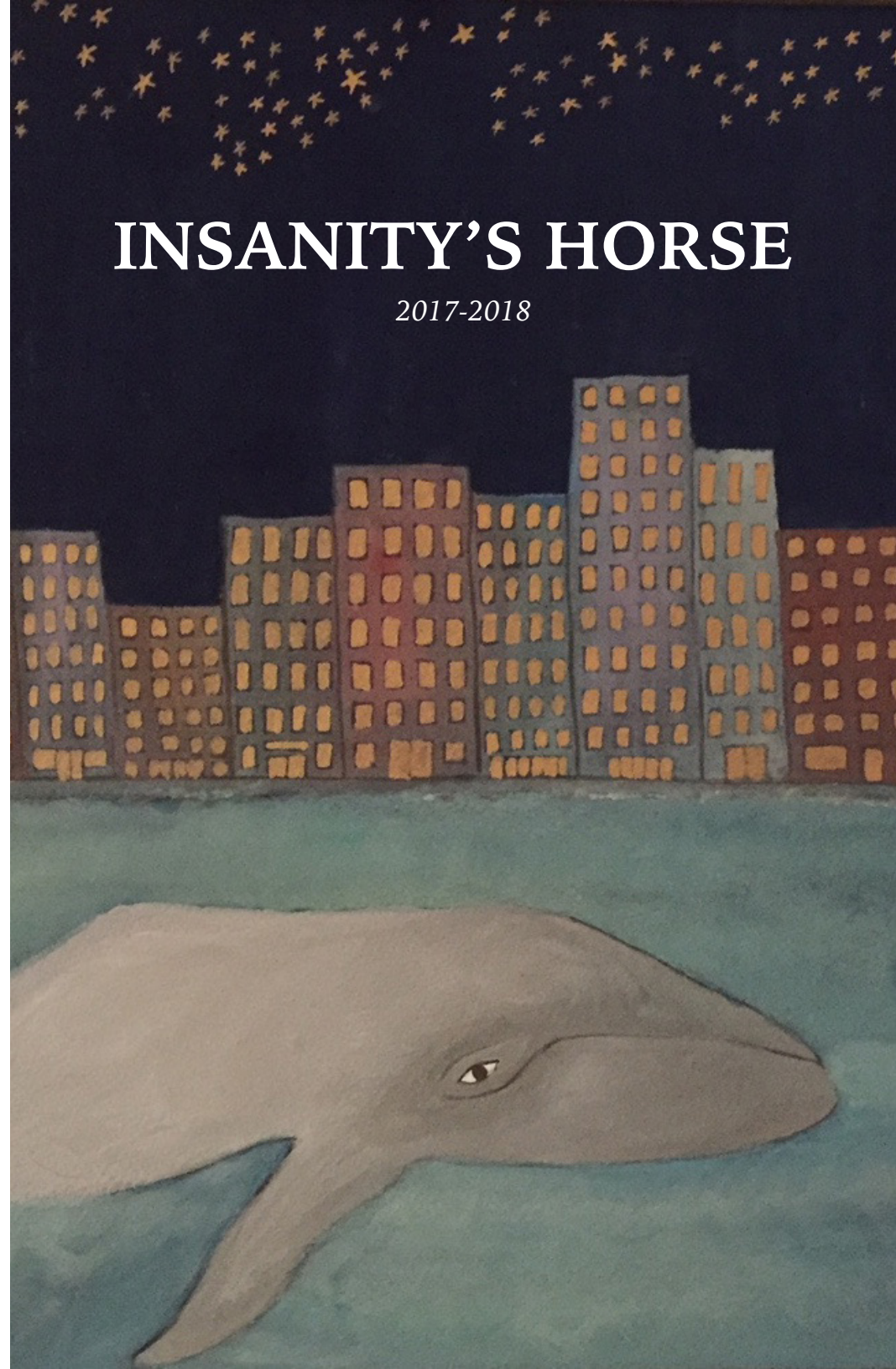


INSANITY'S HORSE

2017-2018



Cover Art by Patty Willis

INSANITY'S HORSE

Drew University Literary & Art Magazine
2017-2018

Within these pages, you will find love and loss, the wonder of discovery and the bite of fear—but, above all, you will find a bottomless well of perseverance. Each narrative, poem, artwork, and photograph carries a voice that seeks to be heard, and we at *Insanity's Horse* are determined to champion the creativity needed to keep our world afloat. We applaud your courage to speak at a time when silence is easier, and we thank you for sharing your voice with us. This magazine would not be possible without the support of the English and writing departments, especially the ever-wonderful Courtney Zoffness. We are endlessly grateful for the generous funding and coordinating that made our second writing contest a smashing success. We hope we can bring you a moment of relief with a touch of our collective insanity. Happy reading!

Sincerely,
The Mad and Insane

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“A Whale in Brooklyn”

Patty Willis

Cover Art

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Patty Willis

These Flowering Plants

Heather Dupont—Fiction Contest Winner

Maggie’s botanist mind catalogs the flora: *Acer saccharum*, *Tsuga canadensis*, *Pinus Virginiana*. The windows are down and the purple air freshener fastened around the rearview mirror swings in the mountain air. The radio is fading in and out, and Nathan cusses every time a synthesizer is replaced with a banjo. Sometimes, Maggie looks over to see the wind whipping through his brown hair, but then her gut drops and she turns back to the trees again. *Halesia carolina*, *Quercus alba*, *Carya glabra*. Nathan’s Craigslist find rattles on.

Sometimes, the trees are interrupted by reams of wooden fencing or metal roofed cabins perched on round green hills. Cows mill on the front lawn and grass grows through the gaps in rusted out trucks and caving porches. Maggie imagines her grandmother sitting on the porch and drinking sweet tea, the glass coated with condensation. Her wrinkled face is brown from the sun. Maggie remembers her own sagging porch, with the car seats her father used as patio chairs and the moss that clung to the faded wooden siding. That was before school, when she ate dandelions and shared a bed with all five of her siblings.

Trees converge on the road again, and when the sun shines through the leaves, their shadows mottle the road’s smooth pavement. Nathan drums his fingers against the steering wheel.

“We’re close to home,” Maggie says, hopeful. Nathan doesn’t answer. She sighs and looks out the window. A man leads a horse along the side of the road.

The landscape makes Nate sick. He doesn’t like the enclosing forest or the patches of red clay that peak through crab grass and pine needles. He doesn’t like the hills or the ditches along the side of the road. He wants to put his car through the trees, to tear up dirt and clay and mow over thorny underbrush. Instead, he follows the asphalt. Its dividing lines run across the pavement like the yellow on the back of a black garden snake. The road will slither in and around the mountain. It will hiss: “Remember

Tennessee?” and Nathan will try not to remember.

Nathan met Maggie in grade school. She didn’t wear shoes and had a hard time speaking, so they put her in a class for kids who ate paint chips and said ‘lellow’ instead of ‘yellow.’ Nate’s friends liked to whisper about Maggie’s wild hair and dirt blackened feet. They said she lived in the woods with squirrels and ate mud pies. During recess, they’d bet snacks on who could get closest to her without getting a rock thrown at them. She’d sit in the school yard crushing acorns with rocks, and he’d creep real close. Close enough that he could see the cracked shells and their brilliantly yellow insides. She’d scream, “sasquatch!” and fling nuts at his cheeks.

Top 40 tears through banjo and climbs out the windows. Cyclists breeze by, legs encased in spandex and helmets fastened under their chins. Beyond them is the last gas station, its place marked by a rusty red star and a crudely assembled sign that reads: FRESH MILK HERE.

“Do we have enough gas?” Maggie asks, but Nate makes no reply. The road dips and rises. Maggie bites her lip and puts her hands in her lap.

She shouldn’t have told him.

She shouldn’t have told him, but she wanted the words to wrap around his ankles and to fasten themselves to his chest. She wanted to render him into a keepsake—wings pinned to foam or thorax bathed in resin. But pinning arms like wings is crucifixion, and Nate is unfamiliar with life inside glass cases. His mother will blow air beneath his wings and he will fly all the way to Washington, while Maggie labels dirt and presses leaves between pages.

After the gas station, there is only ascent. They pass dirt U-turns and cabins older than the state. There are signs. They designate hiking trails, camping grounds, and scenic vistas. Sometimes there are deer crossings or warnings of falling rocks. The road narrows, and the only people that walk alongside it are determined hikers with water stained boots and packs full of Spam. There are potholes. When the car hits them, Nathan and Maggie’s bodies jolt with the hit, but neither of them say anything.

The radio gets worse.

Nathan scowls and cycles through static until arriving at the same struggle between bluegrass and pop.

He tries very hard not to look at Maggie.

All he can think about is sasquatch hunting and rolling through the mud, making forts out of tree branches and calling Jimmy McCabe a four-eyed, sandwich stealing, glue-eating, weasel. He remembers the first time his mother met Maggie, how she pulled him behind her and frowned at the dirt on his friend's cheeks. He remembers how Maggie seemed to materialize from the forest, her coal colored hair clotted with dirt and strewn with twigs.

It looked so different when fanned out across motel pillows. Clean.

The road hugs the mountainside. Some places in the guard rail are so twisted that Maggie's heart picks up. She thinks about Nate's tiny little supra breaking guard rail and burning up biodiversity like a dried-out Christmas tree set on fire. She wonders if the car'll hit the mountainside or if it'll turn over in the air a few times before it does. *Nyssa sylvatica*, *Rhododendron maximum*, *Pinus pungens*. Maggie starts to think of her fear of heights as a metaphor for how badly this is going. The higher they climb, the fuzzier the banjo playing between them gets.

Nathan didn't want to come in the first place. They hadn't talked since Christmas, when Maggie wore galoshes to his mother's annual Christmas dinner and put too much ketchup on her roast ham. Since then, he thought their road trip (planned and confirmed with a spit shake at the age of thirteen) was nothing but the craving of independence-hungry preteens. Like the silver ring Nathan drunkenly pushed upon her finger after pie and cappuccino, the trip was a fantasy not worth pursuing. It was sheer persistence that finally convinced Nate to come. Persistence, and the soft curve of Maggie's hips.

"I'm not going to keep it," she finally says. Nathan doesn't answer. His dark Ray Bans prevent her from seeing his eyes, and his mouth is in the same hard line it's been in since Roanoke. Maggie's eyes start to sting and this time, it's too hard for her to remember Latin tree names. Virginia whirs past in blue ridges.

Nathan was seven when he went to Dollywood. He doesn't remember much else, but he remembers how he tripped and scraped his knee. The sidewalk at Dollywood was made up of a bunch of sand colored pebbles. It was rough and stained by slushies and vomit in places nobody wanted to look at. It pulled apart the skin over his knee bone *easy*. When it happened, Nathan wanted to sit down and cry, but his father just cussed and pulled at his arms until he got up again.

There are no mangled guard rails at this point in the road, but Nathan's starting to think he can change that. He loves his car, but wants to know if he can make it do a nosedive. From the corner of his eye, he can see that Maggie's cheeks are wet. As if she somehow knew he was looking, she turned her face to the window. Her devastation is muffled by the air whipping in from outside. The road keeps winding. The radio's so bad that Nate feels like he's picking through sand to find the sound of the banjo. He doesn't even like country.

Nate thinks about Maggie's arms, and what it's like to be in them. Like that time Maggie held him in a headlock for so long that her mother had to shout, "Magnolia Marie!" and threaten her with a wooden spoon. Or when they were twelve and his father made him so angry that he was shaking, and she just hugged him for a long time. Or even later, when she got her acceptance letters and they squeezed each other so tightly that their skin existed solely to harbor bone meal.

Maggie gives him a look that's all in the proud jut of her chin and her firm brown eyes. It says: "I don't want it if you don't." And Sunday school be damned, he doesn't.

Vowels line up along his lips, but they only frustrate him. He told the truth over and over, about how he wasn't done with school and had a girlfriend back home and never meant to touch her. But her fingers curled like vines that night. They coiled around his wrists and pressed into the skin over his shoulder blades. She left small purple blossoms along his neck and down his collarbones. Their yellowing ghosts winked mischievously underneath his cotton t-shirt collar. *Too much gin*, they both agreed. *Won't happen again*, Nathan finished.

“You said—” It comes out a little too loud. Nathan inhales through his nose and presses down on the gas, “—*promised*. That it wouldn’t happen again.”

Maggie bristles at the accusation. “Me?”

“You.”

“*You* said—” But Nathan cuts her off before she can continue.

“I can’t do it, Maggie. You know I can’t. I have this internship going. I’m the President of Sigma now, and I gotta apply to law sch—”

Maggie’s brows knit together like two strips of brown moss reaching for opposite sides of rock.

“You say that every time,” she says, voice rising. “But you do it again. Over and over.”

When he said it the first time, Maggie didn’t say anything. But he could have sworn he heard her crying in the bathroom that night at Lake Michigan.

Maybe that was when she knew.

There were a hundred places she could have figured it out. In the gift store at Gettysburg, the motel at Lexington, or even a few hours ago in the visitor’s center at Roanoke. There were a dozen places where it could’ve happened. There was all of July: the cat friendly bed and breakfast in Michigan, the creaky sofa in the cabin by Lake Erie, and the duct taped air mattress outside of Lancaster.

“What do you want me to say?” he finally snaps. It’s like Maggie scraped her knee and he’s pulling her up by the arms. Would she go to confession just like he did? And would her priest be just as quiet as his was?

Nathan can see Maggie wiping her face with her forearm. When she pulls it away, it’s glistening with tears. It makes Nate so mad that he grinds his teeth and buries his nails into the leather steering wheel.

Sugar maple, eastern hemlock, Virginia pine. Maggie lets out a little sob and shakes her head. The wind’s blowing her blonde hair around her face and it’s getting stuck in her mouth and in her snot. She can’t stop crying. It doesn’t look so clean anymore.

“*I don’t know*,” she breathes, over and over. They’re barely

whispers. “I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.”

Carolina silverbell, white oak, pignut hickory. There are a thousand sweeter things Maggie wants Nathan to say.

She knows he won’t say any of them.

Nathan exhales, but his face is still red and he won’t look at her. He’s shaking, but he’s got to keep both eyes on the road and both hands on the steering wheel. The road trip was a bad idea. He knew it was a bad idea the second he saw Maggie spread her paper map across that dining hall table. But she put her skinny finger over crayon marked destinations and smiled like daddy told her they were going to eat that night.

“When did you find out?” he asks, stiffly.

“Two weeks ago,” Maggie snuffles. She sits up straighter. “At the world’s largest basket.”

A dry laugh bursts from Nathan’s chest. Of *course* she didn’t tell him. He puts his fingers on one of the radio dials.

Nathan turns up the volume, but it’s all static now. He takes one hand off the wheel and starts to fumble through the center console. It’s sticky with a year of spilled soda. A bunch of cracked CD cases crash against each other when he blindly digs through it. He pulls out some shitty Christian rock album from the early 2000’s. It was the kind of stuff Maggie pretended to like in the hopes his family would see her as a god fearing Christian.

“You do it,” he grumbles, throwing the CD into Maggie’s lap. The car swerves a little when he does it, and it makes Maggie’s stomach jolt. She was no stranger to Nathan’s temper—it knew only broken drywall and bruised classmates. She presses her lips together and pushes the CD into its slot. Nathan puts the music so high that it rattles Maggie’s skull.

At Dollywood, Nathan’s parents made him wait on line for the Super Flume for three hours. It was especially hot that day, and everyone at the park wanted to be on the water rides. The Super Flume was a baby log ride. Its size was only a quarter of Daredevil Falls, and most of its run was made up of twists and turns. The drop wasn’t big at all, but Nathan was hot and tired and afraid. He threw a tantrum and ran out of line. His father grabbed him by the hair.

But Maggie wasn’t throwing herself out of the car and

running away into the Virginia wilderness, and Nathan wasn't running after her either. They were both on the log flume, twisting gently around the mountain and not dropping. The trees are thin here. Sheer rock and scraggly pines scrape wide blue with the promise of natural wonder. They remind Nathan of Maggie, eleven and with sticks in her hair and dirt caked on her feet. The one who wore a coonskin hat and taught him blackberries from pokeberries and Copperheads from Blackrats.

He presses down on the gas, and the supra bellows in response. Maggie puts a nervous hand on the passenger side door as they jerk around a corner, but she lets her heart pummel its way through her chest. From this height, there is no discernable countryside. There are only pine-lined mountains that rise and fall endlessly along the edge of the sky.

Nathan glances at Maggie. Her cheeks are wet with tell-tale sadness. The thudding of tire over rocks flicks tendrils of blonde hair in every direction. Instead of looking out of the window, she studies her hands like they're an invasive species.

"You're like Kudzu," he finally says, allowing himself to look away from the road. "And instead of eating the South, you're eating me."

Black tupelo, great laurel, table mountain pine. Nathan's inattention is enough to send the supra screaming towards a premature warrior's death. Maggie's got words sitting in her mouth, but they're scratched out by the sickening screech of car meeting guard rail.

She screams.

Nathan hits the brake, but the tires are still spinning. Suddenly, going over the edge is so possible that Maggie isn't sure she still wants to. When all of the noise finally stops, Maggie switches off the radio and presses her back into the seat like she's on a rollercoaster and there's no body restraint. Her eyes move between Nathan and the panorama outside of the driver's side window. They are two left tires off the edge of Virginia, held within the bounds of solid ground by only galvanized steel.

Nathan's glasses are resting on his nose now. His green eyes look like marbles. Maggie wants to know if he thinks that he's

escaped death or if he thinks that he's on the verge of it.

"Can we pull away from it?" For the first time all day, her voice is steady. Nathan pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, shakes his head, and lets out a long breath of air.

"I don't even wanna look."

Monsters Aren't Real

Raza Hasanović — Fiction Contest Runner-Up

My monsters never crept up from under my bed or from within the dark depths of my closet. They lived openly in the hills surrounding my city, watching down on my every move. Watching and waiting for people in streets, people in lines, people in groups. Those were their easiest targets.

My monsters weren't big or hairy or green, though they did dress in green army suits. Suits that once united us under a single power now sieged over my Sarajevo. Them versus us. My monsters didn't have sharp fangs or red eyes or long claws to grab me. Rather, they had snipers and machine guns to threaten me.

My monsters looked just like me. They were old neighbors and school friends who turned into enemy soldiers.

My monsters didn't hide from me either; they made themselves known. They dropped shells and sprinkled bullets down onto my city. If there was quiet around me, I knew my monsters were just teasing.

My brother Adnan and I often played in the woods behind our home, a village in Sarajevo. A tall oak tree supported a tire swing that entertained us each day after school. One day, as I pushed my brother high into the air, the tall oak encouraging our childish games, the sky rumbled and the trees shook. An airplane flew by, a metal bullet I had never before seen above my village. The scream of my grandmother from within our house rang in our ears. Air turned to smoke as neighbor Amina ran and grabbed Adnan by the waist and me by my arm. How fast we ran—my feet barely touched the ground. I couldn't see which way we were going.

We hid in the concrete basement of Nena's house. My grandma pulled her scarf tightly around her face and prayed.

In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful. God, please keep my children safe.

My mother cried, embracing us. I felt her hot tears drip

onto my face, one by one, shell by shell. She didn't hide them. My father was out there, somewhere. Alive, I hoped.

Several bombs dropped, and a few hours passed before the village people emerged from their houses. Many were crying. Others were dazed. One fell to her knees and screamed into the air, *Why, Dear God? Why us?*

Across the street, a house had crumbled. Its red bricks had been blown into pieces, like blood splattered over the street.

The next day, a leg was blown off of my cousin. He didn't survive. The following week, the lights went off and we had no water. Only once every few days, the village fountain would begin to drip. At once, we'd grab our plastic canisters and run to fill up before it ran dry again. One day, the monsters sniped the water line.

That was the day I last went to school.

That was the day the big oak last proudly stood.

That was the day I came to understand war.

*

The monsters didn't make soft noises to frighten me in the night. They made loud noises. Monstrous noises, day and night. Whenever they entered the village, they'd line my people up, and shoot them down. Gun shots, screams. Gun shots, screams. Silence. Sometimes, I heard them laughing at the dead bodies in front of them. I imagined them spitting on the dead corpses as they threw them into a pile to set ablaze. I saw that happen once—or maybe I dreamt it. I'm not sure anymore.

The monsters loved children, especially young girls. They'd often barge into homes and force them into women, sometimes in front of their families. Then they'd search for young boys, who they'd turned into monsters too. The monsters brought them to the hills and forced them to fight their loved ones.

Once, I met a monster once face-to-face.

“What's your name?”

I looked down at my feet.

“Jesi li gluh?” *Are you deaf?* The soldier jabbed me in the rib cage with the end side of his rifle.

“What is your name?”

“Eldin.”

“Eldin.” He smirked. “Tell me, *Eldin*, how do you like this weather today?”

“Lijepo je.” *It was nice.*

“*Lijepo?*” He chuckled. “You mean lepo, don’t you *Eldin?*”

“Lepo je.” *It was nice.*

He was one of the friendlier monsters. He let me go.

“Careful what you say,” he said before firing a bullet into the air.

The monsters hated the way I spoke, so I never did. Not around them. I knew my dialect would kill me.

The monsters did care though. They cared for my beliefs. They cared about which god I believed in. No longer did the sounds of the call to prayer sound across the village. There was nowhere from which they could; all of our local mosques had been burnt down. No longer did foreheads drop to the ground in congregational prayer. As long as I believed in their god, everything would be okay. I learned to cross my heart if I saw a monster in the distance. That would keep the bullets away.

*

Monsters never chased me out of my room and into the bed of my parents. They chased me out of my country, far, far from my parents.

Nemoj da budeš glup.

Don’t be stupid, my father had said to me while we were still refuged in Zagreb, Croatia. We had escaped Sarajevo, far from the monsters. In a few days my plane would leave for America, a safe haven.

Hello, my name is Ed.

I learned to say that when I arrived. In America, my father told me, ethnic cleansing would not happen. There, I would be safe. There, I could raise a family.

We hugged goodbye and I sobbed. That was the last I ever saw my father.

*

Monsters didn’t go away with the counts of sheep or the whispers of prayers. Even halfway across the world, even in America, they haunted me. I’d turn on my TV and the news tags

would read *The Old Bridge Destroyed, A City Literally Torn in Two* and *Sarajevo Under Siege – Death Toll Rapidly Rising*. Headlines of rape, torture, concentration camps. Balkanization.

Monsters didn’t disappear once I outgrew my youth. They still haunt me every night and, with the passage of time, frighten me even more.

“Daddy,” my son now often says at night, “are you sure there are no monsters under my bed?”

I comfort him into a cocoon of sheets, shielding his body from the cold of winter. Outside of the bedroom window of our home, a beautiful ranch atop Mount Lily, a tall oak sways with the wind. “*Sine,*” I say. *My son.* “Monsters aren’t real.”

Emphasis on the “ish”

Chloe Weiss—Nonfiction Contest Winner

There’s a Bible in the first drawer. I keep rummaging. Scan the crusty-edged guide for CNN, Channel 25. A gray-haired, polished man fingers an electronic map. *268 to 204, clearly an advantage to Clinton. The lighter blue states, those are leaning democratic. We have to keep an eye on those as we get deeper into the night.*

I pull the cork off of a bottle of Merlot and bring it to the balcony. My boyfriend is sprawled out in a plastic lawn chair, watching the empty motel pool below him. Blaring night lamps shine on the potted ferns, the tiny parking lot. The water is a toxic blue.

His eyes stay on the pool. *You watching the election?*

Yeah, I’m gonna go back in, in a second. You don’t have to watch.

I will if you want me to, love.

He cocks his head to the side like a dog waiting for his treat. The same face I wake up to when he makes me breakfast. When he perches at the foot of the bed and balances a plate of some french toast concoction across his crusty apron. Or, when traffic stops and he clasps my palm, leading me gently across concrete. This is his hero face. His *you’re welcome* face.

I swig Merlot and remember to nod while he explains how he has *just never gotten into politics*. How it’s *bad for his mental health—bad for everybody’s mental health*. He steals the bottle and swigs. He says, *better to just stay out of it*.

After almost two years of dating him, I’ve heard this phrase a lot. One time was when he said to *maybe not* bring up politics with his family. They voted Trump this year. *It’s probably better to stay out of it. That’s what I do; I just stay out of it.*

We spent Christmas with his family. Not the 4th, though—he said, *maybe it’s better to just skip the BBQ? Grandma is kind of weird about the whole Jewish thing*. I said *Hey, I’m Jew-ish*,

emphasis on the “ish.” He laughed and I made sure that I laughed too.

At Christmas, it was the two of us with his parents and his brother. They sang carols and hovered around a mahogany piano. His mother tried to teach me the chorus to “Joy to the World,” her voice crackling with excitement. I bobbed my head to the beat, forced the corners of my mouth up my cheeks, and laughed to distract from my silence. Their eyes said *you’re welcome*.

He said *probably better to just stay out if it* in the backseat of an Uber, too. He told the driver the name of the bar—we were going there to see some folk band—and then, like always, asked the driver how the drives had been, if he had any good stories. He’ll small talk with anyone—gas station attendants, waiters, strangers on NJ Transit. That includes the homeless guy who sits by Gate 137 in Port Authority. He stops by the gate on his way home from culinary school to give the man braised meat from class. He asks him if it’s cooked okay.

The Uber driver had a thick South Jersey accent and a red Devil’s cap that matched the glow of the traffic light cascading onto the street. The walk signal counted down from ten while a herd of Orthodox Jews ambled past our car. My boyfriend and I watched them disappear around the bend. Then we watched the driver’s smirking eyes through the reflection mirror, and his mouth tightening as he muttered *everybody’s readin’ the fuckin’ Qu’ran these days*.

I remember how tight the seatbelt felt. How my boyfriend’s fingers were like a paperweight across my lap. How the air freshener swayed on a string around the mirror—a Royal Pine scent failing to mask hints of Cuban Cigar.

I played—and still play—scenes in my head where I told the driver off. But in reality, I forced any thought of defiance back down my throat. For some reason, it felt right to be small and to be silent. It felt right to let my boyfriend keep thinking he was a hero—to let myself keep thinking he was a hero.

Mostly, I remember remembering how different we are. And how he could realize that in a second. How he could stop loving me in a second, if I just opened my mouth.

Probably better to just stay out of it rings in my ears when I decide not to tell him about my mother's panicked calls—she runs out of breath on the phone lately. *Bomb threats in Jewish community centers all over the place, neo-Nazis are everywhere, they smashed in Carrie's temple windows—you remember Carrie, Carrie out in California, Carrie from college. It's Trump, he's giving rise to all these white supremacists—*

Last weekend, he said that I seemed stressed, so he took me on a surprise camping trip. He filled the back seats of his Ford with fishing rods, canned beans, a matt for my bad back, the blanket he made, and a bag for other people's litter. *Always leave the grounds cleaner than when ya got there.*

He drove us four hours north through farms and mountains and let me sleep until the view was too good to miss. He told me not to carry anything. He got wide-eyed and said *this is my dream, camping and you. This is all I need.* He taught me how to build a fire, curving over the flame like a toddler hard at work in a sandbox. When he asked what I was smiling about, I didn't tell him that the scent of flame makes me think of Hanukkah and my mother lighting the menorah. Instead, I watched his determined fingers curl around a long dead poking stick. I watched him poke and poke until the letters blackened, shriveled, shrunk.

I never told him that the scent of flame reminds me of my mother's frantic shouting. *Girls, we forgot to light the menorah!* My mother, as she slides messy magazine stacks and knitted hats away from the center of the kitchen table. Plunks the menorah down and brushes off its dust with the side of her hand. The swears under her breath when the match flame gives out. Her drifting voice when she forgets how the prayer goes. My family laughs and mumbles Hebrew mistakes through their teeth. My mother in all her messiness.

His mother wears a gold cross that I can't stop staring at on her tan, freckled neck.

His mother gave me a proud tour of her nativity figurines, and the angel ornaments with piercing blue eyes.

His mother let me put the star on the tree this year. *We waited, because we figured you might want to try.*

Bitter salt air crawls up my cheeks and sends rippled waves through the pool. This motel in Cape May was one of his surprises. Like the notes he leaves in my shoes, scribbled reasons why he loves me. *You are a light.*

I use a light voice. *I gotta check, I'm sorry.* He follows me inside to the musty room with tan chipping walls. We sit on the edge of a scratchy olive duvet with Christmas-red hibiscuses.

Lemme help you relax, he whispers, reaching for my waist.

I don't tell him I feel like I'm shrinking in this motel room. Instead, I shrug him off and muster a half-smile. I say, *I drank too much, I'm sorry* and hope that he doesn't see the full Merlot bottle on the nightstand.

Donald Trump takes Michigan before we fall asleep.

I wake up around 4:30 in the morning. I use my trembling fingers to Google *Who won the US election.* The man with the red tie. The bar graph.

I feel my stomach churn beneath the scratchy duvet. His damp breath on my neck, his arm hair across my hipbone. The hands of a man who didn't touch a ballot this year. Stare at the chipping walls. Scream, silently. Stay small. Remember not to wake him.

When I Was a Girl

France Hernandez — Nonfiction Contest Runner-Up

Girl

My dark eyes stared at the birth certificate:

May 7, 1998. 11:56 a.m. *Francisca Michele Hernandez.*

I was twelve when I asked my mother about my name. “¿Por qué me nombraste después de mi abuela?”

Her head tilted to the side, and her ebony hair cascaded over her left shoulder. Her eyes stared at me for a while. The freckles on her face highlighted against her pale skin, capturing her round brown-mahogany eyes. She answered, “I promised your grandmother that if I ever had a girl, I would name the baby after her.”

The only words that processed in my mind were *girl* and *her*.

“You were born on a Thursday, I remember, and I already knew before you were born that you were a girl. Such a beautiful girl.”

Thursday. *Girl...girl...*

Note:

Girl: a label for the female body from birth, through childhood and adolescence until adulthood, where a girl becomes a woman.

Dread coursed my veins as the term *girl* hovered heavily between us. I felt the coldness slip down my spine and slide to my toes, to my fingertips, so that it left my chest hollow and my stomach filled with anxious, fluttering moths. I never had the chance to ask: why did it matter if I was a girl? but the heavy silence in the air told me that being a girl was permanent. I couldn't change it.

Note:

Permanent: what is done is done. You cannot undo it. You are doomed.

I was twelve. How could I be doomed already? But I was, I was doomed before I was born. It wasn't until high school that I questioned whether being a girl was permanent or not.

Note-to-self:

It wasn't permanent; it was temporary. The word *girl* couldn't be permanent because nothing is permanent. Things change.

Boy

Dresses. Bow Headbands. Ruffled Socks. Tights. High-heeled Shoes. The very description of a girl dressed from the late 1900's. As I glanced at each photo, that's how my five-year-old self appeared to my sixteen-year-old self.

Recalling:

I was fourteen when I asked her why she was obsessed with dressing me up when I was a child.

“You were like my personal Barbie doll. I got to dress you in cute dresses and skirts with your ruffled socks on. I miss those times, when I got the chance to dress you.”

I was sixteen, flipping through the pages of my photo album and studying every photo. All I saw were ruffled socks, satin dresses with cute bowl hats or bow hair bands on each side of my ponytail. “Ha! You look like a boy here.” My twelve-year-old brother laughed while his index finger touched the picture. My eyes stared at the photo he was pointing at:

Light blue-gray tracksuit. Low-cut hair. White dirty sneakers.

I was three years old in that photo, with vague facial features that I passed as the opposite sex. The fact that I didn't look like my mother's personal Barbie doll made me realize that, even if I looked

like someone else, I was still *that girl*. Yet, I saw glimpses of *that boy* when my twelve-year-old brother kept pointing at similar images.

Recalling:

Every Sunday morning, I was dressed from head to toe every time we went to church. One day, I asked her why. I was seven back then, thinking why do I have to wear these white gloves on my hands if I'm going to get them dirty?

"You have to wear them; it goes with the outfit, Michem. Leave them on." She scrunched her eyes and lifted her left eyebrow, daring me to go against her. I left them on and eventually got them dirty. I told her. She didn't listen.

Note:

Michem is a nickname, because my middle name is Michele. It's a comfort name that I felt was *me* and not *that girl*. No one in my family calls me Francisca. I don't know why or how it began, but no one in my family does. However, in school and other public places, I am Francisca—a reminder that I am still *that girl*.

I continued to flip the pages of my photo album, and the images progressively changed from the girl dressed from the late 1900's to a boy from the same era. I couldn't pinpoint the feeling I had when my brother laughed at *that boy* in the photo. I didn't care about his laugh. I just continued to stare at the photo. There was something about it that told me that I was someone else from the beginning. I was never *that girl* my mother dressed me up as a child—I was *that boy*.

Name

What's your name?

I never felt that my name identified me. Rather, it was a name that upheld the promise of my mother.

Note:

Promise: an agreement made to hold the "promiser" accountable for fulfilling a certain task.

Warning: it should not be taken lightly. Proceed.

Francisca was the girl that pleased my mother by listening to her demands. "Put this skirt on." I did exactly what she told me. "Don't forget to wear your poncho on top of the blouse." I put it on. I pleased my mother to the point that *Francisca* was someone else, that Francisca was *that girl*. I was left without a name and unsure of who I was anymore.

It started in middle school. I was twelve, where anonymous was a name that popped into my mind, a name to call myself.

Note:

Anonymous: referring to someone or something that is not identified or does not have a label.

"Francisca," my teacher said out loud, searching for a face that fit the name. It wasn't her tone or the way her eyes couldn't place a name to a face. It was the name that made me feel like a mime trapped in a box from which there was no way out. Even if there was a hole, that hole must have been just small enough for me to breathe.

When my peers asked for my name I would simply respond, "Anonymous." I even scrawled the term on top of my notebook in purple marker, claiming it as my name.

Name, please?

Coming of Age

Red Dress. Red Crown. Wand. Silver Heels. Makeup. It was my moment to shine, to show my transformation from girlhood to womanhood. Except—this was the moment where, underneath the *makeup*, I was to transform into someone else.

It was my Quinceñera, the day where everyone would see me become a woman. My mother didn't want to miss her opportunity, so she did my makeup.

“Mom! Can you not poke my eye? I don’t want any makeup.” Stubbornly, I pushed her hands away from my face, watching her brows crease in the middle and her pouting lips, a sign of frustration fuming out of her.

“Sólo déjame hacerlo. Knowing you, this will be my last time putting makeup on you. It’s your big day, too. Así que déjame hacerlo.” With a few *ouches* escaping my mouth when she poked my eye again, I let her do as she pleased.

“¿Te pusiste algo debajo de tu vestido?” my mother asked loudly from the living room.

“Yes, I put on shorts como tu lo dijiste,” I shouted back from my room.

My mother didn’t look underneath my dress, and I was glad that she didn’t. Though, at the end of the day, I told her and she couldn’t believe it. She thought that I was trying to be funny, but little did she know that wearing that piece of clothing underneath the dress was a part of my coming of age.

I wore white flats until I arrived home, where the exchange of footwear happened. It was time for my transformation from girlhood to womanhood, where my dad exchanges my white flats for silver heels.

But underneath my red dress during my big day was my *red basketball shorts*. It was my coming of age.

Me

Girl. Boy. In-between. Who are you?

I needed a pair of sweatpants for my gym class during middle school, but when we couldn’t find them in the female’s section, my mother hesitantly suggested the male’s. I never thought that she would suggest something like that, but after realizing that I didn’t comply with her dress code, she bought my first pair of sweatpants in the male’s section from Modell’s.

From there, I started borrowing clothes from my 13-year-old brother. He didn’t care as long as I washed them and placed them back. I never felt more comfortable in my own body, wearing masculine clothing. It wasn’t because the clothes were comfortable or baggy on me, but my body felt mine. It made me think back to the picture of *that boy*. I was him. I am him now.

Did my mother approve? Did it really matter to her? To me?

My mother noticed my withdrawal from her dress code. She didn’t question me about it, but instead went along with it. She bought me clothes from the male’s section whenever I needed a new pair of pants or a shirt, and even bought me sneakers from the male’s section.

Recalling:

We were shopping at H&M in search for a pair of sweatpants for my brother when I wandered off to the other side of the male’s section.

“Michem,” my mom called out. I walked towards her, glancing at the pair of pants she held in front of us. “¿Qué piensas de esto?”

“I like them. He will like them.” My eyes wandered to a shirt near her. “Mom, can you buy me that shirt?” I reached over and held it in front of her. “Do you think it will match my navy shorts?”

I tried it on as her brown-mahogany eyes stared at the shirt for a while before approving. “Sí, creo que se verá bien con sus pantalones cortos.”

Everything changed when I was seventeen—except one thing: my *name*. High school arrived, the perfect setting where being Francisca wasn’t permanent. It was temporary.

“France!” A guy called behind me down the hallway, stopping me from walking towards my AP Calculus class. It was the first time someone called me by a name other than Francisca.

“Yeah?” My body turned around. “What’s up? You never called me by that name.”

“Eh.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I thought it would be a nice touch. I think it fits you better than Francisca.” His dark eyes stared at me, waiting for me to reply.

I nodded my head, grinning at him, before saying, “I think so, too.”

I felt that name embraced all parts of me. I wasn’t what they’ve told me from the beginning. I am me.

I knew that I wasn’t *Francisca*. I wasn’t *her* with pigtails and skirts. I was never *just* her. I was that boy from the photo but also that girl in various dresses—I was both of *them*.

I was the girl and boy, who wore dresses and tuxes. I was a combination of both.

But knowing that I was both of *them*, that they were parts of me, made me realize that nothing is permanent and things change.

There are days where I feel that I’m *that* boy and the girl doesn’t exist. Other times, I feel like I’m both and I can express myself in different ways.

But one thing that I am sure of that doesn’t change is my *name*.

Who are you, again?

I’m France.



Every Girl I Ever Loved, I Left at Summer Camp

Joseph Dahut

As a fifth grader, eyes were only eyes,
mouths were mouths, and hair
had always been just hair. But you
were the ten-year-old Aphrodite

in a faded, red life vest.

On a paddleboat.

With an embarrassing sunburn.

I remember snapping twenty-two
of the twenty-seven
pictures on the disposable camera
my grandmother gave me
to remember you.

I remember you, wading in Summit Lake,
clad with gimp bracelets,
hula-hooping past the crease of your wrist.

I remember you, peering into the creek,
watching sunfish complete
their bustling commute.

We watched the golden pines
of summertime dilute the words
that slipped from your lips:
Have you ever been in love?

I remember you, chucking stones
shaped like plates,
breezing across the water
like airplanes.

I came home that summer, exhaling the day,
only to breath in the biting regrets
of goodbye.

A History Told Through Battery Park

Sofia Amorim

Everyone who went to school with them,
imagines that when they see the photos of their trip to Battery Park,
that they awkwardly hold hands,
with the same shyness that they stole glances of each other
back during Junior year, when everyone placed bets
to when they would finally get together.
Everyone would see his new photo,
and they knew that she was smiling as she clicked the shutter,
the same way she would smile
when he would steal her color-coded notes in AP Lang.
Everyone would see her new profile picture,
with the same background, and know
that he was trying to get her to smile,
because they knew he worked hard to coax it from her.
Everyone would know
that their fingers would clumsily brush against each other;
a finger, a thigh, a coat pocket,
silently wishing they could just grab a hand
without feeling as though they were breaking a rule.
Everyone knew, that they would always find an excuse
to make a trip to the city, to a bookstore,
somewhere where she could rattle off
the things she's read and studied, and where he
would sit and listen, amazed and scared,
and then poke her, and pull her back to that classroom, three years
ago.
Everyone sees how well they fit into the landscape of Battery Park,
walking the close and quiet streets,
the way they imagine themselves in a history so far removed.
What they don't know,
is that he was the one who suggested they go to the Holocaust
Museum,
that he wanted to take her somewhere,

where he could listen to her, talk with confidence,
with tenderness, with passion,
where she could stand close to him, without pretense.
Everybody sees how they dance around each other,
close enough to touch, too scared to break,
knowing that there is no one else in the room,
and in those dark exhibits,
with every insight she shared, with every fact he repeated,
and in each photo he managed to sneak of the exhibit (with her
back towards him
as she read about the deception of language),
they found solace in what everyone else would assume
you find when holding hands.
What everyone didn't know,
is when they were watching footage from the Eichmann Trial,
and the wall next to her fell,
and she didn't move out of its way,
how for the first time, in the six years they've known each other
he touched her,
pulling her away from a crumbling wall,
and he realizes that she would not have moved.
She just looked at the dust,
and crumbled drywall,
unmoved.
But when she turned to face him,
he saw trails from where her dried tears cascaded in silence.
He wonders if it was the film,
or the wall caving,
but everyone knows,
they were for him.

Charming

Maxxe Albert-Deitch

Bennet had worked as a barista at the Village Café and Bakery for three years, and never failed to be surprised by the sheer variety of people who came in for their daily dose of caffeine. There were the highly polished, not-a-smudge-on-their-glasses professionals who carried large leather briefcases and hardly looked up from their constantly buzzing, shiny silver cell phones. There was the elderly couple in denim and soft, flowery linen, who always ordered eggs and bacon—sunny side up for him and with a side of biscuit for her. There were the four high schoolers, two girls and two boys, two of whom Bennet had quietly been hoping would get together for the past three months. But none of these people quite captured his attention the way that his newest customer did.

Perhaps the reason he was so eye-catching was because he *was* new. Bennet had reached a point where he knew all of the regulars, sure, but he also knew the town. There was a certain impression that went along with the locals, something simple and a little bit old fashioned but true to its roots. Everyone who was from around these parts knew it. Bennet, in his jeans and flannel, knew it. The high school kids, with their glasses and worn-out backpacks, knew it. The couple with the eggs and the bacon knew it. Hell, even the polished professionals knew it, no matter how hard they tried to break out of the type.

But not the new customer. Bennet studied him in between taking orders and pouring coffee into mismatched but colorful mugs. The stranger wore a white jacket that would have been ridiculous on pretty much anyone else, complete with silver braiding and... were those epaulets? His pants were practically leggings. Maybe the look would have fit somewhere else, but here? In this town? Bennet couldn't decide whether he was more fascinated by the stranger's fashion choices or by the man himself. He was tall, or at least taller than Bennet. Broad-shouldered. His hair caught the light in such a way that Bennet couldn't tell if it was dark brown or nearly blond. Either way, the effect was nothing

short of mesmerizing. His face was familiar, but Bennet couldn't place it. Odd, since Bennet was sure he would remember someone who looked like that. Cheekbones like polished marble. A scowl between his straight nose and just-barely-cleft chin. A crease between his sharply angled eyebrows, blue eyes like sharp chips of ice, warning *stay away*.

Bennet shook his head and returned to pouring coffee. It was foolish to think that anything might happen. In this town, as a general rule, it was foolish to hope. Bennet had learned that lesson a long time ago. Besides, there was work to be done. He glanced away from the stranger and reached for a pan of hash browns, cursing quietly as he realized he'd forgotten a potholder. His breath hissed between his teeth as he wrapped a small bandage around the newly pink and stinging area of skin before continuing to scoop fried potato out of the salted butter and place it onto a plate. After giving the dish a moment to cool, he picked up the plate and carried it over to the teenagers in the corner. They hadn't ordered it, but they were good kids. Well-behaved. If Bennet was working, he usually found time to throw them a free side dish every now and again. While he was standing, Bennet grabbed the nearest coffeepot and headed over to the elderly couple, whisking away their plates and refilling their mugs.

The stranger had yet to move from his table by the window. The Village Café was a place where customers came up to the counter to order, but perhaps the newcomer didn't know that. Bennet took a deep breath, convincing himself that the only reason he was walking over to the table was to be a good representative for the café. No other motives whatsoever. He tossed a dishrag over his shoulder and grabbed a menu and a pad of paper from the counter, then walked over—calmly, *calmly*—to the table by the window. He placed the menu on the table in front of the stranger, pen and pad of paper poised to take the man's order.

The stranger didn't look up.

Bennet cleared his throat.

The stranger's shoulders shifted, almost elegantly, and he looked up at Bennet with a mix of sadness and anger that could not possibly have been caused by a throat-clearing and a Village Café

apron. Bennet noted the motion, but did not ask a question. Instead, he flipped to a new sheet on his pad of paper and uncapped his pen.

“Ready to order, sir?” he asked, trying to keep his face as neutral as possible.

“Ah, just...” the stranger glanced down at the menu, eyes passing over it too quickly for him to possibly read every option listed there. “A cup of tea. Please.”

Bennet jotted the order down, his eyebrows quirking up in inquiry. “That’s all?”

“Is that not...sufficient?” the stranger’s scowl grew slightly more intense.

Bennet’s eyes widened. “Er, yes, of course that’s—I was just... you seem like you might want to eat something? I just... here, I’ll leave you with the menu, how’s that? If you decide you want anything else, let me know.”

The stranger relaxed slightly, though his face was still drawn and the scowl was still very much in place. “Sure thing.”

Bennet nodded, ducking his head slightly. “And...can I get a name for the order, sir?”

The stranger’s head jerked up slightly, and a look passed over his face. “Pr—Nikolai.”

“Nikolai.” Bennet repeated, taking his time to write the name down next to the order.

“That’s wrong.” The stranger—Nikolai—pointed out flatly.

“Hm?” Bennet looked down at what he’d written. *Nicklay*. “Oh.” He scratched the name out and rewrote it. *Nikolai*. “I’ll be right back with your tea, then.”

Nikolai looked up, nodded once, and then resumed staring at the tablecloth with the same intensity as before.

A few minutes later, Bennet returned with the tea, two packets of sugar, two slices of lemon, and a tiny pitcher of milk. Nikolai was still staring at the tablecloth. Bennet glanced at the clock and decided that yes, he did have time to do what he wanted to do. And it was out of concern for this strange man, not because Nikolai was...striking. Just because he looked upset. That was all. “Do you want...?”

Nikolai’s head jerked up. “What?”

“You looked...” Bennet shook his head. “Never mind.”

Nikolai’s scowl shifted, turned to something more curious, though still reserved. “No, what were you going to say?”

Bennet hesitated, pressing his lips together and tucking his pen behind his ear. “You know what, enjoy your tea.” He glanced around the café, noting the many tasks he had left to do. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

Bennet returned to the counter and tried to again busy himself with pouring coffee and washing mugs and frying potatoes. The teenagers paid and left. Bennet went over to the elderly couple and poured them what he knew from routine would be their last cups of coffee for the day. Then, with two hours before the lunch rush, Nikolai was the only person left in the café. Turning on some quiet acoustic music had done nothing to lessen the stagnant quiet hanging in the air.

Bennet carefully dried and put away the last of the plates. He wiped his hands on a dish towel, poured a second mug of tea, placed two blueberry muffins on a plate, and walked over to the table by the window.

This time, Nikolai looked up. “What were you going to say earlier?”

Bennet raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“Earlier. You said that I looked...something. You never finished the sentence. So? What was it?” Nikolai’s expression was expectant. Bennet got the impression that this was a man used to getting his way, whether that was answers or something else.

He sighed. “I was going to say that you looked upset.”

“Ah.” Nikolai grimaced. “That.”

Bennet set the plate with the muffins on the table, as well as the second mug of tea.

Nikolai frowned. “I didn’t order more tea.”

“I know.” Bennet replied. “This is for me. One of those muffins is yours if you want it, though. They’re good—lemon blueberry.”

“Lemon blueberry muffins?” One corner of Nikolai’s mouth tugged upwards in what could almost be called a smile.

“Baked fresh this morning.” Bennet nudged the plate over

to the other side of the table.

“Hm. That’s...tempting.” Nikolai looked up at Bennet on the last word, catching Bennet’s eyes with his bright blue ones. “I assume accepting this means taking you up on your offer to...talk about it?”

“So, there’s an ‘it’ to talk about.” Bennet said, surprising himself with his quick reply.

Nikolai paused for a moment.

“You don’t have to.” Bennet said softly. “It can be just a muffin if you want.”

Nikolai considered the plate with the muffins, then lifted his gaze to consider Bennet. He looked back at the muffin. And then he picked it up, took a large bite, and chewed, looking up at Bennet as he did. Nikolai swallowed. His tongue flicked out to catch a loose muffin crumb. He gestured to the empty chair at the table. “Well? Are you sitting down or not?”

Bennet pulled out the chair and sat down, taking a sip of his own mug of tea. “Hi.”

“Hello.” Nikolai responded dryly. “So. You really want to hear about the troubles of the random stranger in your café?”

Bennet shrugged, feigning nonchalance, but gestured for the other man to speak.

“Well.” Nikolai closed his eyes for a moment, draining the now probably-cold dregs of his cup of tea. He fiddled with the paper wrapper on the muffin. “My father is not...the most understanding person. He wants me to get married, you see.”

Bennet’s eyes narrowed in confusion, but then widened immediately on understanding where he’d seen Nikolai’s face before. “And he’s been hosting a different ball every night, rather than just letting you date?”

Nikolai chuckled bitterly, and Bennet knew that his guess had been correct. “He likes to play matchmaker. And he doesn’t exactly...*approve* of my dating choices. Something about my needing to, ah, *man up*, as it were.”

Bennet took a sip of his own tea. “Listen, sir—your highness—”

“Just Nikolai, please.” The crown prince of the kingdom

waved Bennet’s honorifics away like dismissed servants. “Nik, if you want.”

“Nik.” Bennet set his mug back down, trying to mask the disappointment that he felt like a rock in his stomach. “Aren’t you searching for...that woman? I’ve seen the posters; I’m sure she’s beautiful. I’d be upset, too, if I couldn’t find...”

Nikolai laughed, but the sound wasn’t cheerful. Derisive, maybe, but far from happy. “No. No, I’m definitely not upset because I can’t find her.”

Bennet tilted his head to the side, confused. “So...”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, if I was looking for her more seriously, don’t you think I’d have listed more than a shoe size? I’m not *actually* a foot fetishist, good Lord.” Nikolai snorted. “She’s blonde, a little under 5’7”, and her name is Ellie. Pretty sure she lives in a nice neighborhood on the other side of town. If I wanted to find her, I’m sure I could.”

Bennet coughed. “I’m sorry, you’re *not* looking for her?”

“My father thinks I am.” Nikolai picked up the muffin again. Bennet wasn’t sure if it was possible to bite into a muffin angrily, but if it was, then that was what Nikolai had just done. “But frankly, if I hear one more word about how a prince has to be strong and domineering and have a beautiful yet obsequious little wife, I’m going to have to...” the prince’s shoulders drooped. “I don’t know.”

“I take it you’ve got a different plan in mind?” Bennet asked softly.

“I might, at that.” Nikolai looked up with the traces of a grin. “I find my father’s definition of what a crown prince should be...it’s a little toxic, really.”

Bennet had just taken a sip of tea, and now spluttered, struggling to swallow without choking. “Toxic.”

Nikolai took a final bite of his muffin, folding the paper into a neat triangle and setting back down onto the plate. “Well, given that he’s never approved of anyone I’ve ever dated, and now he wants me to marry someone I met three nights ago, just because she’s *female*, and it presents the right *image*...yes, I think toxic pretty well covers it.”

“Ah.” Bennet grimaced. “That’s...a familiar story.”

“Oh?” Nikolai quirked an eyebrow.

“Yeah. But it’s...well, it would take a long time to tell.”

Bennet tapped his fingers on the side of his mug.

“Does it have a happy ending?” Nikolai reached over and covered Bennet’s hand with his own. Bennet wasn’t sure if it was the residual warmth from the tea or something else altogether, but at the moment of contact his body filled with a heat that was almost electric, complete with an odd fluttering in his stomach.

He smiled. “You know, I think it might.”

He dreams of flamingos

Julia Cornell

He wakes up and rolls over to kiss
my forehead. His hand strokes
my back as he tells me he dreamt
about our wedding. His parents
gave us pink plastic flamingos,
he said. To put on the lawn of our place.

Your face winks at me from a dream,
your hair gold as a wedding ring,
like honeyed sunlight. We can take each
day as it comes, my love. We can invite
your parents over to see the yard.



The Peace Mural

Kameron Raynor

To the first man I loved and lost

Leanza Rodriguez

Hey Abuelo,

Do you mind if I just talk to you for a little while?

I know, I know, hablo demasiado, but please...I really need you.

Actually, I have always needed you, but back then I did not know what that meant—to need someone—and less how to articulate the feeling.

Hey Abuelo,

I know that I could never disappoint you. You loved me so much that even my sharp tongue and quick mouth were funny to you. But what if I told you about all of the things that I've done since—well, we'll just say, since you moved? I don't think you'd be too proud if you knew.

Hey Abuelo,

How did you know Abuela was the one for you? How did you know that she's the woman you'd spend the rest of your life with? Was it love? But even then, what exactly does that feel like? I mean, yes, I love you, but is it like the same kind of love or is it different?

Hey Abuelo,

Thank you for raising an incredible man. Raising two kids and taking care of your wife when you barely had anything was rough. I know that once you had to sleep lying in front of your house because you couldn't pay the rent and the doors were locked, but you worked hard and made sure they never had to sleep in the streets again.

Hey Abuelo,

He's such a good man and soldier, but wow is he an even better father. Yes, he's made mistakes and so did you, but he learned from the best and he's been doing great. You know he misses you. HE

doesn't say it out loud much, but his face transforms into yours when he thinks about you. These days, I see you more than I used to.

Hey Abuelo,
¡Te quiero tanto! Quiero que sepas que te quiero tanto. I don't think I'll love anyone the way I love you and our relationship only lasted seven years. But it's okay; I understand that you needed to go in order to feel better.

Hey Abuelo,
I'm going to stop talking now and let you rest, okay.

Abuelo, can you hear me?

How to Save a Broken Ship

Sydney Quinn

“Denise!” my mother cries, “There you are!”

Today, I'm Denise. I set my purse down by her bed and force a smile. I figure that at least this is better than last week, when she thought I was Erma, our old housekeeper who spoke with a rolling accent and always forgot to wipe down the counters.

“What do you think?” my mother asks. She tugs at one of her loose curls. “I want to get it colored. Should I go lighter or darker?”

I sit by her feet. At least her room is nice, with the door next to me connecting to a tiny bathroom. There is printed floral wallpaper, a cheerful comparison to the somber November sky outside of the curtained window. It perks up my mood just a bit. The bed she lies in is small but comfortable, and a wooden table stands next to her. It's topped with a vase of fake daisies. She wears a collared blue dress dotted with tiny white birds. The nurse told me that she just woke up from a nap.

“I like it the way it is,” I say.

She sighs. “But that's the thing—everyone always likes to keep things the way they are. Nobody wants to change, Denise.”

Having a conversation with her is like watching the seasons move backwards: summer leaves fall into the earth and snow sprouts up amongst the grass. There is no way to reverse it; you just stand and watch.

“I mean,” she continues, “maybe I want to change. I don't want to end up like one of those boring receptionists who work downtown, with their plain bobs and cat eye glasses. Maybe I'll go blond. Hell, Denise, maybe I'll go red.”

“I think that, whatever you do, you'll look great.”

She beams at me. “I don't know what I'd do without you.”

I struggle to return her enthusiasm.

With slightly trembling hands, I reach into my purse and take out a piece of cloth, stitched with pink and blue sheep. I place it in her warm hands. “Here, I brought this for you.”

I know it's worthless. It's not like there's anything I can do to make her remember. But a deep need contracts in my chest to try and fix her. I wave memories over her head as a false hope for myself.

"It's cute, Denise," she says, "but I think it's too small for me."

In my head, I'm reaching over and grasping her thin shoulders and shaking them so hard that her dying brain cells come back to life. Say my name, I'm crying. I am your only daughter! Say my fucking goddamn name.

"Denise?"

I focus back on my reality. "What?"

She returns my baby blanket. "You keep it."

She starts to talk about her hair color again and I want to curl up beside her the way I used to as a child. I want to lean my head against her breast and listen to the rhythm of her heartbeat. To drift off into sleep then was like lying in a boat in the middle of a vast ocean. Her hand holding mine was the anchor, and we would be safe forever.

I check my phone. "I have to get going now."

"Okay," she chirps. "I'll let you know how my hair turns out."

"Can't wait."

I stand, placing the blanket in my purse, and then look back at her.

"I love you."

Last week, when I blurted this out as Erma, she laughed awkwardly and told me that she'd leave the check on the table for me. Today though, her eyes light up. "I love you too, Denise. You're my best friend."

"I'll always be your best friend," I choke.

She doesn't need to know that Denise, her actual best friend, has been dead for six months now.

I tell her goodbye and leave the room. I walk down the hall, past wheelchair patients and sign myself out at the front desk. There is a bitterness in the air outside that signals winter approaching. I sit in my car alone, watching damp, sodden leaves land flat on my

windshield.

I press the blanket to my face and breathe. There's a trace of her lavender perfume mingling with the scent of dust and mildew.

A silent scream rises in my throat.

Because I now see the truth that I can no longer fight. My mother wanders across empty waters dismasted, waves of crashing names and faces rolling beneath her. As hard as I try to reach her, she is lost at sea.

Vietnamese Noodle Soup

Megan Vu

It's a hot day. You can see the heat radiating off of the road, cars parked sporadically across the parking lot. As soon as the car stops, you unbuckle your seatbelt and pull the door open in one fluid motion, throwing yourself out of the car at lightning speed.

Sweat beads on your temples as soon as your feet hit the pavement, and you speed to the restaurant without looking to see if your companion has even made it out of the car yet.

The door handle is hot to the touch, but you hold on to it, close your eyes, and try to understand why you're there. When you hear feet crunching on the gravel behind you, you pull it open and step inside.

In the years since you last visited, nothing has changed. The smell of beef broth, spices, and herbs curl in your stomach and make your mouth water. Like always, the restaurant is mostly empty. The AC sputters as the multiple fans swirl the hot air around in vain attempts to cool the room. The man behind the register looks up and smiles, his eyes crinkling at the edges and his teeth pearly white against his tan skin. He pushes away from the counter and makes his way to your companion. You make your way to a booth in the corner.

They grasp arms, talking in hurried Vietnamese. You slide in to the booth, unable to understand, and clench your teeth. The spices are in a rack and you spin it around in lazy circles, letting the soup spoons hit the wall. The Vietnamese gets closer, clearer, and your companion is sliding into the seat across the table.

His hair is thinning, and you can see the sweat falling down his temples. He reaches out without looking and begins to fiddle with the sriracha, nodding along to the older man as he speaks.

Abruptly, he cuts himself off and spins, grabbing some menus from the counter, although you both always get the same thing, every time, and he knows this. The man rushes into the kitchen, the Vietnamese following him through the doors as he talks to the chefs.

Your phone vibrates on the table.

How's it going?

You lock it and slide it into the seat, under your thigh. Your companion breathes shallowly, his chest moving up and down like he's just run a marathon. You're leaning your head into your hand, facing the rack. Awkwardness settles between you both like the heat, making your ears burn and your tongue thick.

"How've you been?" your companion asks, his eyes finally falling on you. They flick away fast.

"Fine. Busy," you respond, foot tapping against the table stands.

He nods, spinning the sriracha.

"How's school?"

"I'm on break."

"Where are you at, again?" he asks, eyes going to the rack. The spoons crash against the wall. You spun it with more force than anticipated.

You look at him, face blank. "Up north."

There's a lull in the conversation then, even though it wasn't much of one to begin with. The man bangs back through the doors, Vietnamese style egg rolls in hand. He slides them on to the table and smiles, before hurrying off again.

You perk up. It's been years since you've had food from this place. You reach for one of the two egg rolls on the plate and dip it in the fish oil. You spin it, letting the roll soak up as much as you can get before taking a bite. A burst of flavor: lettuce, chicken, carrots, shrimp, mushroom. It's been too long, and you have to prevent yourself from letting out a moan. Your companion takes it without the oil.

There's no sound but the snap of the crispy roll as you both chew. The man rushes back out, plates in hand. He slides the dishes on the table, smoothly exchanging them for the empty egg roll plate.

Each dish is stacked high with bean sprouts, jalapeños, basil, and lime wedges. You pick up a bean sprout and nibble, letting it crunch between your teeth in an oddly satisfying way.

He clatters back, two huge bowls in hand. They lurch

against the plates they're set on, and you see a bit of broth spill over. He slides them in front of you both with less grace than before and looks at you, smiling and expectant.

"It looks great," you say, smiling. The man's smile lolls a little bit, and you can see he's disappointed. Your heart speeds up, and you dig your nails into your hands, crescent moons leaving purple indents.

In English, he responds, "Enjoy," his accent thick as he throws his hands behind his back and spins, walking away.

You begin to throw the bean sprouts in and pick off the basil to toss in your soup. You add all of the jalapeños, but don't use any of the lime. Your companion squirts in a glob of sriracha and throws everything into the bowl by the handful, but picks out a few jalapeños. He hands you the sriracha, before picking the limes from your plate.

You both sit in silence as you mix your soup together, the broth dangerously close to spilling over.

Your companion digs in, soup spoon and fork banging against the bowl as he slurps the rice noodles and shovels chunks of beef into his mouth at the same time. You dip your soup spoon into the broth, putting it to your mouth. You let it spill past your chapped lips, hot and spicy. It warms your tongue and slides down your throat as you sigh, happy to have this one little thing. Using a fork, you pull apart the rice noodles and mix them throughout the soup, spinning them around the tongs like spaghetti. You stab a piece of beef and take a bite.

It reminds you of when you were small, when visits weren't once a year, but twice a week. You used to get chicken and fried rice, the most Un-Vietnamese meal they offered, as everyone so liked to remind you. A lot has happened since then. Twice a week became once a month, and once a month became a week in summer. Now, you wonder when he started going grey, when he put on those extra pounds, if he still lives in the same shitty apartment with that woman, and if his dog is doing okay.

He finishes his soup before you do, and you're sipping away on the broth as he spins the sriracha again.

Your phone buzzes against your thigh, and you glance

down

Want me to come get you?

Looking down, you slide your finger across the screen, opening the message thread. You simply send back *yes*.

You place your soup spoon on the edge of the plate. The bowl is mostly empty, but you're done and ready for this to be over.

"Why did you ask to meet?" you ask, fingers clasped together under the table. Sitting back, you add, "I didn't come home for you."

Your companion hesitates, holding the sriracha bottle in his hands. His eyes are wide and his mouth is a thin line.

Once upon a time, lunches like this would have been rowdy. There wouldn't have been any awkward silences, and you both would've said stupid shit to each other. You would've stayed after, spent time together. But you've grown up, wisened up, since then.

"I'm your dad," he finally answers, as if that is all he needs to say.

You sit there, oddly relaxed. "You haven't been my dad in a very long time," you say, coolly. You thought this would be an explosive interaction, not quiet and calculated. But it seems like there was only one way this meal was going to end. There's nothing left to say.

He doesn't jump to defend himself, though he gapes like a fish, his eyes squinted together. You push your bowl away and slide out of the booth. There's a familiar glint and your mom's car glides into the parking lot. She slides up to the curb and waits.

You look down at your companion. "Thanks for lunch," you say, as you turn around and walk out without looking back.

Harambe: An Elegy

Caroline Polich

On May 28th, a date we all rue,
tragedy struck at the Cincinnati zoo.

It began with a child, just three years of age,
and a silverback gorilla, in the same cage.
The poorly watched tot—we don't know his name—
toddled up to the pen, towards internet fame.

The child scaled the fence, his eyes shining bright,
toppled over the edge, with a small squeal of fright.
He fell in the pool, within the enclosure,
alive and unhurt, though lacking composure.

And what of Harambe? Befuddled, I'm sure,
for he'd never seen a child up close before.
Yet deep in his heart, he felt sympathy,
so he grabbed the boy, dragging him, back to safety.

But the zookeeper cocked his gun without thought,
and into the pen at Harambe he shot.
The bullet hit home, blood stained silver fur,
Great Harambe was dead, a ruthless murder!

His death swept the news, the meme-ers went wild,
blame ricocheted from zoo to parents to child.
But none of this helped, Harambe has passed,
and I fear he's a trend that's not meant to last,

In light of recent events, perhaps it's passé,
but I will always remember dear Harambe.



Go Ham

Caroline Polich

Blue

Nicholas Jackson

Blue,
how blue?
Iris glides over dark-sea
light scattered/refracted a mere mirror reflection
canvas
sky blue eyes & azure hair to her slender waist
cobalt revolver at her side
sapphire gun in her hand
gun powder tin in her back pocket
a midnight encounter in Prussian
smoke indigo/homegrown
“we shall be royal”
icy to the touch/hue of slate
cyan 85 fingerprints
dressed for Oxford & Cambridge
she dances with peacocks
there is a robin’s egg broken
the next color is green

wet suit

Joseph Dahut

you slide into your
second skin
for the
second time
this season
the trunk slams as you
skip
to the waves
clap
together,
hugging the secrets
of retired surfers
too old
for the ocean
too old
for coasting
down america's
tattered highways
with a surfboard
twice your height
strung atop a car
twice your age.
I tell
you its
too cold
for this
but your head jolts back

in laughter as you sprint
to the water.

The Afterlife of a Dancer

Sofia Amorim

Tonight, she undoes her satin ribbons
for the last time.
It is the last time she will wipe the blood
around her toes,
And he wonders if she'll be okay.

From now on, the only late night rehearsals
will be his,
As she practices her pirouettes
while boiling soup,
And he wonders if she'll miss it.

He'll practice lines in their room
with her,
While she points her toes and stretches
absentmindedly,
And he knows that it's just who she is.

She walks, bringing her feet through coupé.
She stands on relevé to reach the cereal.
She waits outside of his rehearsals, doing pliés.

Tonight, her legs will be wrapped
around his.
He will ask her to dance with him,
and he is scared.
And she knows, she will be okay.



Untitled
-taken at the Charlottesville Rally
Matthew Ludak

upon hearing unfortunate news

Joseph Dahut

the swell
of morning
sings to me -
the murmur
of summer
hums to me. yes,

I wonder still
how many ticks

it might take
for the clock

to know my name.
for the wall to know my face.

but still
I sit.
I haven't breathed
this slow
this deep
in several weeks.

and still
I fight.
I haven't prayed
this long
this hard
in several years.

Three Dimensional

Alissa Glaeser

“Oh, he’s from Flint? So, is his water poisoned? How’d you shower?”

I cannot seem to talk about my boyfriend without someone asking. No one seems to care about how the monarch butterflies land next to you when you’re sitting in the grass, how there is barely any humidity in the Michigan air, or how meeting his family went.

They beg for information that they ultimately do not care about.

These people who pry do not care about the passion of the people and everything they do to fight for their city, everything they do with pride and song and art to rebel against the government’s injustice.

They only want to see the Flint where people are being handed water bottles out of trucks, people crying as they attach water filters to their faucets. Not the Flint my boyfriend sees every day, has seen for 20 years—a place you cannot understand only from Michael Moore documentaries.

His Flint is as bright as the Michigan sun, which colors his hair shades of brown that marry with black. It’s as beautiful as the sparkling amber of his eyes and as resilient as he is, fighting back depression. It’s as resilient as the people of Flint, who fight the poisoned pipes. He moves as the city moves, a fast but steady pace that gets you where you need to go and lets you see the colors of the buildings and the bricks moving into one masterpiece.

There is a fire in him, in these people, that I have not found in anyone else. There is a deep care, an anger, and a midwestern kindness. He says, “Hi” to people he has never met before, talks to strangers about their interests just for the knowledge that comes with it. He forms connections and constructs a community at a pace that my reserved self is alarmed by. Interacting with random strangers on the street has never been my strong suit, but for him, it comes naturally. The midwestern hospitality is a foreign concept



Untitled -taken at the Charlottesville Rally

Matthew Ludak

to me, but I cannot help being completely enamored by it. I am inspired by him.

He moves around his city like the glide of a knife spreading butter on toast. Smooth, precise, absolutely breathtaking. The city is a thing of beauty, and I see it through his eyes. His love for the city makes the concrete shine. Where there is neglect, there is also love. The love I have for him, the love he has for this city, the love these people have for the same city that is just fodder for politicians to play with, to use as ammo during debates, shines.

From just watching him during the annual Buckham Alley Fest, so excited to show me a place that he had experienced for years and years and years, I fell in love all over again. The passion, the politeness, the connections to a place with a complicated history. New York City has always been my example for what other cities should be, but it does not hold up to his. The closeness of people who stop you as they walk to compliment you, to engage you in conversation about the local bands and artists. His long legs pulled me through the booths full of local Flint sellers, and we bought their handmade goods, ate food from local businesses, and listened to local music. For a big city, there is a community here unlike any I have ever seen. Head-on, I was immersed. There is love here.

His smile reflects off of the dark green river and lights up the abandoned waterfront structures. It was a place meant to inspire, a functional art piece that was installed to illuminate the Flint River. A tourist attraction meant to gather people after driving past the city. Forgotten by the State of Michigan and the people, but not by him. He is captivated by this place, as I am by him and his excitement to share with me something so personal. His smile spans the width of the river as he watches me navigate through the cement structures, snapping picture by picture of the M.C. Escher maze. There is something here that he sees. The true potential of this misplaced art piece. The wonder of a child climbing to its highest stone, the beauty that comes from the river flowing into its every crack and crevices, forming an ornate water feature, an eye for the mundane, the worn down, the broken. He can see everything this city can be. The limitless magic that flows through it. There is love.



Untitled
-taken at the Charlottesville Rally
Matthew Ludak

A moment over La Guardia

Kerenn Irias

a breath a release
revived by my beloved city
stirred by her many curves
and her purring midnight traffic
she whom I have longed for
America the Beautiful escapes
these weary lungs like cafe negro
burnt and bitter it spills into the aisle
jolting los Americanos awake
 how strange
I never knew
I knew the words

An Arc: -from Houston

Julia Cornell

Dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Harvey

They must have felt this way too,
I think, the first people—
when the floods came—
when the redbud trees and the myrtle
drowned and it consumed the front porch
my grandparents built.

They must have felt this way too,
the Jonahs—everything swallowed
whole by the water—
the piano, the china, the old Kodak film rolls,
the stuffed unicorn I've had since I was five.

They must have felt this too—
the first people driven from the gardens—
the violence of Creation.

In The Wind

Marybeth Wynen

When wind is strong enough to move
Each carnal groove of instinct;
Demanding strong standing
Against threats of displacement,
I want this wind to misplace me
Turnabout and face me
Take me
Uncurl, unfurl me from
Constant entanglement.
I want, I yearn for this
I have no words for this
And yet, for this
I am somehow in mourning.
For this, I am thrilling about, willing
The wind to send me soaring

And I'll never land.
I am a pinpoint pinprick
Of quintessential dust
That belonged to barrels
Of wood of trees of forests.
Winds blew through the woods
Bent, spent, broke them
Into splinters residing now
In the lines of my spine.
Prior bodies wore my skin,
Dressed it in color and shadow,
Stars dusting their eyes.
I am fresh yet made of old supplies
Old times old wishes and dreams;
I am a part of this universal stream.

I will go to whatever is after this
Having lists and lists of never-done things

And never-thought-of thoughts.
I am a library incomplete;
Books with missing pages, works
In progress in the ground that
houses my body
Lying in the grass, lying under stones
Thrown across the water.

I will die and grow roots
I will sigh as a flower in the wind
I will die and never have died
I will live and never have lived

Words, Words, Words

MJ Velten

When the Words Won't Come

When it's midday and the roaring silence in your head cannot be tamed by your distractions, trials and tribulations unable to be held at bay by any fury of sounds, and there is a block.

When it's Sunday and there's nothing to do then or the following Monday, and there comes a beast crawling—no looming, nothing so dramatic—and your fear of it stuns you into inaction, so that however much you wanted to run, it wasn't an option, but the words wouldn't have come if you run, but then, they never would have anyway.

When in the stillness of winter your muscles shake with the chill that has little to do with the temperature about the house—it's not like you've left the house—and it's almost as if you can feel the icy touch of that creeping, crawling mongrel swirling up your spine, tighter and closer and faster, constricting your movement, constricting the words that felt like they were on the brink of bursting free—but perhaps that was just a fanciful thought.

When nothing is pouring forth, situation or standpoint being irrelevant, and it's like there is a wall, dull and blank and unremarkable in every way, and somehow that makes it worse; that the damned thing is as cold and indifferent as you've ever seen, not in any way something to be described so as to feel less alone, so as to be able to explain, *look, see?* there is a thing that prevents my mouth and my fingers from working like they used to, like they ought to.

When you want to describe why there are no words, but even those words won't come.

When the Words Do Come

When the phrases and formulations come, tumbling over themselves like the foam on waves that beat against the shoreline, relentless and indifferent, but these are not the words you wanted, not at all.

When the words arrive unbidden, dark and dry to leave a

sour taste in your mouth, staining your fingers and tongue with ill intent they have for all poor creatures in reach, and the defiant cry got caught somewhere in your throat and is but a hoarse whisper to those around, easily ignored if heard at all, and so the poison continues oozing from an unwitting host.

When in the murky dusk there is a hope, a wild flicker about the house, starting and ending with you, that these words that have come will soon be gone with nothing to show they were here to begin with, till all that remains is the feeling that along the edge of your mind, there is a thought wanting freedom, but you simply put out the light and go about your day; you wake from that dream abruptly as night falls with earnest, and the screams start again.

When during the spouting of horrors you realize this is, at least to some degree, your fault, because secretly, silently, you've always wanted to allow yourself to speak out of turn, out of place among a crowd or even between a pair, for always it was that the words wouldn't come, not when you wanted them and not even when you needed them, when they seemed to make a necklace around your throat, gripping tighter as each link contracts, holding you just out of reach—but now you have them and you're sure don't you want them, at least mostly sure.

When the words finally come, but they bring with them a new set of horrors, alien to the old.

When the Right Words Come

When the mongrel that forced you to that unremarkable wall against which your back was pressed bows and recedes so that you feel as though you can move again, and all breaths come with grace.

When those words that came too quickly, moving almost violently toward their mark, and to that end razing all in their path eventually die down, a blaze that is not but warm ember glows, like the light of a love renewed, and how they come softly, feather-touches and murmured encouragements, so that to others they sound like a wind-chime laugh, all clear bells and joy.

When the thought of speaking no longer chills like ice encroaching on a temperate forest, spikey crystalline veins spreading ever closer to a warm heart in an effort to choke off new growth, because there is in you a warmth no amount of frozen reticence could starve off, to hell with the almighty effort put in—

you certainly must be made of stronger bonds than that, so that even a harsh winter's gale will feel as a drowsy, balmy afternoon breeze.

When it has taken time, and patience, and one too many screams into an eerie stillness where no sound echoed, one day too long of clamping teeth into lips to prevent the crafting of poison, too often pained and too often muted; in the end what was meant to be came to fruition, and now you will know the joys of a flower when first bursting from its bud so it may turn to the sky, wondrous at the blues of all shades as you will be at fine tuning the craft of wordsmithing, of all the progress years of silence could not steal.

When the right words come, and they are all you have ever dreamt of having.

On Leaves and Thoughts

Sofia Amorim

The bark of the tree is cracked, and dry
like the skin around the nail between my teeth.
The scene beyond this window, washing my wasted time,
reading Whitman when I should be studying trees,
my pen on my pad, writing aimlessly.

The soft white tufts of fluff, budding into leaves
that will respire, inspire, potential desires of the mind
and heart connected by mutual purpose to alevé,
aspiring unbound ambition for answers entwined
and nettled, in nature unkind.

I follow the free verse, Walt waltzing to and fro
as the leaves photosynthesize the fading light,
and I bite my nail, not thinking for the answers known,
but rather focus on what I know, we should know as right:
our thoughts are complex, which is why we write.

First Day on the Job

Kass Mattingly

Well, that was a bit of a bumpy landing. Could have been better. Oh, yes—to business. Garrison angel 2477 reporting for protection detail. Date is millennium 2, year 15. Charge is...what are you doing?

Oh, well that seems wholly unnecessary, don't you think? Honestly, there is no reason for you to making such a racket! What is the matter with you?

You're cold? Well, I can understand that, but I'm afraid you'll just have to get used to it. No, I'm sorry, you can't go back inside. Your time was up. Besides, I think your mother was getting slightly tired of carrying you everywhere.

There, there. It's not so bad. Well, I mean it can be, but not always. Apologies, I'm not very good at this yet. Believe it or not, you're my first charge. I got demoted. No, no! Nothing bad. I didn't disobey—wouldn't be here if I did. I was injured. A minor tempter came out of nowhere, and I took a hit in the primaries. Can't move that wing very well anymore.

No. I see your curiosity, but I'm not telling you any war stories. I'm not sure your mind can handle it. There are some things humans aren't meant to know. Divine mystery, ineffability, and all that.

Tch! Are all humans as stubborn as you? Fine. I was a warrior, a foot soldier among millions, among the infinite. I have thousands of eyes, and yet I can't look at you with innocence. I have thousands of hands, yet can't hold you with a pair that isn't bloodstained. I slaughtered and killed and maimed, following the orders of the seraphim. I ended the existence of beings beyond that which your reality can comprehend.

Oh, Father in Heaven, I knew that wouldn't end well. Hush now, it's alright. Here, I'll sing you something my brothers and I used to sing. You have to understand; it wasn't always war. We would harmonize with black holes. Jophiel always sang so loud, we all swore they'd shake the moons out of orbit. We'd dance on the

edge of galaxies, see who could ride a pulsar the longest. We'd surf the waves of supernova, catching the solar winds with our wings.

Never been stationed on Earth before. Not since before the flood. I don't think that counts, too much has changed. I've heard mixed things about the here and now. Poverty, neuroscience, hunger, pancakes, the Internet. You need to be careful. I can only protect so much. You have to guard you heart yourself from those that mean you harm. On the other hand, apparently chocolate is very good.

We'll figure it out together, I promise. I'll even make you a deal. I'll teach you the names of all the stars—their real names, the ones they call each other—if you teach me how to tie shoelaces. I've always like those little bows. Come on, now. There's so much for you to do, after all. Look, little one. Come and see.



Celtic Sunset

Adam Oppegaard

My Last Confession

Julia Cornell

Forgive me, my Father, for I have sinned.
My last confession was into my pillow
My last confession was not ivory bone china
and rosaried lamb. It was not holy—
Forgive me, Father, my last confession did
not come gentle, my last confession was
wrenched out of my mouth onto the crisp
white page, my last confession was bled
out of my fingers in a river of ink, my
last confession came with a blessing and
a curse and a joke about how God does
not exist outside of the bedroom. So, I guess
that is to say, my Father, my last confession is today.

It Was Always “Him”

Leanza Rodriguez

I always knew I was into you.
Well, I mean it was you
or it was him,
but it's all the same.

You who think you're men,
by the dime of an age, ten.

For some reason
your brooding masculinity
and elevated stature
enticed me, called me,

made me pay attention
to you.

I couldn't help but make fun
of the way you grunted
when you chest bumped
your bros,

and compared the sizes of your...
let's call it your ego,

and counted how many
Bud Lights you chugged last night,
and how many girls you “banged”—
but let's face it, I wanted all of it.

I wanted you and I wanted him.
I wanted all of them.

The English language
puts you first.
When talking about all people,
we say *man*-kind,

when calling out to a group,
we say you *guys*.

Hell,
this may be stretch...
but we are called hu-*mans*,
are we not?

But the English language wasn't
the only one that chose you.

Because so did I.
Wrote love songs about
you and him,
love poems about you and him—

But don't get too excited;
this isn't one of them.

I always knew that I was into you.
Well, I mean it was you
or it was him,
but it's all the same.

Or at least I used to think
it was all the same because now—

I may be into her too.

Screwdriver in the Circuitry

Julia Morreale

Now I am a console
that has a few buttons that you can't press.
There are a few to avoid,
as they can cause some serious distress.

Just like in the cartoons,
with the flashing red circle that says, "DO NOT TOUCH."
I know it can be tempting,
but you should realize what's just too much.

Sometimes panicking fingers flailing about the button
will just so happen to brush,
but it's easy to forgive them
because they meant well enough.

Others will seek out the buttons,
and mash them until I hurt.
They will end up on my shit list
and to them, I'll trade friendly for terse.

But the ones who go past the point of no return
are the ones who resort to their toolbox,
to cover how their Napoleon complexes burn
over their tiny brains and cocks.

Once they stop jerking off their ego,
they take their unclean hands
and pull out the satanic screwdriver,
preparing for their demonic plans.

They brandish the screwdriver
over my button's pristine plastic cover,
unaware of the surging power

under which their hands hover.

With a flash of their crooked teeth,
matching their crooked mindset,
the screwdriver is plunged straight down
through the plastic and into the circuits

And Here Begins The Shocking Surprise...

*Hey moron, in tearing me down
you've become vulnerable too.*

You had the fortunate oversight
to not realize that the screwdriver in your hand,
coated in semen and self-righteousness,
is made of metal.
Now, here's my "conductive" message for you:
I might be quiet and play by your rules most of the time,
but if you fuck with me like this,
I don't feel bad about electrocuting you,
sparking in response to your method of destruction
until all that's left of your heart is a blackened crisp
and your hands can never help your corpse cum again
as rigor mortis will be the only thing making you hard.

Oh, my bad, was that too harsh for you?
I can go back to rhyming, if that'll do,
since you'll only listen when sweet words I coo.
It doesn't matter if you beat me until I turn black and blue,
you make my blood boil and I'll get yours boiling too.

You can leave me and my shattered emotions left for dead.
I'll leave you with arms sliced up like a loaf of bread.
Your actions have gotten me seeing red,
so in return, it is I you shall dread.

Even if I go back to the way things were,

to being cute and following your rules,
remember that depending on your choices,
I can once again bring out more of the cruel.

Spring Cleaning

Sofia Amorim

Today is the day
where I delete every text
we exchanged,

And I trash every photo,
flush every necklace,
And torch every sheet in the journal
dedicated to what we were.

Those books
you carefully chose,
stacked before me:
Austen, Brontë,
Chbosky...

Next to scissors and a sharpie
as I
black out
and cut
each word and impression of you I found.

Today,
in this numbing, spellbound void,
I wake in a world where the thought of 'you and I'
is now extinct.

And tomorrow,
there will be no you
or us
just
I.

I'm Gettin' Bi

Alissa Glaeser

I am afraid. It is as simple as that. This fear has controlled me in various ways throughout my life. So far, I have done okay in fighting this fear to make sure important things like assignments or letting myself have fun get done. Of course, planners and sticky notes help. But things that are not assignments or event plans? Those are not marked as immediate, so they get left unread. Anything about me, myself, and I slips through the cracks to be revisited in the silence of nighttime.

*

In middle school, I was invited to my best friend's thirteenth birthday party. I have, historically, never been good at sleepovers. It was absolutely because of undiagnosed anxiety. Another issue fallen through the cracks. But this sleepover, I made it. We ate junk food and stayed up way too late watching MTV. At 1am, I was the only one awake and having a teenage mid-life crisis. *John Tucker Must Die* had just finished on the TV, and there was a scene of two girls kissing and realizing that maybe there was something more than friendship between them. This meant nothing for the movie, but everything for little me. It made me feel something deep in the pit of my stomach.

After the movie ended, Tila Tequila's reality show came on. She was wooing both men and women. This was a wild concept for me. It was 5am and I was confused and exhausted. I fell asleep. The next morning, we made a mess of the kitchen with sugar and jam and bread crusts. The laughter was loud but soft, like a bright orange blanket. It let my anxiety rest, while smothering any possible thoughts of anything last night might have suggested.

*

My anxiety and fear are drinking buddies. One takes a shot, the other chugs a beer. Both know it's wrong, but gosh, enabling one another is just so much fun. They take an Uber home and I

hope this means that it's all out of their systems, because tomorrow should be productive. But they are alcoholics, so this cycle continues. The fear fuels the anxiety. I am so stressed. The clock is ticking, and it's loud, it bangs, it echoes, it screams, it consumes. Every thought becomes about this *thing*. And the solution? Avoid it. Do not make eye contact with it. The thing is a person whose shoes you puked on while you were on a bender and you do not know her. Who is she? She is no one. This thing is no one. You are no one. Disappear into the void.

*

In 8th grade, two years after the *John Tucker Must Die* incident, I had a dream about one of my friends. She was a nice ginger-haired girl that I had been friends with since we were both 7 years old. In this dream, we kissed. It was simple and pure—just a peck. The next morning, while we worked on our teen pregnancy project together, I actively tried to repress the dream. Even though I have no recollection of having feelings for her, the dream made her hard to look at. I tried to trick my mind into thinking that it could no longer remember it, so I myself would stop replying it in my mind. I just wanted the dream to never have existed in the first place.

With puberty came a lot of dreams similar to that one. Only my subconscious was allowed to work out these things, because the waking body did not want to think about it at all. I was already awkward and different; to add something like this to the mix was not something any fourteen-year-old wants to deal with. Nor did I have any outlet for it. In the early 2010s, there was not an online community for stuff like this. Trying to Google anything related to it brought you porn.

There was a website called Stardoll though, which on the surface was an innocent community for playing dress up games. But there were message boards too, where girls posted stories about them making out and doing other things with girls. They were written like they were things that happened to these posters, but in actuality, they were all fantasies that they were sharing. I read them with an intensity, because they were the only source of information about what these feelings could mean for me. I had no idea what

gay was. Neither did they. None of it was real or accurate. All of their stories, the intimate details, were overwhelming. I felt dirty just being on the website. I did not see myself in these forum posters. Their sexuality was light years ahead of mine. I tried to make myself forgot what I had read. I pushed my mind to focus on books, fictional characters, like Harry Potter and Bella Swan. Characters with fantastical lives and bigger problems.

*

High school brought fandom. Fandom was a saving grace. Fandom never asked me to figure myself out and it never expected anything from me. It just extended a hand and welcomed me as I was. I could construct myself any way that I pleased, and it was always more authentic than I was in real life. I allowed myself to be as geeky and ridiculous as I wanted.

When Facebook was a young website, before the timeline update, I used to frequent the Team StarKid Facebook page. Everyone there were friends, just a group of Harry Potter nerds, trying to fit in. The most outrageous things used to go down on the Facebook page. Crazy “parties” and music videos were made. Self-insert fanfictions were written. It was like a form of roleplay, where all of us acted like pseudo-fictional versions of ourselves. But among us, love was real. This was a community of outcasts, losers, people filled with fear, depression, and anxiety. We shared those things, because no one was trying to figure us out or force us to be anything. Together, we could be exactly who we wanted to be.

*

Sophomore year came and I finally had a word. After all the searching and struggling, I had a word. *Bisexual*. Once the Facebook page began to die, people moved to the ultimate fandom website Tumblr. Tumblr was a mess of a website, full of all types of people of varying education levels, ages, and interests. This website had people who knew much more than the group on Stardoll did. They had words for all kinds of sexualities, labels for anything someone might be feeling. And everyone was struggling in some way. But I finally had a word: bisexual.

Adding a label to what I felt only came with more

anxieties. I had a crush on my best friend at the time, and I wanted to die. When I confronted her about it, she confessed that she knew the whole time and she was sorry, but she could never feel that same way. Her friendship was more important to me than anything, so I swallowed my feelings back down. I moved my feelings toward someone else. Eventually, our friendship fell apart. After my confession, she kept me at arm’s length. She didn’t tell me things and didn’t include me in things. Our mutual interests weren’t enough to glue ourselves back to the way we were.

*

Anxiety is an abusive partner. It keeps you isolated from friends, family—everyone. You learn to love the comfort of the indoors, of the same old yellow walls of your bedroom. Memorizing the pattern of clouds on the ceiling, the different bumps and lines of the floor. You do not go outside and you do not hang out with those people. You stay inside and have your mind go numb. Everything comes with a sense of dread, of pain, of fear. You go out, but make yourself sick with the what ifs and the imaginary dangers that you have constructed for yourself. You could get hit by another car. You could be too late. You could be too early. You could be murdered. Everyone could turn on you.

And you cannot leave; you can only take the good days with the bad days. You can do your best to enjoy what is given to you. You can fight, but it is just so safe to lie back into those open arms.

*

Since I gave myself the word bisexual, I have spent every moment intending to tell my mom. In that time, she has adopted all of my queer high school friends. Supporting them when their moms have failed. There is truly no reason to have not told her sooner, except for absolute fear of what it could mean.

I have found comfort in limbo. So many moments, I have fought back to the urge to tell her. I have made up excuses to convince myself that it was not worth it. Ridiculous excuses, like “You don’t have a girlfriend,” or something else to validate the irrationality. These excuses were always backed up by friends who

told me I should just “avoid” the experience of coming out because it wasn’t necessary. It was never immediate, never necessary for someone who has only dated boys.

*

When I finally told my mom, she had no idea I was coming out. I sent her the Bi anthem from Crazy-Ex Girlfriend, which clearly states: “My oh my, it’s a fact I can’t deny / I’m bi, bi, bi until the day I die” and she sent me back a bitmoji of her saying “I Love You.” I added that it was National Coming Out day, and with that hint, she sent back “okay.” At this point, I had already sweated through my shirt and my blood had turned into pure adrenaline. She had a lot of questions for me she said, questions that she did not want to ask over text. There are questions I am still waiting for. She did not understand how I ‘knew,’ and I told her that lots of Bi people do not need to date both to know. That, no matter who a Bi person is with, they are still Bi—like Alan Cumming, I told her. She asked if that meant she had a chance with Alan Cumming, and I told her, No, both of you are married.

*

I am no longer afraid of her reaction, of her unacceptance. I’m afraid that she will forget this moment even happened, that once again my bisexuality is unnecessary because of my dating choices. No matter what my dating life shall hold, I will not erase myself again, because I’m letting my bi flag fly.

Indulgence

Alexa Young

V.

In one version of these twenty-two years, I refuse this carcinogenic fate and shrug the unforgiving hold of nicotine from my mind. The cigarette becomes the inevitable. Smoking always seems to follow a familiar pattern (*will i, won't i? it's only one—then, god, i never needed this*), and I fall into that self-loathing of those whose bodies withstand the rot made manifest by our own cravings. Cravings that carry you away from warmth, outdoors into the depths of winter.

Inevitable, I think, in this life, but not quite in others. Perhaps, in another life, Officer Jim’s D.A.R.E. presentation leaves an impact outlasting that of social anxiety or restlessness (*Drugs Are REALLY Evil! tobacco is no exception!*), perhaps I never take that first drag with Steve whose last name I mispronounced for two years, or perhaps I do and it makes me sick. In another life, I retch at the taste.

Snow frosts my fingers past numbness, yet I stay outside and see flashes of my life mapped in my own shadow, free from the unbending canon of the past—the roads and streams manipulated, winding in directions unfamiliar to me. No timeline, I figure, is definite or true.

IV.

There must be a timeline where John speaks at graduation and we clap afterwards and our eyes are dry and

III.

I am seventeen and the snow has not yet released its deluge, but even inside, I can smell the coming flakes. Mr. Sausto, like always, wears a new tie but I cannot excavate the pattern from the ruins of this moment. It is difficult to erase the tension of this memory where life cracks into a distorted before and an uncertain after, both equally illegible.

This, however, I do recall with clarity: the empty desk in front of me slides forward when I rest my feet on its basket because John is not here today and when Lana and Gina are pulled from class to talk to Mr. Casey, we continue our discussion of gerrymandering. I do not think much of their departures nor of gerrymandering, but within a few minutes, a red-eyed Mr. Kent comes to the door. He asks to speak to me and suddenly I know. My lungs become a mason jar, the glass thick and impenetrable and the stale air circulates without any means of escape. Mr. Kent is silent on our walk to the chapel just down the hall and I want so badly to grab his shoulders, ask him what I already know the answer to so I can begin asking what I haven't yet untangled—*how? who found him? have you done all your crying? do you believe in hell?*—his heavy reticence exists in this now. But maybe in another life, Mr. Kent cannot control his tongue.

In another life, Mr. Kent spills all the details he knows he should not tell, like an avalanche—*we don't know yet. his father. no. no, again.*

In a more hopeful life, we aren't walking down this hallway and John's seat is empty because he is carrying attendance to the front desk, like always. He takes longer than usual because he is buying Mountain Dew from the vending machine. When he returns, we make stupid faces at each other. He twists the cap of his drink with a *hsss*, compliments Mr. Sausto's tie, and this time I remember the pattern.

Perhaps John leaves here at peace, in silence. Or with music playing. Or with forgiveness resting thickly in his heart, or with the understanding that he will be forgiven.

I am seventeen and I alternate between sleeping too soundly or not at all. Another version of me can digest grief without the swelling of skin, the sprouting of hives. I skip school. I cry for months and then, suddenly, I cannot cry at all.

In a dream, I am digging graves for John, and I know that he is playing a cruel joke. His laugh bounces from one cloud to the next and the setting sun makes the sky look like a carnival. I dig five graves which, from the right angle, can be mistaken for rose beds. Then I wake up.

I am seventeen and the snow gathers grey. It takes weeks to melt.

II.

In another life, I am happier and my mother plays the piano. She teaches me Satie and I teach her patience.

In another life I am adopted by a different family—one less loving than my own.

—one more loving than my own.

In another life a barren woman finds me in the street gutters of Hunan. I call her 妈妈.

My biological parents never abandon me, and I gorge myself on jianbing as I walk the city streets of China. When this side of the earth turns her face from the sun, I ride my bike home and my father embraces me even though sweat makes my shirt adhere to my skin. He is tall and I have inherited his broad shoulders. My mother is humming a lullaby as she rolls out dumpling skin. I join her and fold the dough in on itself—we fall into our familiar rhythm. The flour collects under my fingernails and I don't wash them until after we've eaten and the tea is poured because the smell is home.

I am never baptized.

I never kiss a boy.

—a girl.

John and I never meet and

John and I never talk about the life expectancy of butterflies

or

John and I can still talk about the life expectancy of butterflies.

I refuse the cigarette.

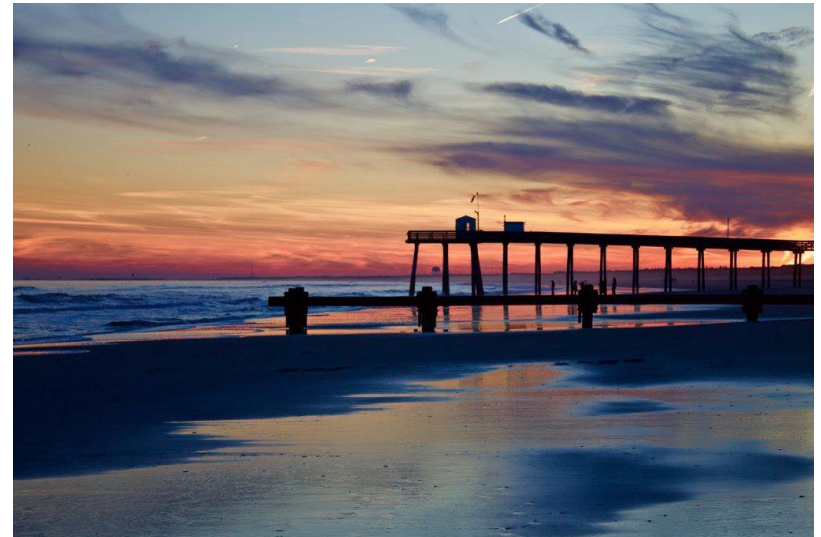
VI.

The cigarette burns to the filter and I finger the pack in my pocket. I could light another, braving the cold to entertain unmined pasts or to entertain my addiction (perhaps they are one in the same). Would my vices change if the contours of my life had shifted one way or the other? Would I indulge my cravings a bit

more? Perhaps. But I go inside and wash my hands, scrubbing the ashy smell from my skin as I watch the suds spiral down the drain.

I.

In a gentler universe, I am named Mei and a bed is called love and love is called soda pop. But this is the life where Mei is only my middle name and soda pop carves cavities into our teeth.



Retreating Horizons

Katie Revelas

A Whale in Brooklyn

Patty Willis

They say that a whale traveled into Brooklyn
down the East River where mafiosos
toss enemies with concrete shoes.

Did the whale see their skeletons
like fancy coral
waving above the sunken debris?
Their arms lift when
the coast guard drags the river
for missing people—the force of the engines
creates a tug at their shoulders,
raises arm bones waving.

That is why they gave up on cameras attached
to the underside of skiffs.
It was too hard on the loved ones
to see who went before
their brother or sister or
son or daughter disappeared.

Sometimes the very old who have lost their minds
make their way to the piers
as if remembering childhood when the
water was clear and their mothers called,
Don't swim after dark!
Swimming suits under trousers, they risked
the loss of clothing left on the weathered planks.

They knew not to swim by the warehouse district.
They had seen the movies,
and knew the drill.
*If you see dangerous business,
keep it to yourself.*

*Stay underwater until you hear
the engine start,
the car roll away.
Don't look to see where it is going
or what it left behind.
The less you see, the less you are hiding
from the FBI.*

That was the game
their parents would not have liked
if they had known.
Those afternoons were a secret
buried until they lost their minds,
their filters,
and the locked door lay open.

*It only takes a second
for someone to disappear,
the director tells the nurse's aide.
They are escape artists
lost in childhood games
starring Jimmy Cagney
and ragamuffin children who
hang out by the pier.*

That is how no one notices
the name tag of the facility
around their necks,
the bare feet on the sidewalk.
*Walk with purpose when you're frightened,
they can hear their mothers' voices.
Looking neither to the right nor left,
they pass through crowds unnoticed
until they take that surprisingly perfect dive.*

Their friends would have clapped as the
fishermen did when they saw his back arch

like a swan.

The whale would have noticed that
the man was at home in the river,
and thought he had come as a guide
for the whale had tired of the shallows.

Onlookers engaged in crime
kept what they saw secret from the police.
They told the story among themselves
like a legend:
An old man led a whale back to the sea.