fluttered away.

Plush Muse

Sarah Fritch



Amber

Christina Phillips

Is it on?

It is. You can go ahead.

Okay. Okay, so um. So I consider myself a professional. I know bartending as a profession gets a bad rap for being kind of sleazy, and I guess that comes with the territory, but that's not me. I clock in, I make some drinks, I chat up some customers, I clock out. That's it.

Usually.

That night was a little different. She was a little different.

I noticed straight away when she walked into the room. I mean, everyone did. It was like every molecule of oxygen just got sucked out the door when she opened it. Everyone turned to look, and everyone saw this...this creature standing there. I mean, I don't think there's any other word for it. She wasn't a person—people don't look the way she did, so flawless it was hard to look straight at her. And she was so pale, like some kind of porcelain doll. I remember the way the neon was reflecting off of her, and shining through her hair. She wasn't just a total knockout. I see those all the time. Something about her was just too perfect and shiny to be human.

So anyway. She walks up to the bar, and the whole time I'm staring at her. Like I wasn't trying to be rude or, like, a creep or whatever, but I just couldn't look away. No one could. The line in front of her just kind of blurred into my periphery and the blaring music quieted, and all I could hear was her stilettos on the sticky hardwood. Oh, and that's another thing that was weird about her. I don't work in some kind of classy club, like it isn't a swank joint. It's a dive—it's sweaty and greasy and you'd have to set fire to the place to get all the vomit out of the floorboards, and in waltzes this woman in her silk fuckin' evening gown and goddamn stilettos. I mean she looked like she'd walked out of a Hepburn picture.

Anyway, she walks up to the bar and she tells me she wants a gin with Prosecco and blackberries. Are you kidding me? A gin with Prosecco and blackberries? I'm like, who the hell does this broad think she is? Where the hell does she think she is?

So you were angered by this woman?

Oh god no. No, it was love at first sight. I mean she was enigmatic, she was perfect. And my ex was a brunette too, so you know how that goes. I made her that priss-ass drink with this dumbass smile on my face, because even though like, I guess she kind of had to, I felt lucky that she was even talking to me.

And speaking of, the way she talked was so bizarre. Like she had this very faint accent that I couldn't quite put a finger on—maybe something Eastern European? I don't know, it was barely there to begin with. And her voice was not what you would expect at all from looking at her. She had this delicate, fairy-princess-looking face, but when she opened her mouth, all you could hear was a thousand-year-old antiques dealer who chain smoked in the eighties. It was unbelievably sexy.

Anyway, pretty much as soon as she sat down, she was swarmed with men just unabashedly trying to get with her. Which like, understandable, you know, I would've too if I wasn't on the clock, but it was incessant. There must've been a dozen of them, at least. And she bought each and every one of them that tried to talk to her a drink, and she just kept sliding me twenties across the bar. I don't know where she was getting them from—I never saw a purse. And she always asked how old they were too, which I thought was weird. Like that's weird, right? I dunno. Maybe she was just super concerned about the age of consent.

Any idiot would've been able to tell how bored she was of them though. Maybe I'm biased, but I don't think men are particularly interesting to begin with.

And when they're twenty-two and singularly focused on getting some, you can forget about an engaging conversation. So these dudes are just rotating in and out, and every time one opens his mouth, her eyes just fucking glaze over. And so at a certain point I'm thinking okay, she's not into this at all.

Anyway, eventually she got up to go dance, and of course they all stayed packed around her like flies on shit. And that's when I notice Thomas, my coworker, trying to get my attention.

And this is Thomas Marten?

Yes sir, Thomas Marten. Um, I notice he's trying to get my attention. And I know exactly what he's about to give me shit for, so I try to ignore him, but eventually I turn to him, and he's like 'whoa, someone's got a crush,' and I was like, 'yeah, every douchebag in the bar, that's who.' And he told me it wasn't very nice to call myself a douchebag, so I flicked a lemon wedge at him. He kept teasing me for what I guess must've been the next half hour or so, but it's hard to say. I wasn't really paying attention to him. My eyes were glued to her, and the way the purple silk of her dress moved like water over her body, fluid and smooth and barely there at all. God. She was hypnotic.

So how did Mr. Marten get involved with the suspect?

Oh, uh, right. Um, he wanted to make a bet. He said there was no way she'd ever want to get with me, you know, teasing of course, and I told him to look at her entourage and tell me with a straight face that he thought he was any better than the rest of the herd. And he bet me all his tips from the night that he could get her number before I could. And like, given that he was so uninterested in her that he'd just spent the last however long mocking me for my interest, I told him he was on.

He made her a drink and took it out to her on the floor. He hadn't heard her original order though, so when he offered her a cosmo or a vodka cran or whatever it was, I got to swoop in with her actual order and make him look stupid.

He got real competitive after that. Told her if she came up and visited him at the bar, he could make the drink for her ten times better than I could. Which is ridiculous because it's three ingredients and one of them is practically just a garnish, so I really don't know what he meant by that, but I digress.

While he made her that superior G+P+blackberries, she and I got to chatting. I don't remember what dumbass pickup line I tried to use on her. I remember she laughed though, a real laugh, not that sorority girl giggle she did for the others. 'What's your name,' she asked, and I told her. She didn't offer hers back, just studied me. There was something unnerving about her gaze. It looked...feral. Hungry. Not at all like the put-together stare of a downtown socialite. She was a predator.

Did you end up getting her name?

She told me I could call her Amber. That was her exact phrasing. Now that I'm thinking about it, I guess that doesn't really mean that's her name, does it? Anyway, Thomas handed her the drink after that and the two seemed to hit it off pretty well, unfortunately. Her eyes kind of lit up when they landed on him, like she'd found exactly what she came into the bar looking for. And maybe it made me exactly as douche-ish as the men whose eyes didn't leave her ass the entire night, but I didn't want to give up just yet. I'd made up my mind to challenge her to a round of darts when she slid off her stool and disappeared into the crowd. And like some kind of cartoon character with hearts for eyes, I followed. I wanted to dance with her more than anything. Which is weird, because I hate dancing.

She laughed when she caught sight of me, not in a cruel way, but in a surprised way, as if I hadn't been the one she was expecting to lure over.

The music we play at the bar is ass, and last night was no exception. But I don't remember what tacky song was playing.

I remember the sound of her laugh as she told me to come on, then, and I remember the feeling of her hand on my wrist as she pulled me in, and I remember the smell of her perfume. I hadn't even been drinking, but I remember feeling buzzed on it, like every thought in my head was being pushed out as the scent of her filled up my skull and time slipped away just as easily as the strap of her dress sliding off her shoulder.

This perfume seems to have been quite potent. Do you remember what it smelled like?

You know...now that you mention it, I don't. I couldn't tell you. I just know it put me into such a trance. A trance Thomas pulled me out of, yelling my name from the bar. Reality flooded back and I realized I had no idea how long I'd been dancing. I'd just been so absorbed in her. At first I had that oh shit moment of thinking he was annoyed I'd left him with the whole place's drink orders to tend to. But then I realized he was looking straight through me. No, he was pissed because I was winning the bet.

I was so flustered as I walked away that I staggered straight past the bar and into the bathroom, in desperate need of a splash of cold water to the face. Like I told you from the start, I'm a professional. This wasn't like me. And, come to think of it, it wasn't like Thomas either. I mean he hadn't even been into her to begin with—he'd made the bet with me to prove I couldn't get her number at all. Why was he suddenly so obsessed?

So I looked for him when I got out of the bathroom to ask when he'd changed his mind, but he wasn't around. And neither was Amber. People were getting antsy for their drinks at the bar, but at this point I could just feel in my gut that something was wrong. But then, out the window, I could see two shadows moving, and the flash of neon light on purple silk.

And of course my first impulse was to run out there and kick his ass.

I mean getting a number is one thing, but abandoning post for an alleyway quickie? Un-fucking-acceptable. So I go out the back, but...

But what?

This is the part where they called me crazy.

I assure you. We aren't here to call you crazy.

I mean...I wouldn't blame you much if you did. It sounds crazy. I might be crazy. But it happened. I swear it on my life.

Of course. Please, go on.

Okay. Right. So, um. So. I go out the back door and I'm about to start yelling, but there's this...I don't know. This sound. Like a wet, vibrating gurgle. And what I thought had been the neon reflecting on Amber's dress was getting brighter, and neon signs don't do that shit. So I started getting closer, and I wasn't sure what I was going to see but I could feel that I would be smart to be terrified. But the light was getting brighter and the sound was getting louder, more intense...and there was another sound mixed it with it, like a wheezing groan. I needed to turn the corner. I needed to see what the hell was going on.

I wish I hadn't.

Amber was gone. I mean I could tell it was her because the silk gown was in shredded pieces all around her, but where the breathtaking woman it had clothed once stood, there was a creature from Hell. There's not another word for it. It was a demon. It didn't have skin. It was all burns and weeping wounds, all raw and red, rotted and black and falling off bone. Its face was all eyes, and it sat, all of its legs bent the wrong way, crouched over this figure that I knew had to be Thomas even though it looked nothing like him. Thomas was a twenty-one year old gym rat. He was muscle and obnoxious laughter and life. The thing on the ground was barely more than dust. Shriveled and dry and ancient-looking, skin like leather. And screaming. Even once the sound stopped, the look on his face was an open-mouthed, silent scream.

But the worst part of the whole...scene, I guess, was the creature's mouth. Or I guess what was there instead. It was just this infinite maw, full to bursting with these wet black teeth. And it was breathing in this gossamer-like substance floating off of Thomas like steam. It shimmered and glittered like stardust, and this creature was sucking it out of him like some kind of iridescent kiss of death. And as it came off, or, I guess out of him, he starting decomposing right there in front of me. I watched his face wither away and disappear until it was just his skull, jaw open. Still screaming.

I didn't realize I was mimicking the sound until the creature's head snapped up, craned around to face me. The glittering light evaporated, leaving only the neon to light the dark alley. A tongue I didn't realize it had slithered out and raked across its dry, bleeding lips. Cut itself on its jagged teeth. And then—oh god, I'm gonna be sick thinking about it—

It's okay, take your time. You can go on when you're ready.

Okay, um. It looked at me, and it smiled. Its horrible, cratered head tilted to the side and the hole full of teeth pulled up into this nauseating grin, blood spilling down its chin, all its eyes blinking out of sync. I just about broke my neck trying to turn around and run, but I slipped in a puddle and went down hard. I scampered backwards on my hands, trying to get away, but it didn't come any closer. I asked it what the fuck it was. I think I was crying. It told me I could call it Amber. And then it skittered down the alley and into the dark.

We: It's Beyond You and Me

Yash Tyagi

In the horrors
of fears and traumas,
free will confines deep within.
A forever sink in our forever sins.

Drowning I am,
just as you are too.
What strengths do I possess?
And what strengths lie within you?

Within agonizing
discomfort, we comfort
one another. The same tears fall together,
and arm in arm, we gather our healing like treasure.

So stand by me;
it is more than just unity.
We'll weather whatever storms may occur.
It's through sorrow we grow closer, to heal and recover.

Paradox (A Prose)

Michael C Ogbuagu

It's always beautiful at this time of the evening. With the sun's purple coloring the evening sky, the chirp of birds in the distance and the coolness of heaven's breath - this was peace. I could hear Natty's heartbeat from beneath me - we lay in the grass, eyes to the unending skies and hearts in tandem. I could feel each *tu-dum* from the almost intangible quake of the ground. Each synchronized breath shook the blades of grass around us. This was our world - different from the world around us.

This tiny moment was all I lived for. *Bliss*

I shifted my weight from beneath me and got into a cross-legged sitting position on the grass. I was next to her still, but she didn't seem to notice that I'd moved to sit. Her eyes were closed. Her eyelids barely fluttering. She seemed to be in half-sleep.

"Hey, Natty", I called to her.

No response.

"Natty?"

She sighed.

"I'm sorry"

"It's okay, T. You know I hate when you say sorry."

I did

"I know..."

"So, please don't"

"Okay"

She stirred from her half-sleep and turned to sit across from me - eye-to-eye.

"T?"

"Yes?"

"Please, walk with me"

I roused from my position. My back was beginning to hurt me anyway.

I needed the walk. Natty was already up and moving before I could stretch my back out. She was always like this - quick and decisive. I think it might've helped with how we got along.

"Are you coming?" She asked, just over her shoulder.

"Yeah..." I dusted the blades of grass off my ass and got moving. "Hold up a bit"

Pfft... But she slowed - barely.

Thank you, my mind said. I caught up to her 15 paces or so after. She barely seemed to notice. Her eyes were to the sky; they were closed but I knew she could see what she wanted, feel the heat on her face and loved it.

I stayed silent.

"What color are the clouds, T?"

I hesitated.

"Light grey?". I was unsure.

"And the sky?"

"Light blue". I was a bit more certain.

She sighed in content.

"Can you see where you're going?" I asked.

"Course I can", she laughed and swung her right hand at my upper arm. It was a light punch.

I laughed as well.

"You gotta learn to hit harder."

"Oh really?" She turned towards me with her eyes open.

Those eyes - the same color as the sky and clouds on a stormy day. I was always entranced by them. *Oh, how I loved her eyes.* There was an electric sparkle to them now.

"Try again", I beckoned to her.

She stopped in her tracks as I stood waiting for her next hit.

"Alright... if you really want it". She was still smiling lightly.

The punch hit.

“Did it hurt?”

“A bit”

“Yesss!”

I laughed.

“What do you think about the summer moon?”

“I love it. The shine of the moon makes me feel alive.”

“I’m glad you love it so much.”

“You... what do you think?”

“Huh?”, I turned back to look at her.

“Is something wrong, T?”

“I’m fine, Natty. I really am. Nothing on my mind”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“Cause I see you lying. I see it in your face that you are.”

“I’m not”

“And yet you still are.”

I sighed.

“The summer moon reminds me of you.”

“...and that bothers you?”

“No. That calms me. Everything else about life bothers me.”

“Oh...”

I could see her face start to fall. It was my fault. Sometimes I was like this - lost in my feelings and distant. I never felt she could quite understand the pain I felt whenever I looked into her eyes. The very glow of her eyes hurt me in ways I couldn’t put in words.

“I’m sorry I got like this again.”

“I don’t mind it.”

“But you do.”

“It’s honestly fine, T. I like to hear your thoughts.” She looked at me. “It doesn’t bother me, I swear.”

We stopped walking. My mind’s world lay bare before us. It was terribly quiet. The chirp of birds had died. The moon lay stark in the sky, amongst the stunning glint of the stars around it.

The purple hue of the sky was deeper now, almost black. It looked how I felt - deeply drenched in some sort of intangible pain, and bleeding that color into the night.

“Your thoughts amaze me, dear.” Natty turned towards me and held my hands. She looked me straight in my eyes. “Your thoughts amaze me.”

There were tears in my eyes now. She wrapped her arms around me and buried her head deep into my chest. I could feel the weight of her head on my heart. I knew - without looking down at her - that she was listening to me heart beat. I could hear her faintly counting *one, two, one, two...*

“You know I love you, dear. I do”

I couldn't stop the tears from slipping out of my eyes. She held me tighter.

“I will always love you, Natty.”

I felt her reach for my face - to clasp it between her hands and wipe my tears.

And then I was alone. *Again.*

CONTRIBUTORS

Raina Armstrong

Senior, Spanish and Youth Advocacy, The
Colony, TX

Erin Crittendon

Junior, English and Comparative Race & Ethnic
Studies, Desoto, TX

Ellie Evans

Junior, Studio Art, Atlanta, GA

Sarah Fritch

Senior, Political Science, Lakewood, CA

Michael C. Ogbuagu

Freshman, Biology, Nigeria & Arlington, TX

Brazos Hopkins

Sophomore, Marketing, Houston, TX

Emma Kate Howard

Senior, English, Belton TX

Angelina Leornardi

Senior, Entrepreneurship & Innovation and
English, San Diego, CA

Micah Matherne

Senior, BFA with a focus in painting, Waco, TX

Paige Murdock

Freshman, Film, Television & Digital Media,
Georgetown, TX

Anh Nguyen

Sophomore, Graphic Design

Christina Philips

Senior, English, Clark, WY

Mark Rose

Senior, Political Science, Criminal Justice and
English, Midwest City, OK

Jaden Ross

Senior, Criminal Justice and English, Houston,
TX

Jessica T

Arlington, TX

Yash Tyagi

Senior, Computer Science, Saharanpur, India

Cora Van Y

Freshman, Writing, Fort Worth, TX

Mia Vu

Sophomore, Economics, English, and
Spanish (Pre-Law), Rockwall, TX

Lydia Welling

Junior, Studio Art, Grand Junction, CO

Samuel Williams

Junior, Computer Science, Fort Worth, TX

Reagann Zimmermann

Sophomore, Psychology, Bakersfield, CA

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Editor-in-Chief

Elena Butterfield

Creative Director

Zoe-Kylie Sanchez

Staff

Elena Butterfield | Hanna Landa
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Department of English
Women and Gender Studies

Dr. Mat Wenzel
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Women and Gender Studies

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