

INSANITY'S HORSE

2016-2017



Cover Art by Bruce Dalziel

INSANITY'S HORSE

Drew University Literary & Art Magazine

2016-2017

When divisive politics threaten a nation, what holds us together? For years *Insanity's Horse* has culled the finest student work at Drew, bringing unique perspectives into harmony across genres and mediums. Every poem, story, painting, and photograph in this issue represents a wealth of experience that deserves to be shared. Though we may be divided in our beliefs, our passions for art and storytelling can unite us. This magazine owes its success to the English department and writing department in general, and Courtney Zoffness in particular. We are especially grateful for the generous funding, advertising, and coordinating that made our first writing contest possible. Happy reading!

Sincerely,
The Mad and Insane

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Spiral

Grace Cerra

Kismet

Alexa Young—Fiction Contest Winner

“Why can’t we do that every night?” you asked, eyebrows raised slyly.

“You’re always so tired. Usually don’t even make it off the couch.”

You offered that awkward smirk I had grown to love and then un-love in the five years we’d been married. Tossing aside the sheets, you trudged to the bathroom, feet dragging as you struggled to right the direction of your wrinkled t-shirt. I stared at the fake stucco ceiling and the dangling fan whose light had two blown bulbs. I wondered if the maintenance had simply been overlooked. Perhaps some night shift custodian had noticed but chose to keep the room two thirds unlit, casting needless shadows across the wooden panels. If it were you, the room would be completely enveloped in a heavy grey. The toilet’s soft gurgle heralded your return and you walked to where you had discarded your pants. I continued to stare up as you asked the question I knew was only inevitable.

“You want a smoke?” you asked, zipping your pants.

“I thought you were going to quit with me.”

Though you didn’t sigh, I could feel the room’s air collapse.

And you shrugged into the jacket, cigarette clenched between your lips. I could smell your cologne as you ambled past the bed to the door. “Going for a walk,” you said and slumped out. The outside screen barely made a noise as it swung back. I rolled onto my side and let my arm flop across the mattress into the dent I wished you still occupied.

You wanted to get away—celebrate our anniversary somewhere far from the stained shag carpet of our home. Anywhere, you told me, would be better than the fucking shag carpet. I couldn't help but agree.

Our budget only afforded us a dingy motel room about five miles outside of town. The rust of the bed frame leached onto everything that dared pass the splintered door frame. The door and windows faced out towards a small balcony that wrapped around three-fourths of the parking lot whose street lights (only half functioning) speckled the lot, arbitrary patches of white light made the concrete look like a stage. I felt the shag carpet (perhaps even coarser than our own) beneath my feet the moment we walked in—I didn't even need to take my shoes off. The boy at the front desk had said it was their best room, and I had shrugged thinking about our stuffy basement apartment. Next year, you told me, we can go somewhere far away. Once I convince Manny to hire me back, you said. It's only a matter of time, you said. And I nodded and nestled further into your arm hoping that this would be the week you returned to work. It wasn't.

Looking back, it only took three years for our marriage to fray like the collar of your sweater—the one with the yellow squares that I'd always hated. You insisted on wearing it anyway and I guess, in a way, I did too. The knit yarn hung from your shoulders like drooped, wrinkled curtains the morning you asked if we could find some place to go for weekend—for our anniversary, you said, and you figured we deserved a break. I'm not sure what it was we needed a break from, but I nodded in agreement, sipping the tea I had forgotten I poured, wondering when, exactly, it had become so cold.

I was thinking about this moment, wondering if the motel's kettle could, in any conceivable way, be clean enough to use when the door opened. I turned my head, about to say, "That was fast," when I realized that the man wasn't you. He had stretched flesh-colored stocking scantily over his head, the sheerness leaving his face exposed. You had similar eyes, you know? Big and brown, like the stump of a dying tree. Every now and then my chest pangs with the pain of missing those muddy eyes, but the ache always falters—fades like a winter sunset, gradually then with urgency. The intruder waved a kitchen knife, his right hand slicing the air with spastic gestures as his left fumbled with the deadbolt. There was something about him that reminded me of you—maybe it was the way he slouched, as though some puppet master had slackened the strings a bit too much. Or maybe it was the calloused hands—something I never got fully accustomed to holding. I knew his type well—had shared vows with his type, lay beside his type—and waved away any fear that may have crept in. I wondered if I would fall in and out of love with him too.

"Where's your wallet?"

He, like you, made no attempt to chat. No friendly introductions or small talk—he knew what he wanted and grasped at it the way a toddler does. I pointed to the chair in the corner where my bag lay. A familiarity drifted between us like a thick cloud of perfume, perhaps only I sensed it, but I felt at ease despite the scratched and tarnished glint of the knife. He jerked his head, ordering me to get it, and I moved out of bed incautiously, only half wishing to maintain the modesty the sheet offered.

"There's not much here, so don't get your hopes up."

"I don't care. Just bring it to me."

“I don’t even have a credit card, you know.”

The robber shifted his weight—partly annoyance, partly impatience—and stuck his expectant hand out like a mother waiting for her teenage child to hand over their confiscated cell phone. I dropped it into his palm, knowing full well it had no more than \$25. I pivoted on my heel to return to bed, but kept my eyes firmly locked on his downward gaze. He flinched with every step I took, as though each gesture might signal the authorities. In a way, I think I pitied him, hovering over me and my musty room wearing all brown, blending into the shag carpet I couldn’t seem to shake.

“Where’s the guy’s wallet?”

“Huh?”

“The guy who just left. Did he have anything? Is that his?”

The man pointed to the wallet on the nightstand. I grabbed it. Peering down at the folds I could see a lonely \$10 bill.

“Don’t look in it, just hand it over.”

By now he had taken a step closer, hand out as though expecting the world to fit within the borders of his palms, teeter on his seesaw fingertips. I don’t think he realized, but he left exposed small slivers of his wrist—the tender part where one feels for a pulse. You wouldn’t remember, because you refused to accompany me, but I will never forget the iciness of the doctor’s fingers as he checked my pulse—his coldness translated even through latex. These same fingers emptied my womb (we had originally named her Lyla) as my fingers wished they had yours to hold onto, callouses and all. You had insisted on waiting outside the door (blood had a way of tying knots of your stomach), but I could never shake loneliness despite your presence just beyond the doctor’s walls, just beyond the motel walls, just beyond the

sheets beside me.

The robber flicked his fingers with impatience, snapping me out of memory.

“You got a name?” I asked, daring him to meet my eyes. He didn’t.

Instead, he opened his mouth, then closed it as though his name got caught somewhere in the cobwebs between his teeth, “Don’t worry about it,” he snapped.

“You look like a Dave.”

Now he dared to meet my gaze. Beneath the nylon, I could see his brow furrow.

“That’s his name, you know.”

“That guy out there?”

I nodded, reaching for my shirt from the floor. It was an old tee from high school, your old band’s name—“Lenny and the Fish”—plastered garishly across the front—it stretched distortedly over my breasts which you never failed to point out. The shirts were one of many unsuccessful marketing attempts. The group disbanded within two years of its formation; commitment proved an issue too insurmountable. Your third gig was our fifth date—who could resist a bassist? The acoustics were muddy and sound bounced too readily across the hardwood floors of the VFW hall, creating a cacophony of notes (sometimes off-key) that swamped my ears. Regardless, I felt obliged to clap at the close of every song.

I remember feigning devastation when you told me of the disbandment one evening in a McDonald’s drive-thru. I lifted my soda in a toast of remembrance, hoping the burger I had shoved into my mouth would disguise the smile of relief trying to unfold across my acned face.

“Yeah...” I answered, the robber was pointing with his

thumb to the parking lot. He looked like a hitchhiker unsure of his destination. "...my husband," and I offered an expression that seemed unable to decide if it was a smile or a frown.

You must have moved onto your second cigarette by now. A small circle of ash probably surrounded your feet like chalk marking the evidence of a crime scene. I imagined you were counting the cars in the lot, making note of the out-of-staters. It was a game you liked to play—who had travelled the farthest? You told me one night that it felt kismet to know somebody had travelled farther than you had to get to the same destination. I wondered if you thought our crossing was kismet. Were we purposefully measured and etched onto the grid of some divine blueprint? Or were we the coffee stains left on a discarded draft? I had nearly forgotten the wallet in my hand and I think he had as well, but we both seemed to awaken from our reveries with perfect unison. I wondered what he had lost his thoughts in. His hand, which he had dropped to his side at some point, was now outstretched, once again expectant.

As I reached out to hand the faded faux leather wallet to him he grabbed my arm, bringing my ring finger close to his face. I could feel his hot breath on my palm, and in a way the intimacy made me flinch. He wrestled off my wedding band (if only he knew it was sterling silver), struggling to get it past my second knuckle. Remember our wedding day, when it caught on this same knuckle as you wrestled to get it on?

"I'll take this too," he said, a smile spreading across his face—the same smile you gave me when I told you my father left his car to us in his will. Then we won't have to take the bus, you said. It'll make all the difference, you said.

As I backed away, he pocketed the wallets and slipped the ring onto his pinky, taking a quick second to admire its shine

against the fan's single light bulb. He clumsily unlocked the door and I watched through the window as he ran to the parking lot, disappearing like a ghost between street lights. I told myself I'd file a police report later, maybe once you returned. I fingered the tender spot on my ring finger, relishing the softness of the skin that had been hidden, suffocated for so long. I wondered if you would notice. Do calloused hands even recognize softness?

Your hands were the first thing I noticed about you. The first time we met, you had walked clumsily into my open locker, which in turn slammed into my unsuspecting forehead. A bump the size of an egg swelled above my right brow and you instinctively grazed the swelling lump with your fingertips. I could tell you were a musician by the raised, rough skin that tipped your fingers. You couldn't stop apologizing as you walked me to the nurse's office insisting you carry my backpack—I reminded you that it was my head, and not my arms, that had been made victim to your inattention. Nervous laughs escaped your lips between each new apology, and I found a certain charm in the way you seemed unable to resist putting your hand on my shoulder, as though guiding me down the hallway. Though I didn't need the guidance, I welcomed it regardless as an affection swelled somewhere between the hollowness of my chest and the hollowness of my stomach—even back then I had understood what it meant to be empty—but it wasn't until that lonely doctor's visit that I was able to recognize hollowness.

After the robber's departure, I slumped back into the lumpy bed, my neck bent at an uncomfortable angle against the headboard. I reached blindly into the nightstand draw pulling out the remote. Clicking through the familiar channels I wondered if

I would have done the same thing if we had decided to stay home. It was, after all, your suggestion that we leave the small apartment anyway. As I stumbled upon a re-run of *Wheel of Fortune*, I tried (without success) to convince myself that I was upset with the robbery—devastated that I had been stripped of the tiny metal circle which symbolized eternity. However, I found myself more bothered by the idea of replacing my license (just imagine the lines I would have to stand in) than confronting the absence of my wedding ring.

I was trying to find a hole in my schedule during which I could visit the DMV when you returned—it had been about a half hour since the thief’s departure. I wondered if he had uncovered any new treasures since his ghostly parking lot exit. The next episode of *Wheel* began as the stench of cigarettes washed over the room with the cold air. It felt as though you had been gone long enough to finish an entire pack. It certainly smelled as though you did. You were smiling as you stripped back down to your t-shirt and boxers and I could tell you were itching to say something.

“So I was talking to Randy down there—“

“Who?”

“Oh, sorry. Randy, the guy at the desk, real nice guy.

Anyway he told me they’re hiring. A night custodian just uh, you know, kicked the bucket—poor fella—so they were looking for a replacement. I gave him my number and e-mail. He said he’ll be in contact. Ain’t that kismet?”

You climbed back into the bed, reclaiming the dent that had long disappeared, grabbing my left hand as you leaned in for a kiss. You didn’t notice my vacant finger, and all I could think about was the cigarette stench clouding your skin like a thick, unseen fog.

You clicked the remote and blankness wiped the

television as you rattled on with your hopeful ideas of possible employment. I have a really great chance this time, you said. Randy will put a good word in for me, you said. I just have to remember to email my resume, you told me. As we lay in bed I found myself rubbing where the ring used to reside—over time I had become accustomed to turning it mindlessly, like a planet on its axis. Maybe somewhere in the back of my mind I thought it made the world go round, like gravity, it would keep us grounded. I think that it was something else that kept us together, some silent force or fear that nestled between every inch of me—of you too. I often wondered how long it would take to pack away my belongings—perhaps I could fit them all within the folds of a single suitcase, let my life collapse into itself to be shut and zippered. But for the time being, I shifted closer, comfortable beside you, our legs clumsily folding in on one another like jagged puzzle pieces. It was our fifth year—the anniversary marked by wood. Perhaps we would grow the way adjacent branches did, curling together, reaching upward. I imagined a renaissance, the resurrection of a dying stump as I shook dim reality from my shoulders—like a shiver—as though it were a gentle, yet unwelcomed, hand.

Fireworks and Mistakes

Rachel Tavani—Fiction Contest Runner-Up

My mother was an accidental arsonist.

Okay, that may be a bit dramatic, but she *did* almost burn down a house before, which is still pretty cool.

It's always odd to hear stories of our parents. To us, they are the people that changed our diapers in the wee hours of the morning or read to us at night. Hearing about them in any other context feels just...wrong. My mother has always been my mother, and I used to refuse to believe that she was anything but the woman who made the monsters under my bed go away. I couldn't envision her as a college student, drinking a cheap beer while at a party with frat boys. My mind couldn't fathom her walking down her high school's hallway, laughing at something her friends said as she tried to catch the attention of the boy she liked. It didn't seem possible that she was at one time small enough to fit on her father's shoulders as they lazily strolled through the Philadelphia Zoo, attempting to call out to any animal that would listen. Lisa Hibner, the woman who raised me, actually had a life of her own before I came along, which astounds me.

And yet, as we readied the dining room table for Thanksgiving dinner in our home in the suburbs of Southern New Jersey, I found myself reliving the past through my mother's eyes.

The dinner's company changed this year, and we talked about everything besides the one issue that pressed on my mind. My mother smiled as if everything was the same as she placed plate after plate onto the decorate tablecloth reserved only for fancy dinners. My Aunt Lori gingerly placed the fancy china

down as my grandmother filled glasses with water and wine, taking care to fill the glasses with the red liquid I found so gross. Eventually the four of us gathered around the table, and the conversations turned to the past, for the present wasn't the best place to be at the moment.

The stories were flowing quicker than I could shove into my eleven-year-old mind. Giggling over past boyfriends, mean teachers, and nosy neighbors served as the entertainment for our turkey dinner, with the appearance of our family's special stuffing. The only thing absent was my father.

My thoughts drifted to my now broken family as I tried to be pleasant. Sure, I knew that my dad worked a lot and didn't play with me as much as he used to, but I didn't think that warranted a divorce. I missed having his booming laugh rip through the house. Now there was only the sound of my mother crying when she thought I was asleep. I missed the mother I saw before me. One that didn't smile just because her family was around or bark out a forced laugh at the right time. As my family prattled on about events I wasn't alive to see, my mind wandered to happier memories where my family was whole. When my mother placed a plate of food in front of me, I stopped concentrating on what was and started picking at it.

"So I may have crashed the car over the median during my driving test, but at least I didn't almost set Mr. Jeffrey's house on fire," Aunt Lori stated with a quick laugh.

This immediately broke my reverie, which had previously been focused on the peas that my mother forced onto my plate in the hopes of me eating my vegetables. I made the executive decision that plotting to feed the peas to our cat Roosevelt could wait until I heard this tale. It wasn't likely that he'd eat the peas anyway, but I was at the point of trying anything before I had to

force them down my throat.

My mother's face blushed as she pushed back her light brown hair, coiffed just like she did it in the eighties during her law school years. I used to tease her about it, only to realize how much I missed it once she finally relented and changed her hairstyle when I grew older.

"That wasn't me, it was Paul, remember?"

"Who's Paul?" I asked, still pushing around the dastardly peas in the hopes they would disappear.

My grandmother responded. "Paul is your mother's cousin."

"And Jimmy was there too, right?" Aunt Lori asked, reaching for another roll.

My mother nodded. "And Paul's friend, John."

"Well, what happened?" I questioned, hoping that it would be a good story.

A far off look lit up my mother's face as she began the tale. "It was the 4th of July..."

And so the story unfurled, curling around our table and pulling us from the dining room set my mother won in the divorce to a warm summer afternoon in 1978.

~

Paul and his brother, Jimmy, were over their Aunt Gail's home to celebrate the 4th of July. All of the families in the row-homes on Peach Street were hosting a block party, filling the road with good home cooked food and better company. Beach chairs served as thrones for the matriarchs of the connecting homes. These women had their well-worked fingers on the pulse of everything in the neighborhood. Their opinions made or broke your reputation, and my grandmother's was the hardest to win over. Everyone would stop by the semi-circle of lounge chairs to

say hi, the equivalent to paying their respects to her. Depending on how wide of a smile you received from Gail Hibner, you could tell where you stood with her. The more teeth showing the better.

It was one of these smiles, all teeth, that graced Paul and Jimmy as they kissed their Aunt on her cheek and asked for permission to go play in the nearby park with her two daughters, Lisa and Lori.

"As long as you're all back by dark, then it's okay with me, sweetie," she stated, grin widening. Her auburn hair fell down her back in a long ponytail that she flipped over her shoulder before waving goodbye to her girls as they charged to the park.

Lisa stayed beside Paul's friend, John, the whole way as the group quickly closed the distance between Peach Street and the park two blocks away. There were five in total, a gang of kids that would soon live in infamy in my mother's neighborhood, consisting of Lisa, her sister Lori, her cousins Paul and Jimmy, and John, a very cute friend of her Paul's. They all jumped around and skipped, happy to be free of parental controls while soaking up all the liberty they could before the sun set.

Now, the jubilation they felt could also be attributed to the fact that somehow, in some unknown way, John got his hands on some fireworks, and he brought them with him to Lisa's house to impress her. He had a bit of a crush on her, and to prove the infatuation of his fifteen-year old heart, he decided that blowing something up was the absolute best way to capture Lisa's love and affection.

Let it be known that fireworks were illegal in New Jersey, despite the fact that John planned to utilize them in homage to his affection of Lisa. The fear of getting caught by the police, or worse- their parents, added an aura of danger that no prepubescent teen could ignore.

The park was silent, as if preparing for the scene that was about to occur on its expansive lawns. The distance of the park muted the party's cacophony, but it served as a reminder that the parents were still in close proximity. Only a few small houses lined the street next to the park, creating a wall between an area for childlike wonder and the block party.

"Okay, let's do this," John stated with a look of determination. He pulled out one of the largest fireworks from his book bag and jogged to the center of the grassy field. He carefully stood it up, pulled out a book of matches that he stole from his father, and quickly lit the fuse. John sprinted back to where his friends and his crush stood waiting, making sure to look as nonchalant as possible as he did so.

And then they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And they continued to wait until someone gained the courage to voice the worry they were all thinking. John bought a dud.

"Are you sure you did it right?" Paul asked, annoyed that they walked all the way over to the park for nothing. He didn't hesitate for wait for John's reply. Instead, he stomped his gigantic feet towards the failed firework.

The group of friends and family watched with baited breath as Paul attempted to light it again, this time with his lighter. But after it was lit, Paul didn't back too far away, deciding it would be more fun to watch from a closer distance as the firework streaked through the sky.

But again they waited.

And waited.

And they waited, until Paul let out a howl of frustration.

"Ugh! John, you moron! Only you would buy broken fireworks."

With an exasperated huff, Paul swung his leg toward the offending explosive, sending it skidding a few feet across the grass. But instead of rolling to a stop, the firework let off a loud explosive sound and rocketed through the field.

Paul's mouth fell open when he saw the firework fly a foot above the air as it gained ground, quickly zooming past the park limits and into residential territory.

"Oh my god!" Lisa screamed, clutching John's hand in fear. This action, of course, was exactly John wanted, so he nearly missed the firework's journey at the distraction of her touch.

All of the kids, with the exception of a distracted John, looked on in absolute horror as the firework rose in the air, crossed the street connecting to the park, and flew towards a house. By this time, Lori's eyes nearly fell out of her head they were so wide in terror.

The screams of the group in the park caused the man working on his lawn next to the house about to be hit with a small missile. He was watering his rose bushes as he watched a lit firework soar through the air with a hiss into his neighbor's open window. His next-door neighbor, Ed Jeffrey, had floral curtains hanging in his open window, flapping in the light evening breeze. Words cannot describe how much Ed Jeffery's neighbor hated those curtains, and it just so happened was these curtains, a garish bright purple set with ghastly-embroidered roses, which were now slowly catching on fire right before his eyes. For an agonizingly long second, the man thought about letting them burn, for they were truly the worst things he'd ever seen. But he decided to be a humanitarian and moved his hose from his prized roses to the flowered curtains, which were aflame.

At this point, Lisa's chest was heaving, though she found

it hard to breathe. She was shaking, despite the summer heat. Her hand was still locked on John's. Paul was running his hands through his thick blond hair, muttering about how he was too young to go to jail. The normally cheery tune of the ice cream truck created an eerie soundtrack for the kids' terror. They watched, faces paled, as the flames were doused.

It is important to know that the ice cream man who drove through Lisa and Lori's neighborhood used to allow kids to work on his truck for five dollars a day, and Lori just happened to be his favorite helper. Hearing Hank, the town ice cream man, pulling onto the street was perfect for her. As each of the other members in the group decided it was time to flee the scene of their crime, Lori bolted in the opposite direction, towards Hank.

"Hey, Lori, what's happenin'?" Hank asked, opening the back door for her so she could get into her scooping position. But she didn't have time for conversation. "Drive! Just drive, Hank!"

The elder gentleman scrunched his eyebrows at the ten year old screaming at him like he was a getaway driver and put his truck into gear, leading Lori away from the smoldering curtains. When she dared to glance back, she gasped at the sight of Mr. Jeffery's screaming and gesturing towards his charred curtains.

As the others came to a skidding stop around the corner from the block party that still raged on, Lisa's heart skipped a beat when she couldn't find her sister.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," she nearly screamed, copying the phrase her mother used when she wanted to use an expletive, "Where's Lori?"

They looked all around to find their fallen comrade.

That is, until they saw a police cruiser speed down the street, away from where they had fled just moments before.

"Holy shit," John muttered, getting a disapproving look from my mother. "They took her! They arrested her!"

They all stayed quiet for a moment, pondering the consequences of this new development.

"Well, better her than us, am I right?" Jimmy asked, earning him a smack in the back of the head from his brother. Lisa rested her head in her hands and groaned. "I'm going to have to tell my mother that we got her daughter arrested."

She felt a hand on her shoulder, attempting to comfort her. "Yeah, that's going to really suck for you."

Paul slapped Jimmy again for his idiotic comment and turned to his younger cousin. "Lisa, we'll be with you the whole time."

And so the young delinquents solemnly marched back to Peach Street, no longer enamored by the allure of danger. As soon as my grandmother spotted them, her wide smile vanished.

"What's the matter?" All of her friends hushed, waiting to hear gossip right from the source.

Lisa stepped forward, the boys standing resolutely behind her.

"Mommy, we sort of did something bad, depending on your definition of bad." Her foot twisted on the concrete as she refused to make eye contact with her mother.

Without another word, Gail scooped up her makeshift throne and grabbed her daughter by the ear. Ignoring Lisa's protests, Gail dragged her to their row home, marked with an ornate H for Hibner, their last name. The boys followed, their heads bowed in shame.

Once inside the house, Lisa was tasked with explaining everything that happened. At every word, Gail's eyes grew wider and wider.

“You set a house on *fire*?” She squealed, slamming her hands on the wooden kitchen table. The kids jumped at the sound, already on edge after today’s events.

Paul nodded, acting as the leader of their little gang of criminals. “And that’s not the worst of it, Aunt Gail...”

Gail paled, which was hard to do for someone with such a light, Irish complexion. “What do you mean that’s not the worst part? What could be worse than *setting a house on fire*?”

“Well, Lori was arrested for it,” Jimmy blatantly stated.

At this point, Gail turned a shade of red that tomatoes would envy. “*Arrested*? You let your ten year old sister get *arrested*?”

“To be fair, Aunt Gail, at that point it was everyone for his or her self,” Jimmy commented, not making anything better in the slightest.

“Oh my god! Jesus Chris- er, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Gail called her husband Rob inside, quickly letting him know what happened. Immediately, he sat down and dialed the police station to locate the whereabouts of his youngest child.

As he began to talk to the officer on the phone, the sound of the door opening caused everyone to still. Lori sauntered into her family’s kitchen completely ignorant of everyone staring at her presence in complete shock. Rob thanked the officer on the phone quickly and hung it back on the receiver without another word.

Unfortunately for Lori, her mother wasn’t so quiet.

“Where have you been, young lady?” She nearly screamed, one of her curls bouncing in her eyes.

The girl shrugged, refusing to look at her parents. “Just with Hank, mommy.”

“Lori, we already told them everything,” Lisa said, exasperated with her sister’s attempt at lying.

“Everything about what?” Lori asked, eyebrows scrunched together in faux confusion.

Gail wasn’t having any of that nonsense from her youngest daughter. “Don’t you dare lie to me, missy.”

At that point, the jig was up.

Everyone was grounded for weeks. John had to hand over all of the other fireworks, not that anyone involved in what was dubbed as the ‘Great Curtain Fire of ‘78’ would ever touch them again after the ordeal they went through.

~

My mind returned to the present as Aunt Lori and Mom were wiping tears of laughter from their eyes.

“I can’t believe you tried to pretend like everything was okay,” Mom giggled.

Aunt Lori chuckled with her. “Hey, I thought it was a good plan! I just didn’t know you were going to rat me out!”

“We thought you were arrested!”

My aunt simply shrugged her shoulders. “At the time, being arrested would have been better than Mom’s lecture.”

This sent us into another bout of laughter. Seeing my mother genuinely happy for the first time in months calmed the storm of anxiety that plagued me since my family broke apart. Although we were still piecing things back together, I finally knew that everything would eventually be okay. My mom would bounce back, with her bright smiles becoming more and more frequent. We’d laugh again.

As I came to this realization, they were off on another tale. I attempted to listen, but my mind was still thinking about the hot July summer in 1978, when a preteen Lisa Hibner was running through the streets of her small suburb.

It would always be weird for me to hear stories about the

childhoods of my parents. Every story is a window to their pasts that we could look through to catch a glimpse of who they once were. They allowed for me to see my mother in a carefree time of her life, giving me a respite from our current reality.

A reprieve that we both needed.

The woman who would grow up to raise me almost burned down a house.

And that's pretty awesome.



Midnight Flight

Kayla Smalling

Seven

Kate-Lynn Brown—Nonfiction Contest Winner

Abby and I became friends in the fifth grade, when fates such as best friends were determined by the class list. She and I could banter off each other with jokes and voices and antics until our faces ached. Abby wore all her emotions on her pale skin, reddening every time we got caught passing notes or Jack Kalin looked her way. That year we vowed to run together in gym class. Abby liked to run as fast and free as she could when the teacher assigned us three laps around the V tree—a school landmark that supposedly got its shape after being struck by lightning. I hated to run and begged her to slow down with me. When we ran Abby's way, she ended up in the nurse's office with her inhaler. We complemented each other. Abby was usually still a few paces ahead, I was a few behind.

Abby could do anything to me and I still wanted to be her friend. She told the boy with the mustard yellow t-shirt whose locker was next to hers about my nauseating crush on him. She hit me at a school dance in high school when I told her I wouldn't sneak out that night. But all that mattered were the days Abby declared me her best best friend over Gillian, Emily, and Shannon. We all competed for her.

It's hard to say what made Abby so compelling. There was the serious way she'd purse her thin lips and search my eyes when I asked for advice or had a problem, analyzing my body language as much as she did my words. Instead of having our parents drive us into town she'd come to my house and we'd walk from there—we went almost every Sunday to try a new scented shampoo. My favorite was Herbal Essences Totally Twisted in the purple bottle.

Abby's was VO5 Strawberries and Cream. And she was reckless and adventurous too. Impromptu water gun fights through the neighborhood matured into vegan scone making, but adventure was always at the core of Abby's heart. In the fifth grade we cut the hair off of all her Barbie's because we thought they looked better that way.

There were four colossal fights between Abby and I; three of them taking place in the three years of middle school. That was the toxicity of being a teenage girl.

In the sixth grade they all sat at Gillian's birthday party writing jokes in a composition notebook: "Kate-Lynn's not the sharpest tool in the shed." "She's not the most colorful crayon in the box." For almost two hours. If I hadn't complained they probably would have stopped. I was being too sensitive, they said, so no one would talk to me at the lunch table for three and a half weeks. Abby said she didn't like to fight over Christmas so she asked me for a truce—but made it very clear this didn't involve the other girls and we'd be in a fight again after Christmas break. I agreed to her terms, but the truce lasted into the New Year.

The summer before eighth grade they invited me to a park where Gillian was babysitting. The details are sharp. We sat in the wooden train car. I wore my favorite green cardigan, my lucky cardigan. "You're just a bitch and we decided we didn't want to be friends with you." They got up to play tag with the kids. I left. Abby went away to summer camp the next day. When she came back I knew I'd have to see her outside of school—we babysat for the same family. Abby and I agreed we wouldn't be awkward in front of the kids; and by the time they went to bed that first night we were talking and laughing.

When Shannon announced her family was moving to London in the middle of eighth grade the girls accused me of

abandoning her and getting Abby on my side. Abby blamed me for the way she distanced herself. Everyone was mad at her because of me; and in turn everyone was only mad at me. I don't think any of us were ever mad at Abby.

Abby was not the sole perpetrator, didn't play any more of a role than the other girls did, but it mattered more with her. Those other girls were temporary. I knew having bad friends was better than having no friends in middle school.

The group of friends changed but Abby and I did not: from a manipulative cartel of middle school girls—the meanest demographic on this earth—to a solid, supportive family of friends by the end of high school.

At that point our friendship had suffered through so much, been so beaten, that it was almost inevitable that it would blow up in our faces. It did, at the end of senior year. When we fought in high school, we'd usually just ignore each other for a few days until we forgot about whatever had upset us. I was genuinely afraid of Abby being mad at me—to me, losing Abby meant losing my other friends too. She would take everyone with her because that was always what had happened. She was bewitching.

I told Abby I might have feelings for our friend Will, and she lectured me on the dangers of intergroup dating. Then they began a secret fling, denying every accusation and deferring every question for a few months until they stopped seeing each other as quietly as they had started. I don't think I would have been mad if she just told me. Instead, Will licked my chin in a drunken attempt at a kiss and told me about Abby.

I sobbed in Will's basement a few days later as Matt and Luca looked on. That was where they had taken me. I wish they hadn't, but the boys didn't know what to do. It was an empty space

where we could sit and talk—and at eighteen that was all that mattered. Being near Will made me cringe. I was inconsolable. My heart was cracking and they were all there to witness it, as I sat on the floor with my back against the couch. I couldn't hold back as I relived every disagreement Abby and I had ever had, a timeline running through my head and out my mouth like a faucet. I apologized to them, told them we wouldn't be friends after that night, made them promise to not get too involved and promise not to leave me. I cried louder at how hard they tried to make me laugh. Haim's "Falling" came on, a song we listened to all summer, and Matt and Luca began to dance. Will joined them. They lip-synched and made fools of themselves. Matt grabbed the Rock Band microphone and Luca the plastic guitar. I half-laughed and half-cried. I stood up from the floor and let Matt move my arms back and forth in a pitiful dance.

The next morning Abby and I met at Starbucks. I had ordered us both iced green teas. We talked alone in a nearby park, where our elementary school Memorial Day celebrations had always been, and the boys ate breakfast in the dinner around the block. They were on standby for both of us. In the next week Abby and I talked for hours, walking through our town as the sun set. We confessed our grudges so we might let go of them. I refused to resolve things with Will—if I could only salvage one friendship, I had much more invested in Abby. No matter what I said, we were not done.

On the night before she left for college, Abby drove me home in her rickety blue suburban, Big Momma. As soon as we were alone in the car I cried—proud of where my friends were going but terrified to leave them behind. One second I was humming *The Lumineers*, the next I was exploding weighty breaths into the air.

“We’ll all be back for Thanksgiving!” I sniffled and laughed, dismissing my tears.

I don’t remember if Abby cried too. I needed her to tell me it would always be the same, that all of us would come home and go to the Millburn Deli, hike through Watchung, host potluck dinners and bonfires.

“It won’t ever be the same, Kate-Lynn. Even if we’re all in the exact same place, none of us will be the same next time.” After seven years, the friendship was over with those two sentences.

I appreciated the distance college gave us; but being so far removed from the situation made me grow resentful. More than resentful; I hated myself for letting someone put me through what Abby had. I hated her, finally.

In my dorm room I had a small sculpture Abby had made when we were seventeen. Two clay pillars twirled upwards, never touching but always in movement with each other. The green glaze that dripped down the sides was the same color as the sea glass earrings she made me in the first weeks of our friendship. One week I decided I wanted to smash the sculpture; it would be some poetic moment, a symbolic ridding of negativity. On a Saturday night I placed the clay piece in my sweatshirt pocket and gathered two friends. We walked until we were out of sight of the Public Safety car’s headlights on the prowl for debauchery. I took the sculpture and threw it at a solid tree on the side of the road. I expected sparks; a loud noise, hundreds of little pieces absolutely shattered.

It bounced off the tree and split in two anticlimactic pieces.

The night before Thanksgiving Abby invites us all over to her house. I must have been there ten thousand times, but I

haven’t been to the house at the intersection of Devon Road and Sweet Briar in almost four years. We’re seniors in college now. Abby’s little sister Sophie opens the door and I give her a hug. She just shaved her head and has a nose ring now. Mr. and Mrs. MacMillan sit in the front room with their friends and I give a weak wave. Sophie points through the kitchen, “They’re in the playroom.” All five of the MacMillan kids are grown and they still call the sitting room in back of the house the playroom.

They’re all there. Abby, Matt, Luca, Will. Matt has two friends from school with him. Later the others will stop by and we’ll open a bottle of red wine. The house smells like it always did—like roasted vegetables and wilted organic spinach. Emily is there too. She and Abby are still best friends; I guess in the middle school games she won the prize title. I haven’t seen or spoken to Emily since the middle of our freshman year. We both knew when we graduated that would be the end of our friendship. I sit between Emily and Abby on the couch and I am transported. I thoughtfully chew on a pack of peanut M&M’s, leftover from Halloween.

We all talk about the milestones: Abby’s Amnesty International work, my upcoming graduation, Will’s parent’s new book club, older siblings moving out and getting engaged and younger siblings going off to college. Several times there are pauses. There never used to be pauses. Matt comments during one of them: “That good ol’ back from school chatter!” It is like we are strangers at a bad dinner party and not the group of rowdy teens who used to skinny dip in a quarry on the side of a highway.

Under Missile Attack: A memoir [An Excerpt]

Dorit Gabber—Nonfiction Contest Runner-Up

In 1988, Rani and I were married in a modest wedding in a synagogue. Rani was 26 and I was 22. In 1990, we rented an apartment in Ramat-Gan, a desirable suburb only three miles away from Tel-Aviv. In fact, it was such a desired area that apartment prices were sky-high. Long-term renting was a legal impossibility in Israel and only year-long apartment rentals were available. At the end of each year, the landlord was entitled to raise the rent or discontinue the contract entirely. When we bought an apartment of our own in Kfar-Saba, we were very excited.

Kfar-Saba was a more distant and less desirable suburb of Tel-Aviv, about 15 miles away. It was nicknamed “the Green Kfar-Saba” because the apartment buildings were separated by large lawns. Commuting to work in Tel-Aviv could take up to an hour and a half, but apartment prices were reasonable and the town attracted young couples and new immigrants.

When we were waiting to move into our new apartment, the Middle East went into turmoil. On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Five days later, Operation Desert Shield began with the first U.S. forces arriving in Saudi Arabia. On November 29, a U.N. ultimatum authorized the U.S.-led coalition to drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait if Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein did not withdraw his troops by January 15. Previously, Saddam went on television and threatened to “make fire eat up half of Israel” if the United States were to attack Iraq. Iraq and Israel do not

share a border and were not engaged in a conflict at the time, but Saddam wanted Israel to retaliate for his attacks which could splinter the coalition between the United States and its Arab allies.

We were scheduled to move into our apartment in February. When I called the manager in December, he said, “How can I move you, ma’am? I have no men, they took them to the war, what do you want? I’m not asking for more money, believe me, I have nobody here.” As it turned out, the Israeli government had activated reserve duty forces, which included our movers, and moving day was postponed indefinitely. This was unfortunate for us because Kfar-Saba was surrounded by Arab villages and I, like most Israelis, believed that Saddam would not shoot missiles at Muslims.

In November, the Israeli government issued a call for the entire population to pick up gas masks from distribution centers. Other than that, life went on as usual: Rani and I went to work every morning, and every Saturday we had lunch at my in-laws’. From there we would drive to Tel-Aviv to enjoy an evening with friends at a cafe or a restaurant. Everyone talked about the war and about Saddam. Military experts said that one thing was certain, his missiles could never reach Tel-Aviv. We were just too far. A man who read the tarot cards in Tel-Aviv beaches confirmed what the military experts said. Even the great Lubavitcher Rebbe from Brooklyn encouraged his followers to fly to Israel because it was the safest place on Earth.

I was not so sure about that. Someone on the radio asked if he could teach himself to not be afraid of death, and the therapist said, “No. It is a mechanism that protects us.” I was also looking for a way to teach it to myself. My other option was to run away, but I had nowhere to go. This was my home. Many people didn’t

feel the same way and left Israel. The airport was busier than ever.

On January 9, 1991, talks between Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz and Secretary of State James Baker failed. In Israel we started the countdown to January 15, when the ultimatum would expire and a war would start.

Tuesday, January 15

The day we feared came. Rani stayed at home because Tel-Aviv University was closed. He was a practical computer-science PhD student in a department populated mostly by theoreticians. Therefore, he was asked to teach the undergraduate students.

On January 15, he happily stayed at home to work on his thesis while I took the bus to Tel Aviv. I had been working as a computer programmer for Hilan, a leading company for computing payrolls, pensions, and mortgages for large companies. My team was responsible for updating the software according to government laws and individual contracts between our clients and their employees.

When I came to work, I went straight to my office, which I shared with my friend Shoshana. She was about 35 years old, a mother of three, and like an older sister to me. Shoshana and I were in charge of different parts of the software, but we brainstormed together when one of us got stuck. This morning she was helping a customer when her youngest daughter, Shimrit, came home from school and called her. "Shimrit, stop calling me! Orit and Adi should be back from school any minute, but don't call me anymore, do you understand?"

In the early afternoon, Ami, the head of the maintenance department, gave us a mandatory tour of the basement. Hilan

was located in a tall, modern building in the industrial area of Tel-Aviv. Wall-to-wall carpeting, modern furniture, and even the lighting was designed to impress customers. Therefore, nothing prepared me for what I saw as I stepped out of the elevator. I walked through a heavy door sealed with a thick rubber gasket, and found myself in a cement hall with a long row of purification showers. "So that's what a shelter for a chemical war looks like," I thought, "like Auschwitz!" I stepped back and allowed my colleagues to go ahead of me. While Ami explained how safe we were, I made my escape to the elevator and waited for everyone to join me.

The radio was on the entire day, announcing the news loudly. Employees from other departments came to say goodbye before going home, but we could not leave yet. David insisted that we finish all our work because "who knows when we'll be back."

When I finally headed home, I stopped at the supermarket and bought supplies for the war: masking tape, a loaf of bread, bottles of water, and canned food. Rani was upset. "What are we going to do with all of this food once the war is over?"

The doorbell rang and our next door neighbors came to say goodbye.

"We are leaving to our parents in the north," they said. "We heard he is targeting Ramat-Gan and we have little children."

"Is he really targeting Ramat-Gan?" I asked Rani. "No, Ramat-Gan is too small. He will target Tel-Aviv and some missiles will fall in the sea and some in the suburbs."

Thursday, January 17

At two a.m., the telephone rang. I sleepwalked to the kitchen to pick it up. At the time, cell phones were not available in Israel, and very few people had cordless phones. After the war I found out that families with young children bought portable radios and cordless phones right before the war. However, because most of our friends were young couples we didn't realize how unequipped we were for the war. The only telephone in our apartment was in the kitchen so now I walked there.

"Hello?"

"How can you sleep? The war started!" My mother-in-law was a history teacher and was excited to see history happening before her eyes.

"The war started," I announced to Rani when I was back in bed and then I closed my eyes.

In the morning we woke up as usual, but we faced a new order. When we turned on our television, we found out that the coalition led by the American Air Force attacked Iraq at two a.m. and a state of emergency was declared all over Israel. The public was asked to remain at home, unpack the gas masks, and prepare a sealed room.

The underground shelters were built for conventional wars, and we were instructed not to use them. Instead, we were told to choose a room and seal it. We sealed the bedroom because the living room had a glass door. However, our only television was old and heavy and rested on a small coffee table in the living room. There was no room for it in our bedroom, but it did not bother us because we believed we wouldn't be attacked by missiles.

Following the government instructions, we sealed the bedroom's windows and door, and protected the glass windows with criss-crossed masking tape. We unpacked the boxes from the distribution center. Inside each box we found an Atropine

injection, which is antidote for nerve gas; powder to neutralize Mustard Gas; and a gas mask. The gas mask came with an active carbon filter that had to be screwed on the mask. The air intake hole of the carbon filter was closed with a plug to prevent deterioration of the active carbon. We were instructed to leave the plug on when the mask was not in use.

In the evening, Rani and I went to visit his parents. On CNN we watched American generals pointing to a map of Iraq and talking about their victories of the day. Geography and history were always a mystery to me. I felt dizzy just looking at a map, but even I could tell that these generals had magnificent victories. And if I had any doubt, Israeli military experts followed and said that, "The Americans already won the war. There may be another battle or two, but the war is practically over."

We went home in a state of euphoria. Such good news! The war was over! For the first time in months, I fell into a deep sleep. I woke up to a piercing sound that was both familiar and unfamiliar. Somehow I knew this sound meant danger!

"Rani! Wake up! The siren is off! Rani!" We rushed to put on the gas masks and seal the door. Intuitively, I jumped from our bed and turned off the light. "So the airplanes won't see us," I explained.

"What airplanes? Missiles don't come in airplanes. Could you please turn on the light?"

Okay, okay. I got confused. The all-clear siren sounded and we went back to sleep. The air raid siren woke us again, and once more we took the gas masks and put them on. When I woke up for the third time, I was sleepy and not focused. Automatically, I reached for the mask, wore it, and tightened the straps. Then I took a deep breath, but instead of air I felt the cold rubber of the mask clinging to my cheeks. All at once the adrenaline rushed to

my body; I was awake and my heart was pounding. Now I knew what happened - the plug was still on the filter canister. I tried to reach for the plug, but it was too tiny and my fingers could not find it. I couldn't see it through the holes for my eyes.

I tried to loosen the straps, but the closure was in the back of my neck and that would require another person. My heart was beating faster and faster.

I turned to my right. Rani was sitting on the bed, waiting for the all-clear siren. He was so sleepy that his neck bent down towards his chest and his eyes were almost shut. Unable to speak I grabbed him and shook him violently. Immediately, he picked up his head and turned to me. He looked like a monster with the grotesque gas mask on his head. Then he reached for the plug with one hand, and suddenly air started flowing into my lungs. What a feeling! I took one deep breath after another. I could not get enough of it!



D-Day Time and Tide

Nancy Dreyfus

Third Generation Holocaust Survivor

Hannah Kohn

First

I didn't realize how strongly you felt
Until I uttered
(With a nonchalance never to be had again)
"I want to learn German."
It was one of those topics
I assumed was safe:
An education pursuit;
A cultural endeavor.
I had only seen you as my kind-hearted grandfather
Endlessly proud of your granddaughter's accomplishments.
But at that moment, a silence shrouded the room
While you tried and failed to conceal your disappointment.
After an eternity, you looked at me and said:
"I don't buy German products."

Second

We're all aware
That despite your temper
You are overflowing with love
And have never been too full of pride
To come into my room at night
Kiss me on the forehead
And say you're sorry.
But there is something that seems impossible for you to shake.

There are associations embedded
In the deepest realms of your grey matter
That are at times pushed through your vocal chords
And appear almost as if there is a separate entity
speaking from within you.
I say "Germany"
You say "Nazi"
I say "Holocaust"
You say "Germans"
As if they are synonymous.
"But they are not", I say.
You shrug, and change the subject.

Third

Grandpa, I know there is no doctor in the world
Who can heal the wounds
Inflicted upon you as a child.
I cannot comprehend the fear you experienced
When you were starving to death in the ghetto
Nor will I ever be able to embody
the sheer hatred of the Nazi party
You have every right to feel.

Dad, I realize you were hearing
Of the torture of the Jewish people
Before you could even speak
And I know that just as many of my behaviors
Are reflections of you
You were influenced by the experiences
Of your own parents.

But I want to travel to Germany one day
And I want to talk about German culture
Separately from conversations about
Nazis and the holocaust
Because no, they are not the same.

I have German friends
I know German Jews
I look at a German person
And I see a person who is German
Not a German who is a fascist
I see a human being
Who does not deserve to be hated
Because they were born in Germany
Just as we do not deserve to be hated
Because we are Jewish.

I love you Grandpa, and I understand your pain
I love you Dad, and I understand the origins of your revulsion
But please try to understand me
When I tell you
I still want to learn German.

neighborhood march

Andy Bates

my dog isn't gonna hurt you
honestly couldn't if she wanted to
she's blind enough
she could have her own dog
at this point too deaf to be called
unless you shout and
her arthritic little hips move
as if her back half were
made of tinkertoys

I know that's not what you see
you see the German in me
you see the Shepherd in her
ears that stick up like riot shields
fur the color of firehose blast

the alarm on your face
apprises me of the tableau
we've inadvertently staged:

black & white snapshots
of the '60s made visceral
Birmingham sidewalk and
asphalt Black man
on the sharp end of a dog
with a pointy face aimed
straight at him fiercely

loyal to his master history
textbook viciousness

I am suddenly worried
you'll think I wanted this
that my dog might seem like
my open-carry protection

“she won't bite!” I say
more smiley than I need to be
I stress the word she
hoping to assuage your fear
by leaning on cultural dismissals
of bitches and their potential
to pose a serious threat

with that information, you do seem
somewhat relieved but even so
I get the sense there's basically no way
to make this a great experience

so I suppose I could have said
“My dog isn't going to hurt you
 any more than she has already”



Women's March NYC

Megan Diriwachter

It Is, It Is

Kass Mattingly

Gender dysphoria is the formal diagnosis used by psychologists and physicians to describe people who experience significant distress with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth.

Dysphoria.

Dysphoria is....

It's a whip cord live wire wrapped around your throat. Sparks fly every time your voice skips too high, even as you struggle to deepen it. No else can see the burn marks as they brand their way into your skin. It's bad memories of a cracking voice and singing soprano your senior year that last longer than any scar.

It's buying jeans a size too large in a shape that will never fit your body, no matter how much medicine and science you pour into it. It's buying a belt and pulling it so tight it cuts into your hips, just to keep them on your body.

It's blood where it shouldn't be and blood in your mouth when you bite your tongue to keep from screaming at how wrong it is. This didn't use to happen, you hate it, you've always hated it, why doesn't it just stop. It's knowing five different ways to remove bloodstains and wondering when you'll have to use that information because someone hurt you.

It's sheer blinding panic every time you meet someone new. Will this be the time it goes wrong? The time they decide it's

easier to recoil than understand? The time their smile turns into a knife they use to cut your throat? It's anxiety and fear and being sure there's always some else there to serve as a safeguard. Or a witness.

It's...god, don't even try swimming. Never mind how much you used to love it. It's better to just not go at all.

It's wearing oversized hoodies like armor and praying that it's not too hot that day. Wearing your binder like a bullet proof vest and begging whatever cruel son of a bitch that gave you this messed up body that someone doesn't shoot you in the head. It's always fighting to breathe, only sometimes it's because you're compressing your chest cavity. The rest of the time it's for fear of someone noticing you're not.

It's walking alone at night with your keys between your knuckles, the only weapon you have besides your teeth. Knowing the numbers and the statistics; you're not stupid. 41%, 19%, 27%. You've heard the horror stories of others deciding people like you don't deserve existence. It's flinching every time you round a corner.

It's crying out to be touched and sewing your own mouth shut because you know you will be met with revulsion. It's never wanting to be touched again, not even by yourself.

It's curling into a corner, staring blankly, numbly at a wall, because it's all over your computer, your news feed. Because one of the very few other people in this world who could have possibly understood is dead. It's ruled a suicide but you know that's bullshit. They were killed with words and looks and hate.

It's the endless struggle of the bathrooms. Do you go in

the one the rules tell you to use and get staring eyes and whispers?
Or the one you want to use and risk a fist in your face and a foot
in your ribs? A fifty-fifty chance or waiting hours til you get home.
It's deciding to wait.

It's a timer on your phone telling you, "Go change. Do
not pass go, do not collect 200 dollars. NOW." You remove
your binder, knowing the bodily consequences if you don't and
wondering if your rib structure is more important than your
sanity. It's wondering how long it will take you to earn enough
to never have to wear one again and thinking that it would be so
much faster to just take a box cutter to your chest.

It's finally, fucking finally, escaping. Going to college and
nobody knows. Nobody knows because you killed your past self
and buried them. It's going home for breaks and and being forced
into the grave you dug for part of yourself. Every old nickname
and missed pronoun is another handful of dirt flung in your face.

It's victory some days. Sometimes you block it out.
Sometimes it blocks you out. It's defeat other days.

The Rhythm of Beauty and Oddities

MJ Velten

The way the bar lights shine just before
closing, and you're too many in
to do much but appreciate the unique
and individual beauty of everything
from the hair of your fellows as it shines
under the glow, to the glasses
and goblets, how they take the light
and perpetuate it, throwing dancing spots across the low
ceilings as the bartends move them about

How the spring coat of an animal, soft to the touch
as it parts around your carding fingers like a river
around stones, feels after a long day
of hand use for pursuits far less worthwhile
than this, and the little movements of
your companion as they settle in comfortably
will fulfill you in manners no long day or work ever could

When midnight swims in cool ocean sprays
as you wade further away from the contrast
of still muggy air that hangs about the shoreline,
become blessings in themselves,
the rejuvenation felt being unlike any
holy water that anointed your screaming head
all that time ago, in that this
purification may take, and you come to realise
this will be a night for the books

Between the pages that are between the bindings
that rest between the ends which are in turn
among the shelves of bookcase
after bookcase there lay knowledge, endless
and intriguing, but what is exchanged armchair
to armchair, stuffed to bursting with downy
fluff in a quiet store corner- therein lay
the real treasure, never doubt that

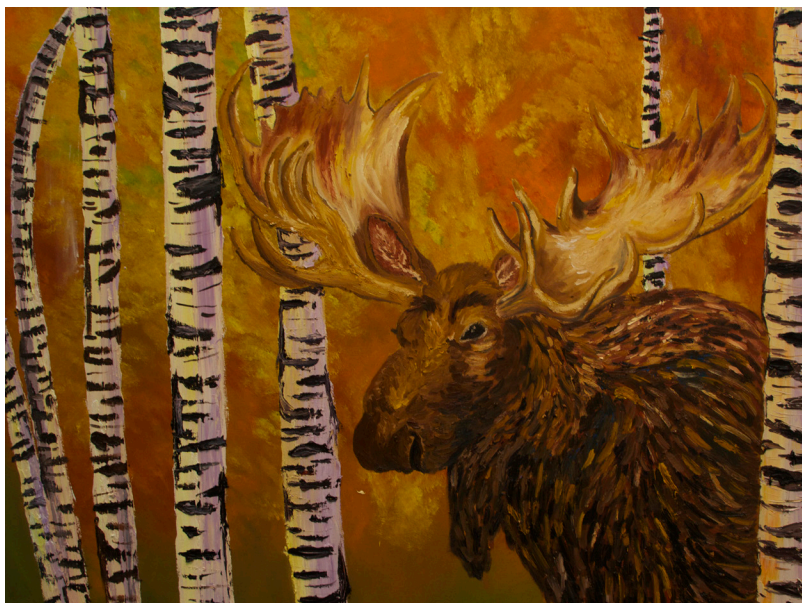
Under fairy lights giving a gentle glow
distorted by steam curling up from
dark mugs clasped in fleece covered hands,
you speak an endless stream of
thoughts-cum-murmurs, folding in
on themselves and surging forward again,
and you think you've got this down now

Remember these things, memories aglow
with laughter and wonder, the kinds that feed
the soul till it feels like capacity
has been reached, only to find
there to be infinitely room when you find
the people, the places and things
that allow for growth

Cast aside what has ailed you, close off
to the poison that seeped from lips
and eyes toward you, this is hard- but
while the process of unknowing has
a high price, the cost of your loved ones

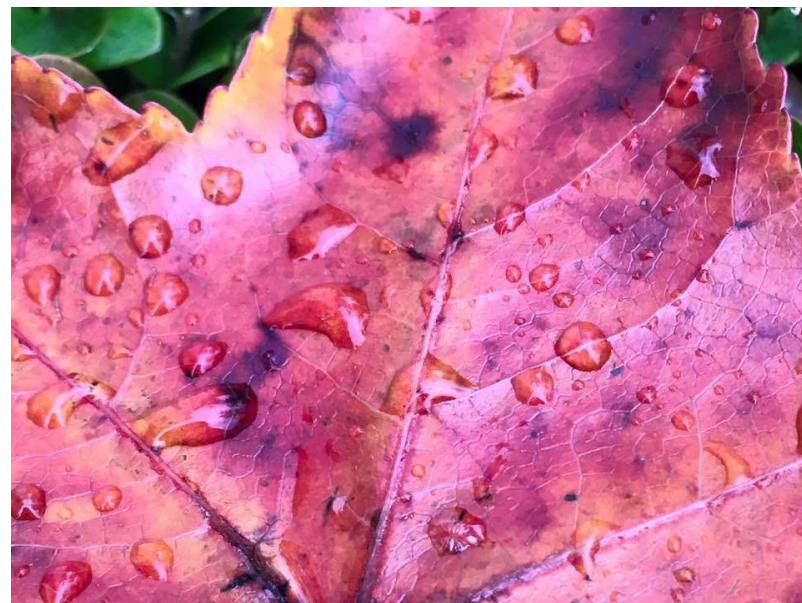
having to unlearn parts of you they loved
is nothing anyone should pay

Remember the good
Set aside the bad
Stay, for your sake and ours



Untitled

Dominique Butler



Untitled

Katie Revelas

Patchwork Autumn

Tiana Rosa

You awake like a forest fire, eager and violent. Your head buzzes and your gears turn, snapping the webs apart in your inner chambers. The vibrations of your activation shake the bits of rust off your arms and legs. Your wires ache, throbbing with electricity, your body twitching with each shock. At last, your monitor turns on.

And after that, you notice immediately something has gone awry.

Half of your field of vision is fragmented, a kaleidoscope of all the present possibilities, each shard a distorted copy of reality. Then again, you ask yourself, what is reality but a faulty rendering program? You then ask yourself, what is a rendering program? A small short circuit of your left hand snaps you back to the present moment. Something in your mind starts thinking for you.

ASSESS PRESENT LOCATION

You look around. The intact half of your vision shows you tall trees circling a clearing and leaves everywhere. It feels like a newborn, plain and shining from sunlight.

RECALL OBJECTIVE

You wait. There is no follow up from your automatic processing. You decide to think. You try to remember. The data you pull up looks like a VHS tape. You see yourself fall and fall and fall and fall and fall and fall and-

You stop the video before you get stuck on a loop.

CHECK INVENTORY

You wonder why you didn't check inventory before recalling your objective since something in your inventory may

remind you what your objective is. But who are you to question automatic processing? You detect something in your right hand. It's a playing card. Nine of Spades. Something painful rises through your system. A virus of a memory.

You remember that you are an angel and divine and a failure.

Your monitor flickers and words flash across the screen.

WHAT DO FAILED ANGELS DO?

THEY FALL.

You walk past tree after tree, the failure you are exponentially increasing with each step. This existence has taken an extreme toll on your self-esteem and you just want to be completely deleted from this world, but you continue. You continue because you must recall your objective, even as a failure you must do so and then maybe afterwards you can work on deleting yourself.

Finally, you make your way to the sidewalk of a suburban street. Souls residing in flesh of all sizes and forms move past you, some in cars, others exposed. You become self-conscious of your mix-matched plates of bronze and brass, faded into different shades of brown and orange. You do your best to move out of people's way, but they all pay no mind even as you step right in front of them. They naturally make their way around you, a river rushing around the rocks in the middle. And god knows you're a big damn rock of a being. Or at least slightly intimidating since you stand a foot or two above all those that walk past you.

After a few dozen people you come to the conclusion that they cannot see you. Occasionally you also see those of your kind. An angel taking form as a ball of fire or as a dog with dozens of eyes. Each one that notices you immediately looks past you, shunning your existence. You are no more than a ghost. Are you a ghost? you ask yourself. Are angels ghosts? Are ghosts angels?

You are lost in the algorithms of the problem when you hear someone yelling. You scan the area, houses lining the sidewalk, a road to your immediate left, a lawn to your right. No one is around. The yelling continues.

“Raise your sight, divine friend!” You lift your monitor upwards to the second story of a house. In the window you see a man, arms frantically waving to catch your attention. “Holy reflecting light bound within form, please come here!”

You see no reason to ignore his call. If anything, it is your job to adhere to any human’s plea. You go inside the house.

“Welcome, welcome shard of light!” Upon closer inspection you see he is very thin, each bone showcasing itself, yet he is overflowing with energy. His eyes wide and ablaze. He starts poking and prodding your overlapping plates. “My, my, you are made of wondrous wishes! You look to be a patchwork of autumn itself!” You say thank you and are about to ask how he can see you when he snatches the card out of your hand.

“So this is the conundrum that bounds you to this earthly plane. No worries, blessed seasonal stitches, I shall return the light to you once again!” He flips the card over and over between his fingers, rubbing along the surface and edges, getting in as much as possible. You are in awe. This feels familiar. You ask him if you had met before. “Of course we have, but that was another story in another time. This now your tale of spun words with the same eager audience.”

You ask him how he is so confident and qualified for the job.

“Ah, a fine inquiry from one who resides high and quite justified for incense thin minds.” You are not sure if he insulted you as he walks around the corner to yell up a flight of stairs. “Mother Mary!”

“What?” A woman yells back from above.

“How long have I been dwelling on this world since my birth?”

“You are twenty seven-years-old, Samuel.” Samuel staggers back gripping his shirt.

“Twenty seven? I have only a few thousand years left! There are still threads to tie and weave of fates left to sleep in closed bottles. Night stands parched of ambitions of the hope she wishes will drown us all. God himself has snoozed his alarm!” He regresses to babbling until you urge him to continue helping you. “Greatest apologies of my inconsiderateness! This way.” He leads you past a clutter of objects lining the shelves and halls, varying from empty picture frames to beanie babies. Some organized into boxes and labeled, others haphazardly tossed everywhere. An attempt at cleaning up paused or completely forgotten. You enter what was originally intended to be a living room, except it is stacked high with books and crayons and cards covering the floor and sofa like a lumpy blanket. He manages to tip through it all perfectly. You shuffle your large feet to push the items aside to avoid breaking them. He turns to you.

“You see what this card is?” You tell him it is a nine of spades.

“Exactly!” You feel proud of yourself for a moment then- “...what they want you to think!” He jumps onto the couch, kicking off crayons and knickknacks. “This! This! How blind it all makes you as your eyes seek what it does not know! It is no different than a sparrow’s song finding its way to the artist’s hand, but even then the final product will be absolute rubbish. Not to mention red is ugly in solid stains.” He holds the card right in front of you. On close inspection you realize the card has changed. It is now an eight of clubs. You are confused and insist that it was really a nine of spades before.

“I am certain it was! This would not be present if it were not something else in the past. However, it is not accurate of sound to call it mere brand name. You must claw deeper into the heart of the beast. Or in this case-” he swiftly pulls out a book, Cartomancy, from the middle of a tall stack, leaving it still standing. He watches it teeter and stabilize before kicking the whole thing down with his foot. “...divination!” He holds the now eight of clubs in between his index and middle fingers as he flips through the pages and slams his hand down on one. “Eight of clubs! Movement! Quick Action! News! Hope! You!” He throws the card back at you and you catch it, with a 0.5% margin of error. “You have survived the nine of spades! You have survived disaster and death itself! By moving forward you shall return back to your true state.”

You ask him what you should be doing now.

“What you should do? You are the heaven-sent and closest to god, not I.”

Before you leave, you tell him he should eat. His smile wavers, but catches itself.

“Is that a new commandment?” You tell him it is more of a suggestion and that you are not one to command others. He laughs.

“A suggestion from the heavens is still fairly heavy, graceful incarnation of fall.” A short spark in your left shoulder goes off. You wonder if he knows or if he knew all along or if he’s just continuing the theme of his speech. He sighs. “I consider your suggestion as a blessing. I will do my best to make use of your benevolence.” You smile back at him, or at least you want to, but you don’t have a face to smile with. Instead, you flip a switch on the side of your screen. A smiley face appears and scatters into smaller frames across the cracks. You look like a fly, tons of small

eyes reflecting the same image, a freak show. He laughs so hard that he grips his abdomen and bangs his fist on the wall, using it as support for his now weakened frame. It freaks you out a little.

“A show! My God! A gift of laughter!” More gasping laughs. “Now off, as it suits your kind!” He shoos you off and you make your way out of the house. As you turn away the last thing you hear is the woman say, “Is it true? Do you really want to eat something, dear Samuel?” between her sobs.

You are walking on an overpass. Cars transfer the human souls along at great speed and distance. They serve their purpose better than you. You tell yourself to not be so harsh on yourself, that your supposed failure has led you to a soul that believes in you. That that soul has filled you with...inspiration? Motivation? No. Well it is something that keeps you going. It is something that keeps you going through the overpass and into the overcrowded streets of the city. You try to keep yourself small, crossing your arms across your metal chest and tiptoeing here and there as to avoid squishing people that can’t see you. You look very silly.

You look so silly in fact, that you decide to call God, or more specifically, send him a text message. You stop and the words you type internally light up on your monitor, a dim gold.

HI GOD.

DON’T I LOOK FUNNY? CURLING MY FRAGMENT OF DIVINITY AS TO NOT ALARM THE HUMAN SOULS YOU WATCH OVER. ISN’T IT SILLY? I THINK SO.

SEND

You wait a second and then another and realize it has been way too long. God replies immediately or at least sends some response not necessarily to what you said or asked. But there is nothing. You stand curling around yourself and continue to

stand there as you see humans pull up their hoods and open their umbrellas. Drops fall on the top of your screen and the sides of your arms. It is raining hard and you want to rust and rot away.

You are not given the opportunity to do this. Instead you are called to.

“Hey! You! Over here!” However you do not know you are being called to and think this is just the usual soundtrack of the city playing incidentally over your misery. When it continues for a good minute you turn your monitor. It is a woman, garbed in cheap polyester robes, sitting in front of a small folding table with the sign “FORTUNE TELLER – CARTOMANCY READINGS” on it, yelling straight at you. You scan around you quickly before pointing to yourself, asking for clarification. “Yes, you! Tall clunky thing! Over here!”

You hobble over, the rainwater sloshing inside your system. You wonder if this is what lava lamps feel like. You are glad you did not choose that for your earthly incarnation. Once you are in front of her, she looks you up and down, squinting her eyes, one you assume to be a glass eye because it only looks straight. Through a quick scan, you determine it does not have the same qualities as a human eye.

“Why you look like a mess, child?” This throws you off so you politely inform her that you may look like a slightly dysfunctional robot, but you are in fact an angel. You tell her that this form is more efficient and that parts are easier to replace. “Yeah, okay, whatever.” You now consider this situation to be a literal test of patience as your patience gauge in the right hemisphere of your monitor starts rising. “Anyway, there’s something you got in your hand that is of interest to me, may I see it, child?” You hand her the eight of clubs. She glances over it, not as impressively as the previous soul, SAMUEL. Samuel. Why did

you recall it in capital letters?

“Just as I thought, you’ve got yourself in a whole lotta trouble recently, haven’t you?” You told her that at this point that you being in trouble has become a universal constant and you can never escape from it. “Wow, pretty pessimistic for an angel.”

PATIENCE GAUGE 40%

“Anyway, the reason why I tell you that is cause of this card here, no one really just carries around a card for no reason.” You are carrying one for no reason or at least one you have no memory of. “They carry for one of two reasons: as a memento or something to give.” =You look down at the eight of clubs she has in her hand. You think about how it serves as a terrible memento because you still can’t remember where you’re supposed to go. Wait, when did you realize you were going somewhere? Where?

You realize you’ve started to overheat. The rain hitting your exterior starts to steam away, you are slowly turning into a walking smoke and mirrors show. The woman in front of you has not noticed. She has been talking, but you have not been listening to save on power. She is asking you a question.

RESPOND YES

You thank your automatic processing for taking over, a fallback system for when things are getting to be too much. She has given you back your card and taken out a set of her own. They look like any old playing cards, worn at the edges from repeated use. She is shuffling the cards and whispering to herself. Then she is asking you something.

CUT DECK

You cut the deck of 52 cards in half. She puts the two halves together. She closes her eyes and wiggles her fingers over the deck. You ask yourself if this is how she makes her livelihood. You want to ask God why the living wage is not higher so she would not have to do this anymore. Another spark goes off in

your right wrist. You wonder if the rain is causing severe internal damage. You wonder if it's for the best at this rate. She draws out four cards face down in front of her. Then she turns them over one by one, like a photographs that she is scared to see-

ALARM ONE ALARM ONE ALARM ONE

Your internal network starts blaring electronic hymns, overlapping and distorted. Thousands of church sounds clashing into each other through o's and r's. Your time is almost up. Up? When was there a time limit? you ask yourself. You don't have time to answer.

SCAN CARD SPREAD

Nine of Spades. Eight of Clubs. Jack of Hearts. Ace of Hearts.

You slur your apologies, the external steam and the internal loud synth bells tripping up your words. You start running, the woman's words chasing after you.

"Find the Heart! The Heart!"

There are approximately seven people in the waiting room of the hospital when you slip in, a walking fire hazard of wet electrical workings and divine calling. You half expect the hospital staff to kick you out as you take a moment to re-charge yourself from clamoring across 39 blocks. You are glowing as the steam stuck to you subsides. Oranges and golds and browns breathing in sync. No one approaches you. You are a ghost once again.

You journey further into the hospital, doctors and nurses in white coats and blue smocks blend and spread into a sky blue colored strip up and down the sterile white hallways. You feel like you are flying again. Except when you're flying you feel complete, but you do not yet feel whole. You drag your feet all over the first floor then the second then the third. By the fourth floor, your glow

has become a dull ache. You let yourself fall back and slide down a wall of a hallway, decorated with various crayon drawings. This floor is more colorful than the other floors you realize. Were all the floors like this? You ask yourself. Were you too dull to notice?

You stay there as the building's air ventilation hum starts to sound just like the buzz of your chest, mundane and disappointed. A child runs by you. Moments pass. A child runs by you from the other direction. Another moment.

REALIZE

You replay the footage of the past two minutes. Child one. Child two. Child one and Child two have same exact physical features. Child one and Child two are same child. Your information processing must have taken a toll from the rain for you to be so slow to get that.

You scan up to see the child running frantically around, between different rooms, searching for something. The child's eyes are stretched wide open, starting to tear up. This is not a happy search. This is desperation.

EMPATHIZE

You do not need to be told this. You feel terribly for this child. When they come to pass you a third time, you stop them. You ask them what they are looking for. For a moment it does not appear that they hear you as they pitter-patter past you, but then, as suddenly as they appeared in your existence, they stop and take a few steps backwards until they are in front of you.

"A card." You see they are missing a front tooth, it splits their sad smile into two crooked halves. They remind you of wings. You ask them what kind of card. They dig into their pocket and pull out a pile of cards. They squat in front of you as they shuffle and sort the cards on the floor. A nurse passing by rolling a metal cart glances over at the two of you, but pays no mind. The child groups the playing cards by suits. In one pile, they put all 13

spades, in another 13 diamonds, but for clubs...

“There’s only 12 clubs. I don’t have the 8.” You ask to clarify, but did they say they are missing the eight of clubs? They nod. You’re so excited, you’re beeping. Then you stop, embarrassed. The child giggles. You overdramatically place the card you’ve been clutching onto the past hour into their small hands. They gasp. Then wrap their arms around your neck for a big hug. You crank your neck a few millimeters so they avoid crashing into your monitor, so they don’t hurt themselves on the glass. You are unsure what to do here so you do what they do and hug them back. You feel their heartbeat, a small vibrant soul.

And as soon as they were in your arms, they were out of it, running down the hall into one of the patient rooms. There is the echo of a few claps and cheers and then it is quiet again. You stay where you are. Then the child comes running back to you.

“You!”

Me, you tell them.

“Are you an angel?” You tell them yes. They do a small victory dance. “Come on! Come on! I need you!” You pull yourself up, gears clicking here and there, re-adjusting themselves. They drag you down the hall into a room. There is someone lying in the bed, sunken into the mattress, clipped and connected to various instruments. These machines make no sense to you. It feels too human. Two older adults are in the room, but walk out just as you walk in. Maybe they are scared to see you, you tell yourself. You wonder why you tell yourself this.

“Angel, this is my sister.” You say hi to the sister. Her eyes remain closed, her breath very light. “Angel, can you fix my sister? She’s very sick, but I want her to get better so she can play cards with me.”

You tell them you cannot fix their sister.

“Can’t you ask God to fix my sister? He can do that, right?”

You tell them that God is not answering you currently, but if he was you would do so immediately.

“Oh.” That is all they say and they stand next to you while looking at their sister sleep. The only movement comes from the beeps and lines of the machines, the sister’s chest rising and falling, and the child mixing the cards in their hands. It is the most painful thing you have experienced since falling.

Black ichor seeps through the cracks of your monitor, filled with glitter and dreams, something that resides within all angels, regardless of form. The edges of the screen swell slightly, pushing against the glass, making more ichor spill. You feel very full, overfilled actually. And the ichor does not stop. You realize what is happening.

You are crying.

The child giggles. They say something along the lines of, you look ugly when you cry. You don’t stop. When they realize this, they dig into their other pocket and pull out another deck of cards. They do their best to be quick and finally find what they’re looking for.

“Here.” They hold out a card. It is the Ace of hearts. “It’s okay. Please don’t cry.” But you cry harder as you take the card and then kneel down to hug them tight. You tell them that you love them. You tell them that you have always loved them. Long before stars, long before wars, so long that you think God got bored of it. You tell them this because you want to. You tell them this because you are scared that they don’t know this. You tell them this over and over until they cry too.

DEAR GOD,
ACE OF HEARTS:
MEANING EMOTIONAL FORCE. INTIMACY.
INTUITION. DIVINE LOVE.
I HAVE FOUND IT ONCE AGAIN.
SEND

Untitled

Nathan Schwartz

- I. Enjoy this series
of Haikus written of the
walks and hikes now past.
- II. Past the dark cloud-line,
In the land where sunshine reigns
Spring begins again.
- III. Wind-swept rocks, Old Friends.
High upon the hill you see
Moments in the trees.
- IV. Our Shaman Jobey,
as if wearing desert robes,
wrangled the Rattler.
- V. “The pacific crest?”
I nod, “One should be akin
to Snails, now and then.”
- VI. On a stroll through the
Wood--A warmth like the buzzing
bee: Komorebi.
- VII. Twilight: the bat flies
figure-eights around the moon
dusk-dreaming of birds.

What the Cat Dragged in

Alexander Slotkin

With a sprawling lawn for balmy summer, a fireplace for chilly winters, and enough space to grow into, Catherine and Dan Mince had their slice of the American Dream—a few acres of beautiful hunting land carved out of the countryside. They should have been happier.

“I’m not accusing you of anything! I’m just asking, Dan. Are you seeing another girl?”

Catherine had asked a year ago, chest red and heaving.

“I didn’t say that!” Dan answered, pointing at his estranged wife.

“Dan, do you love someone else?”

“Su-suppose I said, ‘Yes—’”

“I’d lose my mind!”

“Jesus! You keep asking, accusing me of these, these horrible things. You *want* me to say I do!”

“Of course not! Don’t be—”

Dan jumped up from his seat at the dinner table, accidentally knocking his plate to the ground before storming out of the room. “Leave me alone!”

Now, after months of curt conversations and cold, lonely nights, Catherine was finally smiling in the mirror again, playing with her hair. Dan would be home soon and dinner, caught earlier in the backyard, was on the table—cut, skinned and roasted to perfection. Taking an unopened bottle of Sauvignon Blanc out of the kitchen wine rack, Catherine poured herself a glass...and then another.



Untitled

Jordan Cheeseman

Dan's car pulled into the driveway, his headlights piercing through the windows adjacent to the front door and into the kitchen. Catherine nearly spilled her last glass of wine out of newfound excitement for her husband's arrival. She had been planning this dinner for a while now, hoping it would be the last token of love needed to patch up their marriage.

I hope it's not too dry, she thought to herself, pulling out a folded piece of paper from her front pants pocket.

With gentle fingers, she carefully unfolded the paper, revealing a photograph of Dan, covered in powdered snow, kissing a girl whose face was blotched out by dried tear stains. Underneath the photo was a printed picture of Catherine and Dan on their wedding day, the best day of her life. Chewing her fingernails, a habit Catherine thought she had outgrown, she stared at the picture, feeling the heat from the alcohol rush to her face as she stood trying to figure out how such a happy couple feeding each other wedding cake could be at each other's throats in less than three years.

The front door opened, with Dan's familiar heavy footsteps behind it. Forcing a smile, Catherine stuffed the pictures back into her pocket. She picked up a book on the Donner Party and pretended to read about the snowbound pioneers turned cannibals in the Sierra Nevada.

"Something smells good, Cat," Dan said, unlacing his boots by the door after closing it.

"It's just for you," Catherine answered sardonically.

"What?"

"I'm not hungry."

His wife walked into the dining room, book in hand, and took her usual seat at the table. Smiling, she thought to herself: *She's your whore, not mine.*



Untitled

Megan Diriwachter

Sending

Dalton Valette

Settings. Wi-Fi. Choose A Network...United Airlines.

Messages. Julia.

Hi Julia. Some men just hijacked my flight. I dont know whats going to happen. Im scared. But you have to stay strong for me. Whatever happens please know i love you. I love you more than i can ever say. I hope i can see you again. Please tell little Benny gently. Im thinking of the three of us. Smiling.

Sending...

Sending...

Sending...

Lost connection.

Gram

Rachel Tavani

“My grandmother is dying, and I’m not sad.”

This is a routine we go through every week, promptly at 4:00PM every Wednesday.

Our normal routine was simple. I wait patiently in the reception area, walk down into the office’s relaxed lighting, and sit on the faded blue couch. I tell her highlights of my week. We then analyze everything that happened together.

This week is different.

Even my practiced therapist’s eyes widened at my opening statement.

The first time I saw my mother cry was at our kitchen table. I was only seven or eight, barely old enough to sit without a car seat, let alone comfort the woman who was supposed to comfort me.

Pumpkins decorated the oaken surface, small gourds she bought as centerpieces for the meal to come. Her hands knocked over the carefully chosen pumpkins as she grabbed napkins to soak up her tears. The phone, glued to her ear, had long since been disconnected.

I’d heard the conversation but didn’t really understand it.

Gram wasn’t coming to dinner?

Normally, we only interacted with Gram during the holidays, since Mom hated Gram’s boyfriend. She called him, “nude, crude, and tattooed”, after an unfortunate incident where my mother’s sister walked into their childhood home and saw Ed, the boyfriend, bare-assed on the living room chair watching re-

runs of M*A*S*H*. Apparently now those infrequent visits were about to stop altogether.

Mom's sobs racked her body, making the table shake with her.

"She said she would rather eat at a restaurant than come to our house for dinner. But it's a *family* holiday... *Family*." Her words were hitched, broken up by her bawls.

She rested her head on my shoulder, dampening it with her flood of tears. I slid my small arms around as much of her as I could.

"It's okay, mommy. I'll always have Thanksgiving with you."

Years passed without an appearance from my Gram. My little sister, Emmalyn, went from a diaper wearing infant with a sippy-cup obsession into an elementary school child who loved mummies.

One night the phone rang. Em had just learned how to answer a phone call, so she jumped at the chance to practice.

She replied to whoever was on the other side of the line and dropped the phone on the kitchen table. "Mommy! Some lady is on the phone for you!"

"Hello?" My mother asked. After a moment, "Mom?"

Their conversation was more silence than words, ending in a jilted goodbye.

My mother was shocked that Emmalyn didn't recognize the voice of her own grandmother.

Gram's calls were few and far between, visits nonexistent. We only learned of our Gram when mom and my Aunt Lori, swapped stories over the dinner table. They made up our family history, urban legends that were unfortunately rooted in truth.

None were flattering.

There was the one about the doll Aunt Lori wanted for Christmas when she was five years old. She even named it Gail, in honor of her mother. And Aunt Lori loved that doll for the two days she had it. Until Gram got angry at her for a small offense on my Aunt's behalf, and Gram threw it out in a rage. Aunt Lori remembers sprinting home after school trying to beat the garbage man to save little Gail. She wasn't fast enough.

Gram used to force my mother to go to the pool in the summers to show off for the other people in the neighborhood, despite that Mom hated the sun and the people and never liked swimming. Gram would take away her books until my mother complied. Whenever my mother punished me, she never took away my books, stating that she'd never do that to someone she loved.

One afternoon my Aunt was caught playing with matches by the nuns of her Catholic school. My grandmother wanted to show Aunt Lori that playing with matches was dangerous. To accomplish this, she took one of the matches my grandfather used to light his cigarette and pressed the smoldering tip to my Aunt's finger in a misguided attempt to discipline her. My Aunt always remembers this as a form of child abuse.

From what I heard, I didn't like my grandmother.

We hadn't heard from her in about a year when Gram called us, interrupting our family dinner.

Ed had died. Gram didn't know what to do. Mom offered her a place here against her better judgment.

She was coming to live with us.

It was great timing, really. She would be an ally in the war my parents were waging in the house we were all stuck in until

the divorce was finalized.

We lost the computer room, all of the unused games and equipment packed into boxes that were then split between my mother and father.

I gained a car, a Chevy red Cobalt, my symbol of freedom since I had the small wrinkled paper that represented my learner's permit. Since Gram had her license but not the vision suitable for actually maneuvering a vehicle, I would have my own set of wheels and an adult to go wherever I wanted.

Gram whirled into our house, bringing with her two suitcases full of her clothes, cherished possessions, and a gust of fresh air. For a moment, we could all breathe again as we adjusted to her in our lives.

I got to know the woman I had only painted images of in my mind with the words from stories I heard from Mom and Aunt Lori.

She was obsessed with *General Hospital*, wore clothes patterned with butterflies, had spinach on her sandwiches instead of lettuce, and loved line-dancing.

We spent afternoons stumbling through dances she learned while away, laughing as I plodded through the steps.

Nearly a year after her arrival, Gram and I sat on the blue gingham couch, watching our soap opera unfold like we always did on lazy summer afternoons. She broke our comfortable silence when she began speaking over the voices of our beloved characters.

"My father died when I was twelve. In a mining accident. He got out in the beginning but then went back in to try to save his friends. That's when it collapsed on him. I'll never forget how he looked, deformed and broken in the casket. My grandmother,

she wasn't a nice woman, you know. She forced me to stand and look at him as we held the wake. The Irish always have an open casket that stays in the house for three *long* days. She held me in front of my father's broken face and made me kiss his cheek. I'll never forget that, and I never forgave her."

This admission was a break from our routine. We never talked about anything personal. Here, there was already too much emotion. Adding to it wouldn't help us process the end of my parents' marriage.

I'm not too proud to admit that I had no clue how to react. I simply sat there, looking at her graying green eyes as they filled with tears while she continued on like I wasn't even there. I knew today's soap would be lost to us. There was something more important going on in our living room.

"Of course, then my mother and I were on our own. I didn't know she was sick until I came home one day and there she was, lying on her bed with a cheek so swollen I swore it would pop. She had me call her doctor friend, and he helped drain the excess fluid in her face to avoid the clot from killing her. That's when she told me she had leukemia. Battling it for about a year. Didn't want to worry me, she said, not while she thought she would get through it. Then she wasn't so sure."

I was afraid that even breathing too loudly would break Gram's reverie.

Gram's mother promised she would make it to her high school graduation, but she couldn't hang on that long. My grandmother was an orphan at eighteen. After burying her mother, Gram moved from her small town in rural Pennsylvania to Philadelphia. There, she met my grandfather. After that, she was no longer alone.

We sat in silence for a moment before Gram wiped away

her tears, slapped her leg, and turned to me. “Well, that’s enough of that.”

She got up and walked out.

It was the most I’d ever learned about my grandmother.

Gram met her boyfriend Ben at the place they both referred to as “the club”. The club, of course, was the bingo hall, where my grandmother spent three days a week to get out of the house.

His opening line to her, as he slicked back his wiry toupée, was, “Hi, my name is Bennie, like *Bennie and the Jets*.”

Soon she began staying with him, coming home to our place only on Tuesday nights to be picked up by the community senior van promptly at nine o’clock for the weekly outing the next morning. Getting picked up at Ben’s would be the hot gossip of the club, seeing as they were shacking up together. Contact between us and Gram became less and less frequent. Her presence became less and less expected. Any relationship I forged with her faded back into its original nothingness. It is hard to stay close to someone you don’t know much of anything about. The smacking of her dentures became a ghost of a sound, lingering in the halls but no longer present.

Until one Wednesday morning, she refused to get out of her bed. This worried my mother so much that she notified her friend, a neurologist. He came after work and looked Gram over to appease my mother.

Gram was immediately taken to the E.R.

A blood clot threatened to erupt at any moment.

Doctors gave her a week to live. And then they took more scans.

The clot cleared itself out after doctors pumped

Gram with medications. Weeks in the hospital, days of careful observation, and one resilient grandmother later, she was as good as new.

“It’s not a surprise,” Aunt Lori said, who conveniently flew in for my high school graduation the same week Gram was released from the hospital. “Only the good die young, so you know she is *never* dying.”

After the recent bout with her aneurism, several past cases of skin melanoma, and severe ongoing macular degeneration, we didn’t think there was *anything* that would slow this woman down.

I first heard the news when I called my mother on a lazy Sunday morning. I’d wanted her opinion on a poem for one of my classes. Normally she answers within the first few rings. Instead, she made me wait until I was almost sent to her neglected voicemail.

“Hello?” She acted like she didn’t know who was calling. Like I didn’t program my contact information as Rachel the Favorite, much to the chagrin of my younger sister.

“How *dare* you almost miss me,” I stated, ignoring the background noise.

“What... Hold on.” Mom murmured to someone that it was me. “I can’t really talk right now. Gram is in the hospital.”

She’d been there for two days before Ben called my mother. He said they didn’t want to worry her for no reason, but my mother held power of attorney so Ben couldn’t make any more decisions at this point. They were forced to call Mom.

I was briefed on medical terms I thought only existed on *Grey’s Anatomy*, in between the elevator sex scenes and poignant voiceovers.

Metastasized cervical cancer. Renal failure.

Prognosis: not great. We wouldn't know the extent of the damage until more tests were completed and the doctor had more time to analyze her condition.

The news spun around in my head. To process my mother's words, I scribbled my feelings down on paper. I had a new poem now.

*It was a privilege to know you
Even if you left without looking back.
But now you may be leaving forever.
You are already more of a memory than a person.*

My therapist told me it was okay not to cry. She told me everyone processes differently. She told me that I may feel differently once she passes. She told me I was normal for not feeling anything for a woman who continuously left us behind.

Only a week and a half after I got the news of her illness, Gram passed away.

I asked to give the eulogy. The pastor called me up after he gave a sermon on living life vibrantly, like Gail, like Gram. His words sounded good for a man who only knew Gram through the brief telephone conversation he had with my mother the day before the service.

I had nothing planned. Nothing written. I stood in front of Gram's friends from the Bingo hall, who were dabbing their eyes already, and my family. Just like me, my mother, aunt, and sister had yet to reach for the box of tissues strategically placed around the room.

There was one memory that perfectly reflected my relationship with my grandmother.

"My Gram used to say that she had friends that she would

pray to. People up in heaven that looked out for her, people she lost over the years. Her father, her mother, her husband, friends she's lost over the years... She would pray every morning to her friends to watch over her and hers."

I remember Gram first telling me about her friends. I remember wondering if we, her forgotten family, qualified for her friends to look out for us.

"I know that she and her friends are up there, watching over us. A part of *our* friends. And for that, I'm thankful."

My voice cracked on the last word. Tears started to fall.

I looked to the women Gram left behind in life and, now, in death.

Tears leaked down their faces too.



Prayers on the Wind

Nancy Dreyfus

Images of Love

Rachel McDonald

- I. It was 3am and I was in my apartment all alone
With my arms wrapped around the toilet bowl
When my sister woke up to answer her phone

- II. I asked my brother how he felt about greed
And if being a lawyer could ever change him
But he said you and this family are all I need

- III. My dad took off the socks he was wearing
And rolled them up onto my pale bare feet
When he realized mine were colder in comparing

- IV. When I wasn't even living in her house anymore
My mom would always say text me when you
Get home safe and don't forget to lock the door

- V. I was crying so hard that I couldn't even speak

When my dog walked over to me and intertwined

Her neck with mine and licked me on my cheek

Handle with Care

Victoria Detres

I woke up the next morning tangled in your sheets.
I searched for a trace, a remnant of you on my body.
Maybe a bite, a scratch, something to mark your territory.

It wasn't until I saw a body treated with care,
that I realized love is not meant to leave bruises.

I was just used to convincing myself it did.



Untitled

Jordan Cheeseman

83



Untitled

Megan Diriwachter

84

First Kiss

Zsane Sadler

Do you remember what it was like?
The very first time when we
Had our awkward interlocking flesh against flesh
Our lips reaching for something
But not quite knowing what they wanted
At 14 and 15 years of age?

Do you remember what it was like?
When we pulled apart
And we were left with nothing but the quiet
Of the church basement
As we stared into the blackness of each other's eyes.
There were no fireworks,
Just carnal curiosity.

Do you remember what it was like?
When our bodies connected for a second time?
And I could hear your labored breathing...
And you could hear my clumsy attempts
To match your lustful moves.

For the first time in 3 months
Since we started dating
I could finally feel your stiffness
Press against my pelvis.
I don't know what you remember
As we clamored away from our hiding spot

To rejoin the youth group upstairs.
They clapped and sang praises
About Jesus—
About denouncing sin—
About abstinence—

All I remember
Is the sliminess of your lips,
Your labored breathing,
The feeling of your dick
And the I spent the rest of that night
Clapping and singing along with them.

Rants from a College Girl Who's Ready to Graduate

Zsane Sadler

I really don't want to write this paper--
yet here I am, accompanied by the sounds
Of gossiping insects --
their incessant, inconsiderate voices
ascending up the walls of this decaying dorm I'm supposed to call
home,
through the cracks of my window that I can't quite close all the
way--
scratching legs and beating wings
enough to distract me from my given task.
I try to ignore them because lo and behold
I've procrastinated yet again
leaving me with flying, furious fingers
my hands maintaining speed but lacking grace
as I mentally shovel and throw word after word onto this blank
document.
55 minutes until the deadline.
56 minutes and the electronic submission of my work will not be
accepted.
57 minutes and...

I want to strangle my next door neighbor
Their horrid rendition of Adele makes me ponder
Are the walls separating us are made of concrete or paper?
The singing stops and all I hear now is the clacking of my
keyboard,

But I can't help but stare into the white spaces
Between each line
Between each paragraph
Between each moment I'm left questioning is this really worth it
Because I know once I receive my grade back
None of what I wrote tonight will matter a week later.
The pages on my computer screen are filling.
The deadline is closing.
I wonder if my professor will decipher my work
as stress induced from poor time management
or academic sophistication.



Untitled

Megan Diriwachter

89



Untitled

Jordan Cheeseman

90

A Garden of Black Roses

Ron Williams

When we died, I planted a garden:

Of black roses nature could ne'er harden.

Those thorny perennials bloomed in spring,

Whose petals rose like th'love you cannot bring.

But by grim autumntide, I to dismay,

Heartless Death seized my black roses edgeway.

And when I beheld this most dismal sight,

I cried, "No, this garden's ours!" much affright.

There I thought of your bounteous foison,

And hoped Death would surcease planting poison.

But of my gloomy weeping, Death cared not,

And all my black roses, he himself got.

Alas, my dark garden's all plucked away,

And on our grassy earth, I'll no more stay.



Like a Maze

Grace Cerra

Indonesian Half Moon

Hannah Kohn

It's 3 a.m
And I'm watching the half moon
Ripple through the Java Sea
Cause I can't sleep
And I figure this might match
The ripples of electricity
Still coursing through my body
From kissing you on a rooftop in Hong Kong
That I just can't shake off.
It didn't come close.

And as I lick my lips
Still saturated with the salt
From Indonesian waters,
All I can think of is how much I want to
Dissolve it on the surface of your skin,
Kiss you where the crystals can't reach,
Because I'm homesick for
The shelter of your arms
That I only just discovered
Before we flew in a painful breeze
To opposite sides of the world.

I don't believe in miracles
And I don't believe in destiny,
But only the three fates could have foreseen
The mysterious forces that

No scientist can lay claim to
The circumstances falling into place
Like my heartbeat falls into your rhythm
When my head is on your chest at night
And I focus really, really hard.

Someone said to me the other day
"The Queensboro Bridge is pretty at night"
And I thought, lady, "pretty" does not come close
To describing each glint of life
Suspended above the East River
Like thousands upon thousands
Of Indonesian half moons
That still do not accumulate to
Even a fraction of the neon insanity
Of you coming up behind me on your balcony
And silently whispering to the nape of my neck
"This is reality."

Because you,
You are so real
That I sometimes think I'm dreaming
But then you press your lips to mine
And breathe poetry
Straight into my lungs
And I exhale words I didn't know existed.

And as the Lombok moon
Waxes and wanes
As the lights of the Queensboro Bridge
Flirt with the night,

All I wish for is to
Keep leaning my head on your chest
Feeling my heartbeat
Synchronize with yours.



Venetian Sunset

Brianna Donofrio

My Haven

Sarah Temraz

The deep blue waters of the Mediterranean crashed against the concrete blocks that lined the coast. It was almost sundown and I was waiting on the Corniche for my best friend from high school. My chiffon blouse stuck to sweat droplets that covered my chest and I cursed Alexandria's humidity in August.

Nehal and I were going to catch up over coffee and shawerma. I licked my lips at the thought of the spices and tahini that we were about to enjoy at our favorite Syrian restaurant in the area.

It had been a year since we last saw each other. She had decided to study international politics at Georgetown in Qatar. She was, no doubt, the lawyer type: aggressive, in-your-face, a know-it-all, yet still able to carve out time from her busy class schedule to work two jobs, do an internship, and...party hard. I, on the other hand, was the writer type: introverted, a night owl, detail-oriented, a procrastinator, and a dreamer. From high school, she had planned out a clear-cut path to reach her goal, which was to become an international lawyer, while I had decided to move over 5,000 kilometers away from everyone I had ever known to get a liberal arts education in the States.

At the end of my senior year of high school, all I had wanted was to get out into the world and travel. I had a rough draft of a plan in the back of my mind: I could be a travel writer, or work in publishing, or even become a teacher. Worst case scenario: I wouldn't put my college education to use and I'd be back in Egypt living with my parents. Best case scenario: I would be a novelist living somewhere in the Caribbean with a private

plane tour company.

After returning to Egypt after three years in college, I had hoped that I would come back chock full of experience. Don't get me wrong, I don't regret my decision to leave— I've learned an extraordinary amount about life— but being back in this cultural hub for the summer had started to bring back memories of my childhood.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of car horns blaring obnoxiously and drivers shouting profanities at each other in Arabic. Oh no, not another accident. I couldn't completely understand what the drivers were saying, but I picked up on one taxi driver, arms flailing and nose scrunched up in disgust, making an obscene remark about another's mother. You would think that at one of the busiest intersections in the area that they would install traffic lights.

I turned away from the scene and hopped the three-foot concrete wall dividing the sand from the sidewalk. Alexandria was my haven and I had carved out my own little nook on the sand that somehow blocked out the sounds of the city's nightlife. I claimed a spot for myself on top of one of the concrete blocks and let the cool mist of the Mediterranean spray over my face. Across the sea, I spotted the Qaitbay Citadel, a popular tourist spot that was a museum now, filled with fake, plastic fish on display. If you want a mental image of the 15th-century defensive fortress, picture a 120-meter-tall sandcastle with an Egyptian flag planted dead-center on top. Don't forget to add into your mental image the street vendors sprinkled around the base of the citadel, selling freska— thin, crispy wafers sandwiching patties of sesame, peanuts, or coconut, all held together by honey or sugar. I knew the citadel well for it was the setting of my high school class's graduation pictures. I remembered how the sandstorm that hit us

that day had made all of the pictures have a yellow tint to them.

And then there was the Alexandria Library, renamed the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, another popular attraction that people would come from afar to visit because the museum held rare Egyptian artifacts and the shows at the planetarium were exceptional. The library sat behind me, across the highway that ran along the Corniche, where I had spent countless mornings biking with my father when I was sixteen.

I traced my eyes along the sidewalk towards the many hookah places that my friends and I had sat at for long hours and held countless debates over Egyptian politics during the 2011 revolution until I realized that my friend was thirty minutes late. I forgot that she lived according to Egyptian time, which meant that she might've not even left her house yet. I debated whether or not to meet her halfway at a restaurant closer to her house, but the lull of the waves convinced me that I should stay and ponder some more.

I wondered if Nehal would be the same or if college changed her in some way. I remembered when we would hang out after school on the swings and talk about the drama in our lives that always seemed to be much bigger of a deal than it really was. Life was so much simpler back then...free from the stress of deciding what we were going to do with the rest of our lives and who we were going to become.

Just then, a screeching voice broke through my thoughts. "Sarah! Sarah! Is that you?"

I turned around and spotted a familiar face. I wrapped my best friend in a hug and stared out at the crumbling apartment buildings that were embellished with makeshift clothes lines. I thought of my apartment with the wide balcony, as every

Egyptian had some sort of balcony— big or small— with a view of the sea. Mine overlooked the Stanley Bridge, a landmark that many tourists visited daily. I remembered the bridge not for its visitors, but for the many wedding pictures that had been taken on it, the bicyclists who traversed it in the early morning, and the million man marches that had taken place on it during the revolution.

I pondered how Alexandria would look when I returned to Egypt next year— how it would look in even ten years, when I would show my own kids my haven— and I wondered why I had been so eager to leave in the first place.



Whispers of Castle Cashel

Brianna Donofrio

Abandoned on the NYC Subway

Kristina Simmonds

I'm not worth much when I'm alone.
Most coin machines won't even accept me,
but when enough of us get together,
then we become worth something.
"I plus 99 equals one".
That's what I would tell myself to make me feel better.

I used to live at 125 leather wallet lane,
with Mr. and Mrs. Bills and their 2 kids,
Quarter and Nickole.
Throughout my whole life I've been different,
never as silver as anyone else,
never worth as much as everyone else.
I always wanted to be silver.
I have a friend name Di-Me.
We grew up together.
He's one of the silver ones.
Everyone makes fun of him because he's tiny.
I don't know what they're talking about because in my eyes, he's a
10.
Although I am copper one,
I enjoyed the safety from living with the bills family
Until one tragic night, everything changed.

It was a dark and dreary October night
I hit the floor and you left me there.
Trampled ignored pushed aside and overlooked,
no one wants me.

I'm not sure how long I've been here.
It could be days, weeks or maybe even months.
No one notices me.
My closest friend is the floor where I lay.

Throughout my time here,
I've become acquainted with the shoes of
many people from various professions backgrounds and
neighborhoods.
In such a short space of time we became closer than you would
think.
Well...
That's if you consider being stuck under a broad shouldered
6ft 5inch construction workers size 13 boot or being pinned to
the 5-inch-high spike heel of a business degree owning financial
consultant on wall street.

It was a dark and rainy October night
I hit the floor and you left me there.
*"Splish splish slip slide
kick roll and start again"*.
That's my daily routine every time it rains.
People come in with their wet feet and trample me.
The floor becomes filled with puddles of muddy rain water,
You can barely see me.
Splish splash!
another person just stepped in my puddle,
I'm now completely covered.
Someone finally noticed me under their shoe.
He kicked me.
Slip slide I just rolled away.

Bendy Straws

Kristina Simmonds

*3 ounces of coke, 5 ounces of Jack Daniel's Whiskey and 2 ice
cubes.*

*Swirl the glass around in the palm of your hand for 5 seconds then
insert a bendy straw.*

You were such a cold person, not a funny bone inside you. Despite
your heart being almost as cold as the north pole on the night of
a blizzard, and your soul being as bitter as can be, I know that
somewhere deep inside your heart, smothered by all the hatred,
was the love you had for me.

Let me Explain...

There was a time in your life when I was your pride and your joy,
a time in your life when I was your biggest accomplishment, your
son, and your little boy. But at 5 years old, you don't notice a lot.
You don't notice when the reason why he won't wake up when
you call him and shake him is because he was passed out on the
couch You think he was just in a deep sleep. At five years old, you
think that he's in that deep sleep because he's tired. Not because
he drank too much...*Again*

We used to be so close, you could call us inseparable. At five years
old you're filled with joy to know that he's taking you to the *soda
place* again. At five years old, you would have never known that
the soda place was just a bar.

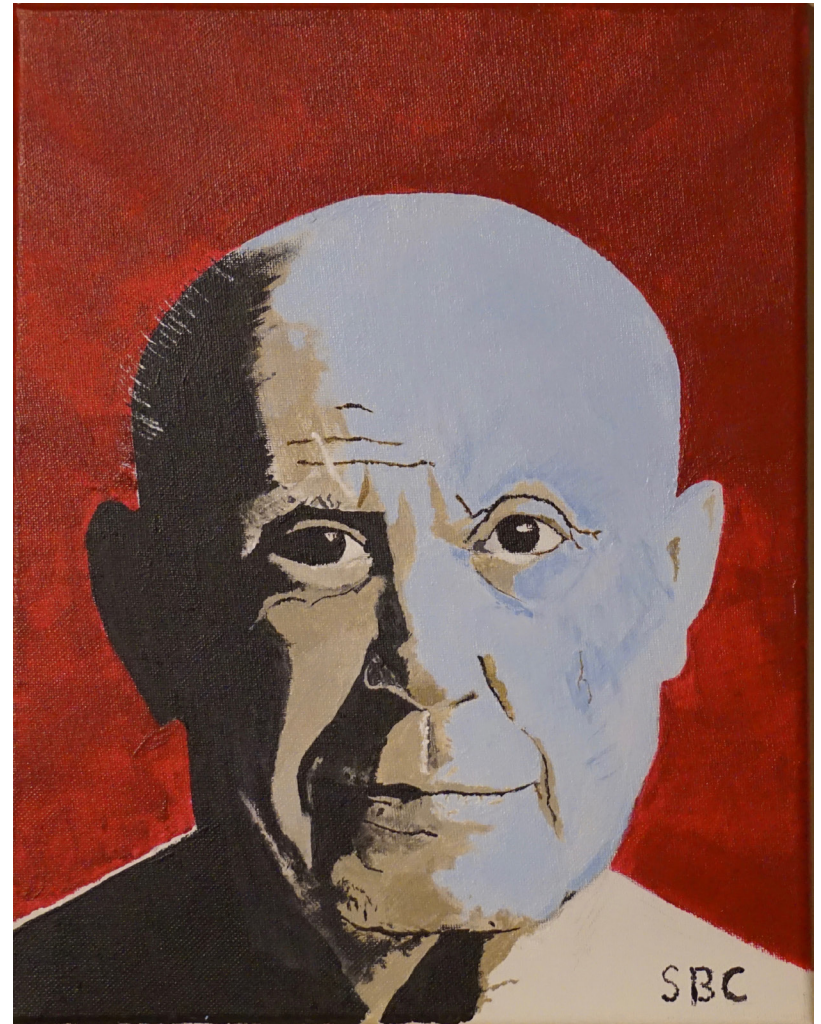
Some of the best memories I have with him were at that bar.
Every moment I spent with him became the best moment so far.

As the bartender continued to serve you more and more drinks, in between each drink we would raise our glasses while he would tell everyone at that bar that I was his son, the most important thing in his life, I was his number one. We would then hit our glasses together and sip our drinks through our bendy straws.

Three decades later

All I have left of you is

3 ounces of coke, 5 ounces of Jack Daniel's Whiskey and 2 ice cubes with a bendy straw.



Pablo Picasso

Seaton Crossman

Can You Believe It

Lindsey Heale

Marty hasn't dreamed in a while.

That's what he tells me this morning as we wait in line for coffee. He's visibly upset with purple bags under bloodshot eyes and a whole head of greasy, messy hair. It's nothing short of pathetic, so I reply, "All a part of being human buddy. Welcome to planet Earth!" and reach up to slap him on the back. He, of course, stumbles into the woman stood before him, who shoots him a filthy look.

"That's not fucking funny man," he mumbles, face scrunched up in distaste. He begins to pick at the skin around his fingers while I laugh at the woman's back.

"My bad. I know you're a sensitive guy."

"It's not that. I'm not—*sensitive* or anything—I'm just..." Marty always does this. He trails off in thought, stutters his words, and creates intense awkward silences with every conversation he has. He can't communicate with other human beings whatsoever. "I'm just *worried*, alright? I haven't dreamed in a fucking week and then there was the *crash* last week. Shit, man," he mutters, the woman in front of him huffing exaggeratedly in disgust as she pays for her drink.

Grinning, I quickly mutter, "Marty, I think she just sneezed."

"Bless you!" Marty splutters immediately, spittle flying as he removes his finger from his mouth. It's bleeding. As Marty grapples through the pockets of his dingy hoodie for a tissue, the woman glares at him and spits some very unfavorable words, shoving past him toward the door.

"Wow, that was kind of rude," I remark to Marty's wide-eyed stare and quickly reddening face. The people closest to us unabashedly stare. "Anyway, you're next in line." I kick at the back of Marty's legs and his lower lip trembles. "I'll go get us a table and we can talk more about your—uh—issue."

I've missed Marty, I think as he takes his place before the cashier.

-

For some background on Marty, all one needs to know is that he has a very active imagination and a great desire to explore the farthest corners of the universe (even though he's terribly hesitant to take risks or embrace change). He also keeps a dream journal, which he treasures more than his own life. Lastly, he told me that he's always liked the idea of traveling through space once.

Just a few moments later, Marty bumbles over to our table, managing to not knock into any other customers. When he sets his drink down, a dark splash of coffee flies out of the cup and lands on the table.

Immediately, he fishes around in his bag and pulls out his self-proclaimed dream journal with gnarled, quivering hands. Quite unassuming with its thick hardcover and plain, black coloring, Marty handles it so very carefully. He mutters, "Ah, shit," wiping it away with his jacket's sleeve, before finally setting the journal down.

"So, bro, dude, pal, Marty, my man," I say, grinning when his head shoots up, all wide-eyed. "What's up?"

His hands go straight to his mouth, biting off a hanging piece of skin around the thumb. "Right, sorry." He sighs, shoving his hands into his dirty hair. "It's just that...like I told you, man.

I haven't dreamed in a, uh, while. You know?" Then he goes *tap, tap, tap* against his journal looking positively miserable. Around us, people laugh, talk, and rush out the door.

"Yeah, um, sure. I guess so," I reply, lips twitching. "It's normal for humans to not remember their dreams though; ask anyone and they'll tell you that."

The look on his face is devastating, because what I'm saying is true, but I'm still *wrong*. "No, dude, you just don't...you don't *get* it, alright?" He shoves the heels of his palms into his eyes, moaning his frustration. "I dream *every night*. For six months now. God, I already have memory problems." His eyes water as his body slumps into the wooden chair.

Humming thoughtfully, I reach over to pat him on the arm, small smile turning into a frown. "Hey, it's cool, Marty. No worries. Why don't you tell me about the last dream you had?"

He looks me in the eye then, a deep frown on his pale, tired face. "Alright," is all he says, straightening his posture like it's a chore. On top of his dream journal, he folds his hands, squeezing them tight together until the muscles shake. Then he tells me about his latest extraordinary dream.

"So-so you know—like, I told you about them before. You remember—?"

"Yes, Marty, I remember. Just keep going."

"Right, okay. Right." His speech is slow, every detail tumbling past raw, spittle-covered lips and tongue. "The last time I dreamed was last week, and after thinking about it, I realized that, uh..." He shifts uncomfortably, gripping onto his journal, teeth nibbling on his bottom lip.

Taking a deep breath, he exhales slowly. "Well, I realized what these dreams mean, man." Then he shouts in a whisper, "*Aliens are trying to contact me!*" It's quite comical how he cups

his hands around his mouth, looking quite the fool. Even so, his wide eyes beg me to understand that this isn't a joke. He isn't kidding.

"But, fuck, man!" he plows on. "I don't know why they stopped." He stops, shoving his blistered finger into his red mouth to chew on red skin. "But then I started wondering if something went wrong. I don't know." He rips the finger out of his mouth and rests his head on one arm, while the other combs through greasy hair.

"Well, Marty," I say gently, lips twitching again. "That's definitely an idea you have there."

Muffled by his jacket, he morosely asks, "You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"No, I swear. But, can I ask why? Like, what in your dreams made you realize aliens were contacting you?" He stays quiet, until his head rises and he looks me in the eye, a clear droop to his features.

Slowly, he speaks. "Well, in all of my dreams, there's this... garbled—mess of someone talking, like I told you. There's the screeching static too. But recently, I realized: numbers. And I've written it all down in my journal." For emphasis, he smacks his finger onto said journal, willing me to understand the contents of his book. "But now that they've stopped, I'm confused." He pauses, gaze falling into his coffee with bugged, unseeing eyes.

He swallows thickly. "I don't miss the static though...the static just *invades* your brain, man," he murmurs and moves his bruted hands to cradle the air around his skull.

"But anyway, I got to thinking and I think they're—or they need..." Marty's face tightens into a magnificent frown. His chewed-up, stubby fingernails rub the ends of the dream journal.

“Need what?” I coax, when Marty fails to continue.

He winces and raises his head. The insult of his bloodshot eyes and raw, red lips is unavoidable. “I think they need help,” he finished miserably.

“The aliens do, huh?”

“Please don’t laugh, man. I’m really serious. What with last week and everything, you can’t—”

“I know, I know,” I say soothingly. “I’m just teasing.” I gesture to the dream journal. “I want to help, Marty. I mean, what else are friends for?”

He nods slowly as his eyes wander to the journal. He appears dumbfounded. “Right, friends,” he whispers and nods again. Then, he bites his lip, a scab bursting with fresh blood.

His eyes flicker as he grips more tightly onto the journal, licking the split lip. He hunches his shoulders. “If we, um—go to my house, you can see my journal. Just not—here.” From head to head, his gaze jumps around the coffee shop.

“Yeah?” I ask, and rise from my seat, when Marty weakly smiles in confirmation. As I push my chair in, I grin. “So, you’re a living embodiment of an alien SETI signal, huh? Wow! That’s hilarious.” Marty’s body jerks as he tries to emphatically nod.

Before we leave, he gives his lukewarm coffee a morose stare and then grapples for his journal and bag. Soon enough, we’re outside, where he suddenly says, “Hey,” while skirting to the edge of the sidewalk. “How long have we been, um—how long have we known each other?”

Thoughtfully, I hum, glancing at him from the corner of my eye. “Officially, six months. You know,” I muse, reaching up to pat him on the back. “Time moves pretty fast.” He looks to me, the view of his cracked, raw lips and bloodshot eyes blocking the sun. I grin at him, eyes squinting. “Friends for six whole months

already. Can you believe it?”

A tinge of confusion twists his face and he looks away. As the wintry chill blows past us, I watch Marty’s matted curls follow the breeze. He licks his bloodied lips. “Yeah, it’s crazy,” he says, and cradles his bag to his chest, fist curled tight around the handle. His eyes waver and in the shadows of his face, I see traces of the Marty he used to be.

I rest my hand on his arm and smile softly. “Let’s get you dreaming again, Marty.”

-

In the bedroom, Marty immediately sits on the edge of his bed. There’s a computer, an unopened trunk of trinkets on the floor, and a garbage can with crumpled up papers near the bed.

I sit next to Marty and his body slumps forward as I do. His one hand travels into his bag and he pulls out the dream journal, chewed-up fingers idly drawing invisible patterns on the cover. “You know, before, when you talked about, um, friendship. It reminded me—well.” He begins to pick at the cuticles of his left thumb, digging into the thin skin above the nail.

“What?”

“Man, I dunno. I was just thinking about time.” He licks his bottom lip. “It’s weird, because my dreams, well—they started around the time I met you,” he blurts and curls his hands around the dream journal.

“Huh,” I hum, leaning toward him. “What do you make of that?”

“Oh, well,” he stammers, his spine curling him over the journal. “Nothing bad, just—” Suddenly, he groans in frustration, head turning to the white ceiling. “My memory’s shit, dude; you

know that. It's why I appreciate you. You've really helped these past six months, since I can't remember anything before that." He pauses, before laughing wryly and shaking his head. "Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own body."

Then his mouth wobbles as he cradles his face in his hands. "And this whole dream journal's just felt so personal. It's why I haven't shown you."

"So cruel, Marty," I say. "Friends carry each other's burdens, you know."

"I know, but—nevermind." He stops, a curl of sadness coloring his face. He turns directly to me, the light of the sun highlighting the fantastic shadows in his face, and dangles the dream journal in loose fingers between us. "If you'd be so willing as to carry my burden," he says and I gladly take the journal from his warped hands.

Immediately, he lies back onto his bed and a drawn out sigh bursts through the air. "I'm so tired, dude," Marty mumbles, while I open the first few pages. I skim them briefly, flipping to the next. Scribbles of mediocre alien drawings appear every once in a while, amidst Marty's 2AM ramblings: *My ears are ringing, My eyes burn, I think they need help*, he writes.

"I like your drawings," I murmur, flipping to the latest entries.

"Ah, yeah," Marty laughs lightly, sounding drowsy. "They're terrible." He sighs. "But six whole months, man; that's crazy." Gently, he taps his leg with my own. "Thanks for 'carrying my burden,' like you said. I'll carry yours too."

"You're fantastic, Marty." I grin, staring at the last entry, dated last Saturday. *I think I understand what they're saying. Coordinates.*

"Right where the meteor landed?" I ask, fingers tracing the pen markings.

"Oh, shit, yeah. I forgot. The meteor last week." Marty's response is quick and I feel the bed shift as he rises to a sitting position. I turn to face him and worry fills his face. "Do you think the aliens..." He licks his raw lips. "...landed here?"

"Aw, Marty," I laugh, while shaking my head. "It was just a rare, wayward space rock." I sigh, smiling. "Humans are pretty dumb though; I'm surprised they haven't been invaded already."

A swath of confusion cuts across his face, the same as before. "What?" he asks. Then he squints his eyes and frowns, licking chapped lips. "I guess so," he says awkwardly.

"No worries, Marty. I mean..." I pause for a light laugh and pat him on the leg. "You said the aliens needed help, right? They'll contact you again."

Marty's eyes skirt to the side and he sighs, bringing his thumb to his mouth. He bites at the already impossibly-short nail. "I don't know," he mumbles.

"It's only been a week," I tell him, reaching over to plant my forefinger right in the middle of his forehead. "You've got an entire journal full of messages. They need you." I tap my finger *one, two, three* times, Marty flinching with each one.

"I guess so," Marty mutters, shaking his greasy hair when I lean back. Then he smiles, split lip threatening to spill blood again. "Thanks for, you know—" he idly waves his hand. "—believing me. I mean, I haven't seen you in a week, but you've bothered to listen anyway."

"No problem, buddy." I grin. "Why don't you try sleeping now? You never know."

"Yeah, okay," Marty says, warped hand briefly squeezing my wrist. Then he lies back onto the bed, murmuring, "Keep the

journal close by,” as I rise from the bed.

“And seriously, man, I appreciate your friendship too.”

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All one needs to know about Marty—or, #164595—is that he has a very active imagination and a great desire to explore the farthest corners of the universe (even though he’s terribly hesitant to take risks or embrace change). He also keeps a dream journal, which he treasures more than his own life. Lastly, he told me that he’s always liked the idea of traveling through space once.

So, I told him that I too had a great desire to explore the farthest corners of the universe. Marty could join my team as a retainer of information. After all, his journals always showed an astonishing talent for drawing and an immaculate ability to record details. And I liked Marty, a friend who was so deliciously kind to me.

It was after yet another rejection that I stole Marty for friendship and his expertise and a ship for travel. A voyage through space was as fantastic as I’d always imagined, even while Marty begged to go back. Still, I lived my dream until we crashed with no way to return. Marty’s friendship and expertise were damaged and the ship was destroyed, but humans were dumber than any entity I’d ever encountered.

“Thanks for carrying my burden too, buddy,” I murmur, staring at Marty’s fluttering eyelids. “You’re a great friend,” I continue, the static and garbled noises of irreparable hardware filling the room. The illusion of a bare bedroom flickers, and I see Marty, free from the alien human form. When the static crescendos into a screech, I wait for silence and only in the silence do I repeat the very same message I have been for the past six

months. “This is #134340, requesting assistance. Coordinates are as follows...”



Cross of the Golden Vale

Nancy Dreyfus

117



Colossal

Grace Cerra

118

gomtuu

Andy Bates

sorry too late
so lonely for so long
i am so old

long time to be an empty
long time to be a floating
hell of memoried sobs
and tickles i am a sick
and still-living spaceship
drifting naked through
every sector wretched

no no one to hold to
my insides cozy no hearts
or minds no passengers
to ride with

i am no warm host no
longer i am tin man
tin tin tin man
clanging bag of dead
friends' echoes in me
ghosts in my machine

i should have been
so much stronger
steered away from all

that loud ow ow danger

explosions out of
nowhere
they came blazing such
radiation o i still see
failing faces die inside me
and i i i why no
could save them
o my o my poorpoor
crewmen

o if only
space were empty

but it is so full of scary
so full of frightening
lightning things that bump us,
break bruise us
in the darkdarkdark

so old for so long
i am ready ready for the big
black void to swallow
me up up away, hopefully
i will orbit in this
sore system until it goes
because, snuggled up to this

white dwarf under such
black covers, at least

i won't have to die alone

sorry too late



Hidden Away

Grace Cerra

The Mermaid Grill

Stephanie Tobia

Flash steamed & removed from shell,
from sea to ship, now a road through Hell.
Pedal. Pedal. Delivery bell.

One hit wonder crooning blues.
Sidewalks cracked & roots protrude
I nearly flip over during interlude.

Faster. Faster. With rhythmic pain,
forgetting their order or why I came.
“It’s the Mermaid Girl!” that’s my name.

Promised in minutes. It’s time to cash in.
Ringing their bell in timely fashion,
Do they think I have the passion

to serve you lobster soaked in butter?
It’s words I crave, my mind they clutter:
ON YOUR LEFT SIR. All I could utter

slamming the breaks before I expire.
A pink knit hat, my identifier,
I secretly hope—
 a flat tire.