

INSANITY'S HORSE

2018-2019

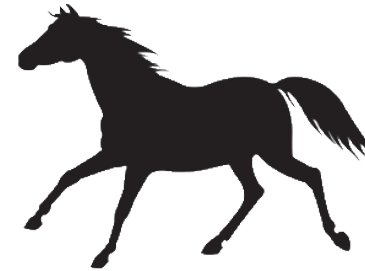


COVER ART BY BRUCE DALZIEL

INSANITY'S HORSE

Drew University's Art & Literature Magazine

2018-2019



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FOREWORD

Thank you for choosing to read and view the hard work and creativity of Drew University's artists and writers. Each one has delved deep in order to express fear, anger, love, and joy in their work, and we are proud to showcase their voices for that exact reason. Nothing is a greater honor than allowing these pages to give you the space to speak that which you felt unable to do elsewhere. We look forward to reading and reviewing your work again next year.

A huge thank you to Courtney Zoffness as well, for always helping *Insanity's Horse* find success.

Sincerely,
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“OUTSIDE THE SEMINARY”

BRUCE DALZIEL
Cover Art

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THE GIRL UNDER THE STREETLIGHT

Maxxe Albert-Deitch—Fiction Contest Winner

She's visible across the courtyard again. Her hair shines red under the lamp light, dark enough at night that she looks like she's on fire. Like the thoughts that roil inside of her are hot, hot, hot and she's about to combust. It wouldn't surprise you if, one day, she did explode, burned from the inside out from the sheer energy of the supernova racing its way across the cells of her brain. You read once that thoughts are like electric waves. If that's true, then hers must short out every battery in a ten-mile radius. Briefly, you wonder if she can even use a phone without it sparking and shaking, turning into ash in her pale hands—the way you almost did the last time she looked into your eyes. Hers were such a dark blue, they were nearly purple.

She isn't looking at you now. She turns away, lights a cigarette, the brief glow of her lighter a paler shade of fire than her hair. The puff of smoke that rises from where she's standing drifts over to you, and you try not to be surprised. But then, you don't really know her now, do you? The same way that the people whispering about you from the other side of the dining hall don't really know you, when they say your name and pity fills their faces too quickly for them to look away trying to hide it. They feel sorry for you, but they don't reach out directly. That's okay. You'd rather not hear false sympathy from people who don't know you anyway.

You want to reach out to her, though. To say something, to be silent and simply occupy the same space as the smoke she exhales. The small snakes of pale gray smoke have been inside of her, know her more intimately than it seems you ever will, as they've coated the insides of her lungs with their carcinogenic caress. They know her better than you ever will now. You used to call her the fire girl, but that was a long time ago.

"Hey," a voice says quietly. For a second, you think it's the girl on the other side of the green, but it's not. It's the guy from your history class who you promised to study with tonight. Looking away from the flame under the streetlight is like staring into the sun and then closing your eyes. You blink twice. The spots in your vision dissipate.

"Hey," you reply, and try to sound normal. There's still

a slight hitch in your voice, but you hope he'll attribute it to you being cold. It's October, after all, and you forgot to wear anything heavier than a hoodie and jeans. Your nose and the tips of your ears have gone numb; you can tell that they're the same red-pink hue as the outer skin of a radish. Your fingers probably are, too.

The boy hands you a warm paper cup with a plastic lid, campus coffee shop logo on its side. "Sorry I'm late. Apology coffee?"

You nod gratefully. The exam you're studying for is going to require more than an hour or two of work, and you're already feeling the cold seeping its way into your bones. You take a sip. It's sweeter than you like it, coating the back of your throat with the thickness that cream leaves behind. You wrinkle your nose. "Thanks," you say, not mentioning that you prefer it black, so bitter it makes everything else seem sweet.

"Anytime," he says, rubbing his hands together. "So, history."

"History," you repeat. "Are we going to the library, or...?" You wouldn't mind if he suggested his room. He's cute enough, in a business-major kind of way. Light brown hair that's messy, but smells like expensive mousse, so it's probably on purpose. Corduroy pants on and a collared shirt on a Thursday night, holding his own cup of coffee in both hands. You already know he's not opposed to people who look like you—basic black T-shirt, nondescript jeans, paint-splattered sneakers. His lacrosse teammates and at least two of your friends are all aware of that fact. But you also know that this history exam is worth more of your grade than you can afford to lose, so the cute business boy takes a backseat to studying in your mind. You're a bit relieved when he shrugs and agrees to go to the library.

You lose the smell of smoke in the air when you turn around. By the time you look up one last time before turning for the library, the girl is gone—no more cigarette smoke, no sign of her red hair left under the light. Probably for the best. Seeing her all over the place is getting exhausting. It's been over a year; you should be able to let go better than this.

Studying is uneventful, but not unproductive. You and Business Major have agreed to get lunch the next day. Maybe it'll evolve into something more, maybe not. Either way, at least you won't flunk the exam. Not that anyone would really blame you. After last year, the university would probably let you graduate

without attending a single class from now until graduation if you let yourself look the way you feel most mornings. After last year, you could probably break half the windows in your building and only get fined fifty bucks. A slap on the wrist, if even that.

You go back to your room, taking the sidewalk all the way around the quad, careful not to step on the grass, the same way that you won't step on sidewalk cracks, just like you won't drink apple juice while eating mac 'n' cheese. Funny how little pieces of your childhood have snuck their way into how you exist, creating the idiosyncrasies that set you apart. Except yours used to set her apart too, because you shared them, because you weren't the same, but you were damn close.

You look up at the street light as you pass it, but she isn't there now. The smell of smoke has faded, leaving you with the scent of mud and the taste of old coffee going stale in your mouth. For a moment, you think you see the red of her hair, and you turn to look. A fox's tail swishes underneath a bush, and then vanishes, the rustle of leaves absorbed into the sound of the wind and the far-away noise from a Thursday night frat party on the north end of campus. You shove your hands in your pockets and keep walking. You keep your eyes on the ground and stomp the leaves as you go, drowning out anything you could mistake for her.

You can't sleep that night. Maybe it's because of the coffee, maybe it's because Business Major really was cute and you can't help it if you're distracted, maybe it's because you've got paint on your skin and it's always itchy. At least, that's what you tell yourself. You haven't been able to sleep since her. The dark circles under your eyes have been practically permanent since middle school. Every time you close your eyes, you see her, sitting on the end of your bed, climbing in through your window, in the bathroom mirror when you turn around. It isn't her appearing that makes your heart jump and your skin go slick with sweat. It's the silence. The silence, and the moment when she's gone.

You throw off the blankets the next morning, shivering. You're always cold now. You pull on jeans and a sweatshirt, don't bother brushing your hair, and make yourself a cup of coffee with the electric kettle that you're pretty sure breaks at least a couple of dorm housing rules. No sweetener. You think about shaving, knowing that the scraggly hairs scattered across your chin have gotten long enough to be unattractive. But your hand is already shaky from coffee, and who's looking at you anyways? Instead, you brush your teeth, avoiding the mirror the whole time, and head

to class. You don't really feel like conjugating French verbs. Soon enough, you tune out, letting your chin drop down to your folded arms on the worn-out desk. Through the bird-shit smeared window, you watch the now-dark streetlight next to the quad.

Coward, you called her, the last time the two of you spoke.

You're impossible, she shot back. *I can't talk to you about anything*.

We used to talk about everything, you replied. Wounded. You felt wounded then. She hadn't made you feel so overwhelmingly guilty just yet.

Not anymore. You don't listen anymore. You can still hear the tears in her voice.

I'm trying, but it's hard, you told her. *You just repeat the same stories, the same drama. Everything's the fucking same with you. You've got to turn and face the problems sometime—nothing's going to change if you don't*.

So, I'm lazy. Her eyes clouded over, like some barrier was shutting off. *I'm the lazy, pathetic, coward. Good to know, Alex. Really good to know that's how you think of me*.

You tried to grab her hand. You remember that. But she yanked it away, and she left anyway. Your stupid kid sister, who was still your sister despite the fact that she'd stopped being your best friend long before that. And now, her voice won't stop ringing in your ears.

Your attention turns back to French class. It's not your fault, what happened. On some level, you do know that. But you also know that she blamed you, right before. You also know that your hands still shake when you shave, that you end up with cuts because you're too scared to hold a razor too tightly, scared that you'll know what she was thinking, or worse, that you want to know.

You're walking home from a friend's dorm that night. The taste of cheap pizza and the thick feeling of faking normal still clings to your mouth. You don't hate that you went out tonight. It's good for you, your therapist reassures you every week, that you still try for normal. That you talk to your friends, even about classes, about sports, about nothing. But even your pale imitation of normal goes out the window when you pass the streetlight, when she falls

into step beside you, when she follows you home, when she sits on the end of your bed and stares.

“What?” you snap. She won’t respond. She never does.

Which is why you nearly fall over when you hear her voice. “Your face.” She grimaces. “You look gross. Shave, already.”

“Cass?” Her name falls out of your mouth like mancala marbles from an open hand. Unintentional, in a soft clatter, like rain.

She doesn’t respond to that, but her face conveys a clear “duh.” Instead she clucks her tongue, looking around your room. “Wow.”

You want to feel defensive, knowing that your crap is all over the floor and you haven’t done laundry in far too long, that the whole room smells of stale coffee. Instead, you just stare.

“Alex.” She stares back at you, deadpan as strong as ever.

“I’m sorry.” And then it’s like you can’t say anything else. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I should have— I didn’t— I *tried*.”

For a half-second, she looks at you like she’s confused, and then the understanding sets in. Then she’s your *sister* again, in a way that she hasn’t been in years. In that tiny split second, she’s the one who swept up the mud you tracked into the house all summer, then tracked in even more herself. She’s the one who used to push you into the pool even when she knew the water was cold, who always talked you into playing chicken and who made you teach her how to drive. In that half-second, she’s the kid who sat next to you eating ice cream sandwiches, the one who never tattled on you for eating half the cookie dough from the bowl. And then she opens her mouth and it’s over. She’s the one who cut open her veins and made you feel like you bled out right alongside her. When she was gone, she took with her half of your heart.

“I know,” she says. “I know.”

You shake your head, tasting salt and metal and pain in your mouth. “I tried so goddamn hard, Cass, and it wasn’t enough. I’m so, so sorry.”

She reaches out, touches your face, but you don’t feel it. She shakes her head, and the words that come out are so soft you barely hear them at all. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” you tell her, choking over your tears and the lump in your throat. “I called you a coward, and it was after talking to me that you...” You can’t even finish the sentence.

“It isn’t your fault,” she repeats. Firmer this time. “I love you, Alex. I did this. Me. You...you were good. Always so good.”

“Not good enough.” You shake your head. “Never...”

“Better than good,” she argues. “You did your best. I couldn’t have asked for more or better, and you were above and beyond just by being.”

“I love you,” you manage to say. “I love you so much, Cass.”

“I love you, too,” she says faintly. “And I’m sorry. I forgive you. And you can let go now.”

She presses a hand to your chest. You still can’t feel it, but there’s a tension that lifts from your shoulders, a hitch in your breath that you didn’t even notice until it goes away. You close your eyes for half a second, and when you open them, she’s gone.

You cry until you’ve got nothing left. Then you get up and walk to the bathroom. You look in the mirror, empty except for your own reflection. Mechanically, you reach first for the shaving cream, then for the razor. For the first time in months, your hand doesn’t shake.

A STRANGER IN THE LAND OF GOD

Andrew Dugan—Fiction Contest Runner-Up

The farm house looks how a hippie commune in 2018 should: stuck in a time when concrete siding and flat roofs were somehow “in.”

My car and I are both drenched in rain. The only difference is that the car is there: steeped in softened earth at the bottom of the hill, and I am here: waiting for someone to come alive and open the door.

A woman with hair down to her belly button and breasts to her genitals answers my knock. The rain washes away the oxygen. I don't know how to ask her if he's here.

Inside, there are four of them on the couch, all a little older than me. The oldest man has his legs crossed and the whittled bough of an oak at his side to walk with. A few more dressed in synthetic silks look on from the stairs behind me, and a final bunch are situated around the room like posts. The youngest is not even one and entangles her fat fingers around a Fisher-Price teether.

The woman offers a stool. She wraps me in a blue blanket while all the rest (of what I can assume are hippies) behold my spectral state.

I hear the faint beat of a familiar, slippery pulse. He's here. I can't look up from the wooden-planked floor, but I suspect that he stands next to the couch in denim he'll claim he dyed himself, his hands clutching blocks of tofu, his absence of a shirt, and his hair coated in the stuff of the Earth.

But Cal is not the stock photo of a hippie I thought he would be. I see that Cal is skinny. I see that Cal has the beginnings of a beard. I see that Cal doesn't know what to do about me. That he is not crying. That he will dig my car out of the mud and restart the engine to be rid of me. That he will wrap his eyes around a knife's edge to be rid of me.

“Sorry I tracked in mud,” I say. “Everything's all flooded.”

What do hippies hate? Do they hate? They do not hate

the rain. They do not hate that I tracked in mud. They do not hate the crushing mildness of an Oregon spring. They do not hate Illinois. They might hate Chicago, but if they do, they do not hate Chicagoans. With that, they do not hate me, and they do not hate that I am now one of them.

After a sleepless night on a couch, I'm knee deep in cow manure (organic), with an ethically produced gardening shovel in my left hand, and something they tell me will turn into beans in my right (also organic). The woman who answered the door is perched next to me. Her squat is agile, and I learn her name is Glen. She tells me that she knew a man who shared my name, Brian, in grade school.

“Where are you from?”

She bares a set of straight, yellow teeth. “Arizona. Tucson area.”

My eyes are on the house, then on the stretch of arable land that we're farming. They are in the clouds and then behind me, over the fence, looking on towards the wilderness. They are on the shed where people are knitting blankets, half of which will go to funding the commune and the other half to homeless shelters in Eugene.

I don't see Cal.

Glen says, “You're a far ways off from Chicago.”

“Sure am.”

“What made you want to come to God's Land?”

I tell her I came to God's Land because that's what the hippie commune is called: *God's Land*. Because I am devoted to a power greater than myself. Cal has nothing to do with it. Who even is Cal? I tell her that I see Him in the soil, in communal living and in composting crappers. She says she sees Him in all these places too as she drives a seed right into the mouth of God.

I ask with Cal in mind, “Did you leave anyone behind when you moved here?”

“Nope. No one.”

“No one? I find that hard to believe.”

Either she's annoyed, or the sunlight causes her brow to

furrow unnaturally. “You’re right. I left one hell of a cactus garden. You should’ve seen it. I had every breed of cactus cooking right in my front yard.”

“Yeah, I bet. You only left behind a cactus garden?”

“It was a damn good cactus garden.” She looks towards the untamed wilderness so close to our tilled soil. “Why are you so curious? Did you have a cactus garden back in Chicago?”

Cal hasn’t been seen all day. Maybe he’s working on another part of the commune. Maybe he’s inside the main house. “Where can I get some water?” I ask.

“We normally just wrap our lips around the water hose.” Glen laughs to her feet. She stands at a colossal height from my angle. The sun inspires a halo about her mess of hair. “I’ll show you the sink; it’s just inside.”

As we walk into the communal kitchen, Glen explains that she only tells newcomers that joke because, more often than not, they fall for it. “And, for a twenty-five-year-old, there’s something about you that’s never been newer.”

Her treating me like a gullible foreigner in this strange land makes me think of the time Cal and I went to Paris. Cal couldn’t have been less interested in flying across an ocean to see works of art that were more decay than paint. I convinced him to go on the grounds that we must’ve been the only two gay men in the world who have never been to Paris.

I remember a moment from dining on the Seine. I could see the spires of Notre Dame just across the river. Cal’s brown hair was perfectly combed, but what he never let on was the pound of product he’d put in his hair just before. Cal and I were a half-bottle of wine in when I asked the waiter, in piss poor French, “Where are the water closet?”

He laughed. “In Paris, we pee in the river.”

In hippie communes, we drink from the hose.

I hate it when others take advantage of my ignorance.

The memory becomes Glen who is the French waiter with the mocking laugh. I look across the table where Cal is soaking in my minutes of embarrassment. In these smiles that bend at my expense, I beg to forget everything about Cal. About why I even

decided to leave Chicago.

“You see something new in me? I think my body is worn out for a twenty-five-year-old.”

“You wait. You stick around God’s Land enough, you’ll start seeing it for yourself. This dirt will do marvelous things to your body.”

Cal isn’t in the kitchen. There is only a college student lurched over a coffee table sucking up the information of her American History textbook. The water I drink is hardly refreshing.

“What has to happen to a person to make them join a hippie commune these days?”

The woman glances up from her textbook as Glen keels over cackling. In between chuckling beats, “What has to *happen*? I think we’re more deprived than anything. I was looking for more than what Tucson could offer me.”

The student at the table agrees in silence.

We return to the fields. The work of beans and believing that proper dirt exposure can make me new again is at hand. Maybe the dirt will work. Seems like it made Cal new again.

My first day on God’s Land goes like my first day working in publishing. I’m suffocating on expectations only held by myself. I’m waiting for someone to tell me that I’m doing it all wrong. Doing it all right. No one ever does. I’m annoyed when new people introduce themselves to me. I’m worried all to death when there is a face I’m unfamiliar with.

In between my fellow farmers poking me with questions on how my first night on God’s Land was and how lucky I am to have surpassed the commune’s strenuous application process, Cal walks out of the wilderness and across the field carrying a chainsaw.

In the golden hour, he’s a golden man. In this unforgiving daylight, I can see him: the Cal who left our Lincoln Park apartment one February night and hasn’t been seen for three months is not this Cal. Or an even more frightening idea, he is this Cal. He is this beast of indifference, ignoring me like it’s in his genetic coding to live as I had never been something to him.

Why aren’t you happy that I’m here? I followed you to God’s Land from Illinois. I crossed the Great Plains for you. You

can't cross a small field.

Cal goes around the side of the house.

Glen rubs my shoulder to signal that the day is done.

"I'm going to the store later," she says. "Want anything?"

"No thanks. I'm all right."

"You know what I'll get you?" she laughs. "I'll get you some bug spray. You'll thank me later. The mosquitos on this farm are worse than whatever you got in Chicago. Once you think you've killed every last one of those skeeters, they're back and instead of one there's ten of them bloodsuckers. They make your work impossible to do."

She drives one last bean into God's throat.

She whispers, "I hate bugs."

Cal's wallet has seven one hundred-dollar bills in it. The rich hippie has three left after I go through it. Only right that he pays to dig my car out of the mud, that he fills up my tank, and then some. I'm getting out of here.

Under his bed is a balancing game of bins and locked trunks. I don't remove anything for fear that the whole mess will come spilling out on to the floor.

His bed is made (as was always the case), and his bedroom wall is no longer decorated with the inexplicable modern art that our friends made but is strewn with pictures from when he was younger. They're all grainy, especially this one: March of two years ago in Puerto Vallarta. Both of us so cheeky and tan, in yellow speedos. The picture needs an update.

He has a roommate (I think) whose bed is covered in clothes that belong in the donation bin. A white cat perched on the clothing heap yawns at me as I go through Cal's life of the past three months.

"What are you doing?" Cal asks.

Took you long enough to find me.

There is a young man with dark eyes and a rigid jawline

behind Cal. My heart races at the idea that I've deterred their plans. This man shoots Cal a glance and exits down the hall. I'll later learn that he trips on acid for the rest of the night, and God's Land finds him humping a pine tree in the wilderness the next morning.

"Who was that?"

"A friend."

These words burn holes in my throat: "You mean hot friend. Must be nice having one of those around! Shitty replacement..."

Cal moves next to me. He doesn't tear the picture of us in Puerta Vallarta out of my hand. He does tear off his shoes. He moves to his bed. He does nothing. He isn't waiting for me to say anything.

I'm flushed. "Why did you come here?"

Nothing.

"I've just gotta know. The last night you were home, we ate takeout from 21 Chinese Kitchen. We didn't talk too much, but it wasn't because we were fighting. We just didn't have much to say to each other. At least, I didn't. Maybe you had some things on your chest. You must've had something to say to run all the way out here."

He still lays in his bed, elbows tethered to his waist and feet curled up on top of each other. I could never hold him when he laid like that.

I say, "I took a sleeping pill, you took an ibuprofen. We passed out. You were gone the next morning."

He says, "You really didn't hear me leaving at all? I was pretty loud."

"I filed a missing person's report. You sure know how to make yourself disappear. There's only so much the police can do about a twenty-seven-year-old man who wants to skip town. I found you because I'm sitting at my computer in the dining room table, two Ambien in and drunk on wine when I google search your name for the seven hundredth time. There it is. Calvin Seston giving testimony on some hippie commune out in Oregon: 'God's Land is an otherworldly place! I have felt welcomed by the people here in a way you could only hope for. The work is fulfilling. It's hard for me

to imagine being happier anywhere else!”

I think that I will feel better after slicing the past three months open, but I don't. The wound just bleeds everywhere.

“Why did you come here?”

“I don't know.”

“Because I never cheated—”

“Yeah.”

“And I—”

“I'm tired.”

“You're tired?”

“Yeah. It's something that happens when you work outside all day. I wanna go to bed.”

“You don't want to talk about it.”

The cat is annoyed that neither of us is willing to give the other the magic phrase which'll put a stop to all this suffering. Sorry, cat, this will only take a moment more. And then I'll go back to Chicago or fly across the world to Mumbai or join whatever the opposite of a hippie commune would be. (A capitalist commune?).

He says, “I wanted to be happy, Brian.” My name is tacked on to the end of his sentence like a stamp, something customary to indicate address. There is no delicacy to his intonation anymore. Brian is just like table, sink, and ibuprofen. Common.

I say, “You don't like my name now, or something?”

“What.”

“The way you swallowed up my name, *Cal*. You said it so plainly.”

“You didn't even hear what I just said.”

“What did you *just* say?”

“Never mind.”

“What's that man's name? The one from before!”

Cal points to the threshold.

“My friend?”

“*Hot* friend.”

“Did someone smoke you out in the fields today?”

“Wish they did.”

“I wasn't happy. That's what I said. That's what I wanted you to ask me about.”

“And you didn't think to talk to me first?”

“People like you only want to understand so much.”

“You mean to say I'm dumb because I can't understand why you would want to live on some dinky hippie commune in the middle of nowhere when you were living with me in Lincoln Park? Well, yes, Cal, you're right. Call me stupid because I could never understand any of that.”

“No, Brian, you're very smart.” Oh God, that smile! My expense. I'm red, and we're back in Paris. “You were so smart that I decided I couldn't handle any more of your smarts.”

I'll say almost anything when I'm angry. People often do. The words I let fly are offensive, but to the part of me that hated hippies, that hated Oregon, that hated change and Cal, the raging words are true.

I find myself in: “So, what now? Are you going to stick with this hippie bullshit?”

“Yeah! I am. And there's nothing you can do about it.”

“You had a life in Chicago. You had a place to live. You had me.”

“And just none of it made me feel like how I guess I was supposed to feel.”

I laugh. He sounds like one of those moments in his Nicholas Sparks books where the blonde, middle-aged single mom says something we're all supposed to cry over.

“You're so fucking full of yourself. What do you mean? None of that made you happy? None of it? You didn't like a

comfortable apartment, a group of friends, a job, and someone to share it all with?”

“If I was happy in Chicago, I wouldn’t be in Oregon.”

Our quarrelling hits its final tremor here, in a hippie commune room where Cal is stuck in a past he pins to his wall.

I say, “You were comfortable. Don’t tell me anything different. If you weren’t happy, then that’s your problem.”

“Just like how, if you’re miserable, Brian, then that’s your problem now too. Not mine.”

All the time I was driving to Oregon, I was thinking, four years. Four years. Four and a half, depending on who you ask. Four years of me smelling your sugary coffee. Four years of kissing your thin, uninspired lips. Four years of you snoring next to me. Four years of expensive alcohol down our throats every weekend. Four years of routine. I choked myself on four years for the past three months.

I hack it up. I chew it up. Four years: down the hatch.

“Okay. All right, Cal. All right.”

I’m sure he thinks I’m angry, but I don’t know if I am. I think I just want to sit in my stuck-in-the-mud-still car. The mud has hardened by now, the dirt has formed a cast around my wheels, and I have become a part of the earth here.

Four hundred-dollar bills. I put them on my dash. I use the cigarette lighter in my car to burn all four. You could’ve *flown* back to Chicago with that money, Brian. Could’ve crossed the nation via air. All up in smoke. It means air now. Atmosphere.

What’s four years anyways?

Glen is knocking on my window. Did she see me light the money on fire?

“Hey! Just got back from town. Got your bug spray.”

I crack my window while waving away all the smoke from the money burning. That was a stupid idea to burn all that cash. She passes me the neon orange can of bug spray. I don’t thank her because my throat is heavy with more insults to vomit up on Cal.

“Mind if I hop in?”

“We’re not going anywhere,” I say.

“That’s fine. I’m good right here.”

Sitting in the car, we are the same height. Up close, Glen is older than I think she is, but I see something in her that screams twenty-five-years-old. I think we also have the same hair. Her color might be a bit faded, but it’s still the same. The same. Running from somewhere, running to catch the ones that slipped through our fingers. Tucson, Chicago, and God’s Land. The same.

“You ok?”

I’m not, so I ask her, “In your experience, what are you supposed to do when you can’t make the person you love happy?”

She says, “Pick up what you can and try not to get too bitter too fast.”

“You know Cal? He was my boyfriend of years and years and I don’t—”

Digging into her bag, she offers, “Tissue?”

“I’m fine.”

She reaches a hand across the center console and rubs my arm. Her touch excites me. It’s been a long time since anyone has touched me.

Glen understands, “He came here, and you didn’t know why he did.”

“Finally, after three months of looking, I found that rat bastard in a dirt ranch in Oregon. I hate dirt. I hate it here. I hate him here.” And I won’t leave without him.

“I’m sorry. That’s a hard thing for anyone to have to go through.”

“And I think I love him, Glen, I really think I do. Maybe saying ‘I think’ after four years isn’t enough, but I don’t know. When he left, I felt like I had failed. I didn’t know I was failing, but someone doesn’t just leave out of nowhere, right?” I slouch back in my chair and look at the commune. The house windows stare back at me like the Amityville Horror. “Shit, I hate this.”

“I know you do.” She’s bearing those yellow teeth to me again, but I can’t look at them. “I’m sorry, but you have to go home.”

It'll hurt you if you stay here. And it's not because I don't want you here." Her face is within a hair's length of mine. My hands look so small in my lap. "You're going to drive yourself crazy trying to understand why Cal is the way he is. The way any of us are the way we are."

"Glen, he just left."

"As people often do."

She sinks back in her seat. An hour may have passed since I ran out of God's Land. Good. I hope I stay in this crusted earth for years. Four years.

"I left people back in Tucson," she says. She's not looking at me now, but instead down the road to where one would go to return to Tucson. "I left a dead son and a husband. That's who I left in Tucson. Not a cactus garden. And I don't know why I left. I just couldn't ever begin to understand why I did. I can begin to understand that I made the decision to go though. Now I'm here, plucking turnips out of the ground."

"I'm sorry."

"Our son was suffering for a long time. We all were."

"And you're not suffering now? What about your husband, whose son is dead?"

I'm glad she ignores me. "As for Cal, he came here because he had no other choice—"

"He had no choice?"

"—and that choice had nothing to do with you. Just like how my choice had nothing to do with my husband, but everything to do with me. The choice had more to do with me than I know how to deal with."

My foot accidentally rubs against the gas pedal. After a brief rumble, I step off of it. Did I even put the keys in the car? As though the hand of God scooped us out of the earth and laid us on the paved road, we are free. Finally. Not four years. Three months.

She smiles at me. "You might not like this old hippie dirt ranch, but the dirt here is telling you to get on your way home."

"Maybe." I look behind to see that the cast gave way to the

vehicle, letting it slip out and thus maintain a forward motion onto the road. "I didn't bring anything inside with me. I should just go. I don't even want to go back in."

"It's like a band-aid, Brian. Rip it off. Get on the road. I'll let Cal know you've gone."

Get on the road. I tell her she's right. I hope that Cal knows I've gone. That I won't ever think of him again. That my coming here was the result of some fever dream I've just woken up from.

Glen gets out of the car, and I pull down the dirt road that leads into a grove of low-rise pine trees. God's Land is better seen when it's not raining.

Glen and God's Land are eaten by foliage in my mirror. The last trace to disappear is my imprint on the earth there, the four tire mud casts. I'm thinking, soon they won't be there. There'll be grass instead. I'll be erased by the earth. Cal or Glenn or anyone could go to the spot to plant handsome trees or a singing patch of wildflowers, but, like the unwelcoming, frosty touch, the four tire casts wouldn't make a keen spot to grow something healthy.

SNAPSHOTS OF THE END

Anne Nadel-Walbridge—Nonfiction Contest Winner



OLD GODS | GREECE
JARAUN WRIGHT

*See Jaraun's art through music in "Mass Pandemoneyum":
<https://youtu.be/lvDX-oZ9XjI>*

First there was the diagnosis. He never backed away from a dare; this one poisons coursing through veins, winding through organs, forcing him to sit at the edge of the fire river, razor wire in his hands, agony ripping him into pieces from the inside out; he pulls back the shirt, exposes the three black dots on the skin, the ones he did not choose, aside the demon sketched into his chest, color sleeves wrapping his arms. These three dots are a roadmap for the electric sun that burns his flesh, his throat stinging with flame and sizzle. His face is miserable and agonized when unguarded.

He was athletic, tensile. His youthful face hid a rage that always bubbled just out of sight. His stride was the giveaway. He walked like a cat, coiled, shoulders up as if fending off potential blows. His look was confrontational despite the blue eyes that always appeared just a bit sad when at looked directly. Most people didn't - there was something a little frightening about him to look at straight-on. Except when his daughters were tiny, when he walked holding a small blonde cherub (who could fear a man with a baby in his arms?), he scared people, seemed ready to strike. Now his pace is more intentional, measured, careful, obvious only to those who know him. It is all he can do to walk some days, but he won't be stopped.

He escapes, astride the monster in the driveway, chrome and metal pearl cobalt blue, the massive V-twin motor screaming a primal battle cry of vengeance, defiance, refutation. He is swathed in black-leather bulk, masking his diminishment. He becomes one with the machine, losing the demon behind him for a while. Roll the throttle, ease into the turn, let the world disappear. One day he cannot hold up the bike any more, he is too thin, his legs feel like rubber bands, and the leather seems to drag downward. He parks the beast, won't look at it again.

Fall lands on him like a tombstone, cold, windy, barren. He beats it back by hurling angry words, sometimes solid objects at her. She is there. Nobody else will do what he needs, making his life their universe. She tries like hell to cook things he can eat, a fucking short list when you have a tumor permeating your esophagus - swallowing feels like your chest is being turned inside out. He doesn't know why, but she tries. Sometimes heavily

sugared black tea with milk, other times soup he knows he probably won't eat. She makes it, brings it to him. Anything to try to gain some padding.

And when he doesn't eat, she can't eat, too. He can see her disappearing with him. She makes sure the girls are fed. He sees that when he crawls out of his misery. He's glad about that, when he can find the energy. He recalls when they were born. Skye is the first blood relative he ever saw. He held his tiny daughter and cried into her hair. Adoption fucks with your sense of self, but he had a real family now. Rose was new and pink in his arms 18 months later. When he looked into that baby's eyes, his own filled again. Now he doesn't say much to the girls. They spend most of their time in their rooms, metabolizing having a father with cancer in their own ways.

He feels too crappy to interact. He's an island, doesn't need anyone, but he also has to have her around. He can't say why. If she goes anywhere, he panics. He calls her cell phone just to know she is there, leaves shaky messages if she doesn't answer right away. This embarrasses him. She never mentions his quavering voice, his obvious need.

He's on fire. Heat consumes him. When his eyes close he sees red and black. The world is made of things that hurt. He is so angry. The world is blood-colored agony. He needs to cool down, to feel water. He asks her to help. She puts a plastic lawn chair in the shower for him. She looks away while he undresses - he insists; she has to look back to help him step into the shower. He can't stand her seeing his skeleton, because that's what he looks like; an echo of a man with translucent skin and bones protruding, like the pictures of the Nazi victims. His once smooth cheeks are caverns now. He has lost several teeth. Women used to sidle up to him, the kind of women who liked wild men scented with danger and rage. Now he can't even let his own wife look at him. Her gaze leaves bruises. He won't look her in the eye.

The living room, the center of the ranch house, is command central. He can no longer sleep on a flat surface from the tumor's pressure, so the huge couch is his throne. He props himself up on a bank of pillows. TV is on all the time, drowning out reality. The remote knows the shape of his hand.

He once told her, right after the cold sterile doctor said, in cold sterile words, that stage 4 cancer, the tumor through his esophagus to his spine, that she caused this. Of course he knew she

didn't, but she also did. He wanted to punish someone. It was so easy. She drove silently; he raged, spat his poisoned anger all over her, rained word blows on her head, her arms, her heart. It made him feel powerful. She cried, soundlessly, for 47 miles. His venom was too big for any other sound in the car. He wound a thicket of vitriol around the interior, streams of anger and madness creating a mesh of grief that enveloped them.

That night, he sits stone-faced and distant, refusing to talk or interact after they tell their daughters he has cancer. She eventually creeps off to try to sleep. He stares at the TV screen, then catches sight of her moving silently toward him. She bends toward him, kisses him on the cheek, hands him a folded paper. He looks past her at the TV and she leaves again. He reads the paper; she has written him a letter. She loves him, she will be by his side through all of it, she is there for him if he wants to talk.

Ever since they met, she has given him words on paper. It's one of the things he loves her for. He carries a folded paper she gave him in 1989, when they were young and looking forward. It is creased and discolored, tucked in his wallet so he can read it any time he needs to remind himself that someone believes in him unquestioningly.

He reads the new note, holds it over a Bic above the hearth, tosses it on the andirons and watches it burn.

It's too hard with her. He's always expected to be something he cannot be. He decided ages ago everything that has gone wrong for him is her fault. Her love asked too much of him; he couldn't be that guy. He loves her and his kids. But that isn't enough for him - he's never been able to figure out how to be the guy everyone wants him to be. He's carrying around so much rage, so much hurt. An entire life of agony - it's too much. He can't be that guy. But he needs her, and no matter how hard he pushes, she never turns away or denies him. Even when he was in the hospital for what she calls his first "unfortunate incarceration," his first round of 24/7 nurses and doctors that lasted an 11-day eternity, he told her (never a request) to bring him a bowl and the film canister of good weed, had her take him to the place doctors hid on the smoke-free campus so they could hastily gasp in their nicotine in one minute before running back to tell a patient about his cancer. He had her load the swirled-glass pipe and hand it to him. He drew in the smoke, letting it cool in his mouth before inhaling it. For a little while, a tiny pearl of peace. The walks with her and the girls in the trees are a speck of normal in this wreck of a life. One day

he becomes aware he can't smoke anymore and another chasm, splitting the fabric that binds him, screams through him, leaving his innards exposed to the vultures he sees flying in his periphery.

He is afraid these days, of nothing and everything. Something has happened. Not just the cancer. Something isn't right, even more so than ever since this cancer, has been given a name, since his own cells got called out for betraying him. He can't shake the feeling that he needs to escape somehow. It is icy and snowy, and yet he has to get out of the house, has to keep moving. Something is hunting him; he doesn't know what, or where, but only that he has to run.

He makes her drive all day, down highways and backroads, past farms, fields and mountains wearing cold white wigs. No matter how many miles he leaves behind the dread is near. She drives to his doctor, duplicitous bitch, and sitting on the floor like a broken doll, cries that she can't keep going like this, that something is radically wrong, they need help. The doctor (a fucking nice guy, really, but he can't deal with anyone now, so he tells the doc it's all in his wife's head, the fucking bitch, she's the problem), the doc checks his vitals and talks to him, but in the end tells her it's probably the pain meds he is on causing this, because there's nothing obvious wrong. A nurse makes him feel just a bit guilty, tells him it is not OK for him to yell at the woman who is looking out for him. And he does feel guilty about it, all the time. But it is something he can't control. His mouth has a mind of its own. He knows absolutely that she won't leave. She just takes it.

A few days later the cracks running through him become gorges. He throws a glass coffee-pot at her, (who knew his arm still worked? Damn!). It explodes inches from her head, all over the floor around her, as the visiting nurse arrives. The nurse looks around, heard his venom as she arrived, puts a shawl around his wife's shoulders, sends her out to have a half hour of quiet, turns to him. He is confused, ashamed, and defiant all at once. He sits staring at nothing, refusing to make eye contact. Fuck both of them. But he knows his rage is verging on dangerous. That's the story of his life. He's always pushed the boundaries of the world with his hands and mouth, shoving the people who try to get close right through them. He knows that. It's just gotten more obvious lately. He can't help it. Fucking bitches telling him how to act - they should try living in this fucked up body!

The nurse says he has to stop attacking his wife, who spends every day tending him. He feels bad, but he can't tell any of

them. His power over her is all that's left. He's a shell of himself, he knows it. It destroys him. He can hear it chewing at night like mice in the walls of his mind. The nurse knows he'll try to be a little kinder, a little gentler to his wife. He doesn't have to say it; his shoulders drop, he slumps in defeat, acknowledgements he'll try.

She is the fucking birthday fairy, making a not-terribly-secret effort to make celebrate people on their particular anniversary. This year his falls on Thanksgiving. She tries to get him even vaguely looking forward, but he has been feeling more and more remote from everything - kids, life, friends he has her turn from the door. He'll be 44, so what? It's a number. He has played games of Russian Roulette since he was a teen. All he knows is misery and his new companion, unshakeable terror. He doesn't know why he's afraid, or of what, but he never sleeps for more than a few minutes, and when she tries to sleep, he panics and makes her come back to him, just to be there. If she falls asleep, he rocks back and forth, clutching the bathrobe around him, the menace always there.

He's back in the hospital. He went to that hellhole to get a scan of the cancer site, but he knows they're secretly implanting something and he won't cooperate. Fuck no. They'll have to tie him down. He fights the technician. They call some uniformed thugs, take him in a wheelchair and then one of them walks away with her. What the fuck does she say to them? He wants out of here, to go home, wants to turn back the clock and start over. He wants to die.

They take him to the ER instead, and by the next morning he is admitted to the cancer ward. *FUCK!!!*

She insists they all should be together for his birthday. She brings a bunch of balloons and foods he might have been tempted by months ago, puddings and cream soups. The hospital kitchen has done what seems to be a passable turkey; he even gets a few bites of stuffing and gravy past the red hot coals in his chest before he's too tired to do more. His body screams PAINPAINPAIN! She read about pain relieving pressure-points in the feet and she massages his feet; it brings him some relief. He sits back and closes his eyes while he can.

The girls and she try to look happy. The sterile wedge-shaped box room has its curtains drawn back to the sight of a statue near the walking path; he has the uncanny feeling that damned thing is looking at him. He fights the nurses who come in to check his stats.

You fucking bastards are clueless! Get your goddamned incompetent hands off me you cunts! FUCK YOU!

They add something to his IV and he drifts off, asleep.

Soon, it's clear that he won't cooperate with the staff, will keep fighting them and the damned statue they have watching him, will not settle down, will not accede to their demands. At his insistence that she'll take care of him, they send him home. They make an attempt to convince him inpatient care is better, but he knows they're all out to get him. They show her how to use a picc line, administer j-tube feedings, start and stop an IV pump, and send him home. He knows they're happy he's going.

Christmas never really meant anything to him. It comes and goes. The gnawing in his head is louder, a constant grinding that endless miles behind him can't erase. Once the girls are off to school, he snarls at her to get him wrapped up, to the car, turn the heat up high and drive. Nothing makes sense to him, looks right. The landscape is made of broken glass. It matches him inside, he's also made of shards that cut and slice, make people around him bleed out. He sees her bleed out every time she starts an IV of antibiotics, every time she takes his temperature. He rolls the word around in his mouth, neutropenic, no immune system. He's in the ER in December, but refuses to be admitted until right after Christmas, when she insists. She probably didn't mean to get sick but it seems like an attack when he has no immune system. She claims it's not flu, so do the doctors, but fuck, they were the ones who told her she was sick. He was in the ER. She didn't look so good, they said, they checked her out. Now she needs to rest. So who the fuck will take care of him? The doctors claim that she had a drug allergy, but he knows they're fucking liars. He's got goddamned cancer. He starts screaming at her. The doctors say calm down. They don't understand she's his enemy, plotting to kill him. They send her home and admit him. A shrink talks to him. Acts like he's crazy.

My father is in prison. Yes he ran a Ponzi scheme and fucked over a lot of people. FUCK YOU JACK! My fucking wife can't do what I need. She's lying about me. And everyone is out to get me.

She redeems herself, tells the shrink his father really is in federal prison. In three days they ask if he wants to see her. He has begun to miss her quietly doing what needs done, not asking questions, not leaving his side.

What kind of stupid fucking question is that? She's my wife, of course I want to see her. Damn she's the only one I want to see! Get her for me. Make her come.

They have someone with him 24/7, because he can't sit still and his heartbeat is erratic. He hyperventilates constantly. Shadows creep around - he knows he's being stalked. She arrives and wraps her arms around him and it feels a little like home. He leans into her. He tells her this, fear leaking from the corners of his eyes and down his face and he knows she knows. He clutches his IV pole and says *I can't do this anymore. I can't do it.* He knows she'll help. She asks if he'll go to the bigger hospital, the one he was at for his unfortunate incarceration. He says yes, if it's not that fucking cancer ward, maybe they can help. He can see it in her eyes. He loves her so much and he's sorry for what she's gone through. He knows she knows. She's still here.

Tuesday, January 5. He knows because they keep asking him what day it is. He has been in this hospital for eight days. Today she's coming before they transfer him to the big hospital an hour away. They've got him on some drug that makes him calm. He hopes maybe this will change something, maybe he'll feel better eventually. Maybe this is feeling better. He doesn't remember. He thinks maybe he's happy when she gets there and sits by his bed. He holds her hand. He looks at her and remembers they were once young, together, maybe years ago. Maybe last week. He can't figure out what happened but he knows her love, he knows she is there for him. She tells him she's planning to go to a school meeting, but if he really wants, she will come with him and not go. But he knows that has to do with his girls and tells her to go.

The EMTs come with a gurney to transfer him and she grasps his hand as they move through the corridors, and leans forward to kiss him by the ambulance. In nearly 20 years together, she never forgets to kiss him goodnight, even if angry or hurt. He leans forward and kisses her back, softly, holding the contact. He says simply, *love you.* He lets go of her hand but keeps contact with her eyes, and feels the gurney rising. The doors swing shut between them. He looks through the widows of the moving ambulance back doors, sees that she is driving behind them. At an intersection where the ambulance turns left, he raises his hand to her. She waves back, goes straight through the intersection.

An hour later she calls to check on him. He tells her he's fine, tired, tell the kids he loves them. She says rest, she will come early tomorrow.

OK, good. See you then. Love you.

He sets the phone down and feels the need to move again, so he gets slowly out of the bed, takes two steps, and stops suddenly. The room is swimming, he can't catch his breath. His hand looks for support. His ears roar as his lungs looking for oxygen, his heart hammers in his chest and then

* * * * *

January 13, he hovers over the form on the bed. It looks like him. Appropriate. He's been watching as people come and go, machinery hums and beeps. She sits and holds the form's hand hour after hour. Drugs pump in and out of the poor bastard and he wonders if she's figured out he isn't in that body. He watches her. That first night when they called her, she came driving through the New England dark to the hospital, tried to sleep in the waiting area, not like she's been sleeping much for months. Now for eight days she has been stroking the emptyman's hair or cheek, talking to him in the bed, playing music she thinks he will like on a radio. When he sees the emptyman thrash in the bedsheets, claw at the air, he wishes he could tell her not to worry, that he really isn't there. He bets she has it figured out though. She's pretty fucking smart. She's seen the test results. She's spoken to the doctors, the nurses, the specialists. He has heard the questions she asks. He waits and hopes she knows.

In the waiting room his girls sit with his best friend. He is sad for them. He sees their pain and wishes he could do something to make this easier for them all. He knows he can't. His best friend is a good guy. One at a time, they come in to see the emptyman in the bed, to spend time with that lost body that hasn't figured out it's hollow yet. Skye chokes back tears. He knows that like him, she hates crying. Rose can't look at the form. He understands that. He wants his girls to remember him like he was, not the empty vessel. Then it's just her and his friend in the glass room. She has the emptyman's left hand and sits by his side, his friend to the other. The device that forced oxygen into the emptyman's lungs is gone. A nurse monitors the ticking, beeping.

She has the radio playing, songs he has known all his life. The Righteous Brothers sing. He likes that one, he realizes. "Lonely rivers flow to the sea, to the sea, to the open arms of the sea..."

The emptyman's lungs don't work. His heart is only

beating because once they started it, nearly 20 minutes after he left that body behind, it has not been permitted to stop. The emptyman's eyes gaze out at nothing and his breathing slows and stops, heart rests, chest quiets.

He watches her crumple, her head on the emptyman's leg, holding tight to his hand as the body loses color, becomes a wax replica of a body. He wishes he could do something. He reaches for her but knows she can't feel him. He waits and watches. His friend reaches and takes one of her hands in the hand that does not hold the emptyman's hand. In a few minutes, he goes to be with the girls. They couldn't be there for this. She is still, stunned, her sorrow falling in sheets down her face.

Time has no meaning. He waits. She stands, walks around to the emptyman's other side, to the photo she has put near the bed, the two girls, picks it up. She places in in the emptyman's hands, which she folds over his ribs. She bends, kisses the emptyman's cold lips. As she turns to go, he thinks as loudly as he can, hoping she knows, *thank you. I love you.* Then he lets go.

LONG BEACH ISLAND: PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY

Brad Distel—Nonfiction Contest Runner-up

My four-year-old face is smushed up against the glass of a half-cracked window, the taste of salt heavy in the air as we make our way through the southern New Jersey marshland. There is a small, dilapidated shack made of splinters and nails just off the road, proudly displaying its patriotism with an American flag on the side. That hut made its way into several stories my dad told us on the long drive down to keep my brother and me from murdering each other in the back seat. When the shack showed up, either in his stories or along the side of the road, it always meant we were close.

The drive to Long Beach Island always feels like a drive outside of time. Part of this has something to do with how long the drive takes, but there is something about the journey through velvety green marshland spread from horizon to horizon as the familiar radio stations fade to static. Then, buildings appear in the distance, their wood siding faded after years of abuse from wind and salt. Even with the windows rolled up, a briny smell permeates the air. Echoes of classic rock and hair metal begin to force their way through the static. There can be no doubt: this is shore country.

Just as quickly as they appeared, the fishing villages are replaced by the glittering Barnegat bay (if the weather is nice), bisected by what used to be the biggest bridge I had ever seen. Swampland drops away and there is nothing but the bay around you, the sky above you, and the bridge underneath if you're lucky. If you aren't, you're sharing the bridge with scores of cranky motorists and their cranky families, crawling towards their destination at a snail's pace, invigorated at the notion the end is near.

Perhaps this is why arriving on the Island always felt like such a relief. Perhaps it is the comfort found in LBI's unchanging familiarity. Driving up the boulevard towards my grandparents' house, I still see the same tanned surfers, their hair bleached blond by the sun, walking home after spending the day at the beach, the same Schwinn bicycles, their pastel colors and chrome wheels glowing in the late afternoon light. Nowhere else have I seen an actual Woody, yet here, these living monuments to Americana are just one flavor of classic car you'll see cruising the boulevard or parked alongside. One of these vintage wood paneled surf wagons

can be spotted parked on one of the boulevard's side streets, its sparkling chrome and cool sea foam green serving as a sign of where to turn to take back roads up the island if traffic is heavy. They even named a burger stand after the iconic vehicle. A younger me, convinced Woody's had the best burgers on earth, would loudly tell anyone who listened and argue to the death with anyone who disagreed. I took and still take burgers very seriously.

Miniature golf has always been the preferred method of familial bonding among the cousins when the California contingent comes east for the horse races at Saratoga at the end of the summer. This is the only time the whole family is together, and things get a bit crowded. In order to keep everyone from each other's throats, the older grandkids take the younger grandkids mini golfing.

For the sake of peace, we've logged a lot of hours on various greens over the years, spending most of that time at either Flamingo or Island Mini Golf. Every Distel, Salomon, and Busch from 29-year-old Craig to 6-year-old Eliza has learned to play miniature golf on these courses, and we all have our favorites. My brother prefers Flamingo, an older course that requires more actual golfing skill, while I prefer Island for its more complicated courses and unconventional obstacles. The younger cousins agree with me for the most part, because Island Mini Golf gives out candy at the end of every game. Eliza, the youngest, couldn't be bothered with lollipops when there is a mechanical spider staring at her while wriggling its body over the ninth hole, so she prefers the spider-free Flamingo.

In order to quench the heat of competition, we head to the Carousel to cool off with some post-game ice cream. This is arguably the best part of every outing.

Perhaps it is the best part, because inside the Carousel was the first time I saw real magic. I was four or five, and we're waiting in line on the far right side of the ice cream shop, separated from the seating area by a thin half wall that seemed to stretch up forever. The playful sound of ragtime music floats through the air, the ice cream shop thick with the smell of freshly baked waffle cones. The person behind the counter hands me my cone and I turn around only to behold a sight that overwhelmed and astounded. Up against the back wall, in the middle of the seating area, is the source of the ragtime music, a shabby old piano. Just as I notice the keys, moving completely on their own, I am shaken with the realization the piano is playing itself. Mystified by the modern mechanical marvel cranking out "Yankee Doodle Dandy," I fail to notice the scoop

of peanut butter ripple I lost to the floor from the top of my waffle cone. Ever since then, I order hard ice cream in a cup, the waffle cone I love so much deemed too risky an ice cream investment all thanks to an automatic piano.

Ask most people where their happy place is, and they'll most likely tell you about somewhere out in nature or somewhere emotionally significant. Ask me about my happy place, and I will tell you all about Mustache Bill's. A small diner at the north end of the island in the shadow of Barnegat Light, the island's only lighthouse, Mustache Bill's is the only thing other than screaming cousins capable of getting me out of bed before nine. The wait can sometimes reach an hour and the already cramped restaurant has been packed full with far too many tables, but even the most claustrophobic diner such as myself can't help but smile in dreamy anticipation of a stack of pancakes so perfect and fluffy they should qualify as anti-depressants.

Local pancake artist Mustache Bill has been slinging batter in front of the same griddle across generations. My pancake order grew up as I did. The vast array of cartoon characters he immortalized in batter spanning Disney, Looney Tunes, and Hanna-Barberra's roster were the pancakes of my childhood. I grew into standard pancakes and basked in their simplicity, until I actually looked at the menu for the first time at twenty-one years old and discovered Mustache Bill, pancake artist, was also a short order mad scientist. His Cyclops pancakes, a short stack with a perfect circle of eggs over medium at the heart of each pancake, are the centerpiece of my happy place, sitting in front of me on a too small table in the middle of my too large family.

Lighthouses fascinated me when I was a kid, thanks in large part to the red and white monolith looming over Mustache Bill's. I collected lighthouse lamps, made in the image of every lighthouse I had ever been to from Cape Cod to Jupiter, Florida, but Barnegat Light is still my favorite. Standing alone on a rocky beach separated from the rest of the island by a pygmy pine forest, "Old Barney" stands watch, tall and resolute. The journey to the top could be dizzying thanks to poor lighting and the spiral staircase, but the view makes the ascent worth it. The brisk wind, sting of salt, and distant braying of seagulls only enhances the feeling the ocean is stretched out before you. The view reminds me how I admire lighthouse operators. Leading a solitary existence, frequently in places with miserable weather, the lighthouse operator devotes their life to maintaining the beacon responsible for countless sailors, unaware of how close they were to land.

Most of my family memories on Long Beach Island were made in my grandparents' back yard, around the pool, overlooking the bay. Every July Fourth, we watch all the towns on the mainland set off their fireworks at the same time, their explosions stretching from horizon to horizon. I've watched five cousins learn how to swim from the same poolside lounge chair, and my brother and I would race big wheels around the pool until every single adult yelled at us to stop. I caught my first fish from that dock and brought home food for the entire family thanks to some stinky fish and a couple crab traps. Now my brother is planning to propose on that dock, the same dock where we learned to fly kites.

I've watched an entire life unfold on the Island, witnessing my family bloom from my grandparents' back porch. While we've all grown and changed with time, Long Beach Island remains steadfast. The entire island feels like it was lifted out of a Beach Boys song (one of the towns on the Island is called Surf City. Brian Wilson did not name it, I swear), yet nothing about the place feels dated or tired.

That's not to say Long Beach Island is completely unchanged since the early 90's. However, despite the cyclical opening and closing of new seasonal businesses prevalent in any shore community, the Island still feels the same. Long Beach Island's constancy in the sea of obstinate impermanence of daily life is strangely comforting. However, blessed permanence is not without its drawbacks. Constancy can be a curse when the only change is the people no longer with us; any tranquility the Island can offer is tainted by the absence of those we love. Being with so much family helps soften the edges, but the absence of my father and aunt will always have a presence. Perhaps this presence is why we don't fight over where to eat dinner, or why we are simply content to spend the days watching the water, taking in each other's presence. There is no fear of boredom, save for the younger cousins, who must be placated with mini golf. Maybe their loss has helped us appreciate the family we have.

Looking out from my grandparents' dock on the bay, I can make out hints of Otis Redding and spicy grilled chicken carried by the breeze from my neighbors'. We all watch the sun set over the mainland amidst fiery explosions of deep reds, flecks of gold, and electric purples; awash with the lazy satisfaction of a day spent entirely doing nothing. There is a languorous peace to this place. The world is quiet here.



LULWORTH COVE
VIRGINIA HAND

GRANITE

Olivia Kingree

The best place to watch the sun set at the small Long Island Sound beach community where my grandparents owned a cottage was always the flat rock off of Shell Beach. I've spent many nights sitting there in silence, alone or with friends or family looking up at the fading light, surrounded by glimmering ocean.

To get there, we would walk down a set of stairs made from rock on the side of the beach. We never knew who originally built the rock stairs, or when—those four misshapen slabs of granite that led from the land where the sand met the grass to the flat boulder that overlooked the bay. It seemed like they had always been there, like they had always been part of the landscape in our beach community. As children, we never questioned their origins. In our eyes, the land evolved in magical ways, and rock stairs existed because the world opened up for us in new ways every day, eased our passage to adventure.

They must have been there back when my grandmother spent childhood summers in our cottage by the sea. They must have been there, too, when her uncle originally bought property on the peninsula, back when my great grandparents sat on wooden chairs and watched green waves churn from the lower deck.

The third step was wobbly—easily disrupting our young, eager footsteps. Though the steps made it easier for us to walk from the beach to the flat granite boulder, when we were children their shape and size forced us to walk slowly.

Yet, as careful as we were, still we bled often. Cut our hands climbing up rock walls. Cut our feet on oyster shells and barnacle infested boulders. Still refused to wear water shoes, still refused to wear shoes at all because this place was a place that did not welcome shoes. Because the blood made us feel alive, even when we were children—especially when we were children and lacked the fears that would accumulate with age.

There was a rock couch near the rock stairs. A long, curved rectangular piece of glittering pink and tan granite. It fit all of us

kids back then. It was where we relaxed, salty and tan, after a day of running, swimming, biking.

There were boats—real ones, not rock ones, attached to moorings—thick wooden branches that sprung out of the water with ropes that ran through loops in poles on the boulder. Sometimes, while we played here, families would pull in their motorboats, pack them with beers and fishing poles and people and slowly take off.

There were tiny cacti growing in the grass at the edge of the rocks. Cacti that enticed us as children, even though we knew the consequences of getting too close. But get close we did, walking home carelessly with minuscule needles in the tips of our small fingers.

There were mussels and hermit crabs in ribbons of water that pooled into cracks in the rock, and grass and leaves and various plants and weeds. We used them all for our entertainment, making “meals” out of plucked berries and mysterious mixtures placed in cups made of clam shells.

Next to the flat boulder with the rock couch (what we called the “living room”), was a tree and then two thin strips of rock with water running between them. We could stealthily make our way over the water to the other side of the rock formation, holding onto branches and bumps in the rock for support, then jump up to the higher rock. This gave us the best perspective. Here, we saw out to the horizon. We saw the cottages past the guardhouse, the ones that technically counted as neighbors but were not part of our community. That small beach across the way seemed like a different world. It still does today. A beach that existed next to us, in sight every summer but out of reach, barred from our touch.

Once, when I was ten, I slipped on moss growing in a puddle on the rocks, fell quick and hard, back slapping the black rock. I didn’t cry. I shook, I got up, blood running down my bare shoulders. I felt more a part of the land than I ever had before in my life.

When we jumped off of another set of rocks, the ones in front of my family’s cottage, we grabbed a tattered rope attached to the side to climb back up to dry land. Like the rock stairs, we never knew who had installed the rope. It had been there, wedged into the mossy rock, every year of our lives. When it began to disintegrate,

our neighbors replaced it or fixed it. We knew that the rope was not magical, that someone had initially installed it. And many years ago, too, someone else had installed the four granite steps leading to our rock home. The magic was never a mystery. It was man made.

JULY

Elena Hooper

Nature's breath
warms the grass
weaves between
the branches
and simmers
in the pavement

Pressure cooked
the day away
until the pot
boiled over
spilling into
the soil
into the street
and onto
my garden

Waves and waves
Sky splits
cracks and crumbles
Realigns
In brilliant bolts
and cotton grey
dull
soft
quiet
again.



THE CITY
SHANJIDA KHAN

UNPREPARED

Jenae Romero

Darkness has fallen;
With it, the pain and longing for better days.
Winter is here, and it comes with harsh intentions.
I cannot face the cold alone, but I try anyway,
as the wind cuts through my skin,
and the cold so bitter it shakes me to my core.
I look for shelter to ease the pain,
but it's nowhere to be found.
Helpless, hopeless, and fatigued,
I surrender.
Winter is here and is much stronger than I am;
I wish to fight it,
But I have no coat.

THE WINTER WOOD IS WEARY AT MY COMING

Jessica Shively

The winter wood is weary at my coming
to battlefields of long ago.
The trees, like glass, whisper in my wake
with the crooked voices of frozen soldiers,
who speak of that which stole their souls.
Can you imagine,
two hundred years ago those rebels walked these woods?
I picture them,
waiting here next to the last circle of Hell,
waiting for Heaven I suppose.
Snowflakes merge and my thoughts converge,
Then ghosts got up and gather to tell a tale:
“We the restless and the weary,
come to tell of the things we carried,
through the winter frost and snow,
we marched together.
This is what we know.
Hunger and emptiness.
Hatred for the life we've missed.
Pain and sorrow.
Hope that we won't die tomorrow.
Pictures of our families were painted on our minds,
we will carry them to Heaven, when it is our time.
We left home young and strong, answering our country's call,
to return a ruin, if return we did at all.
We sought glory on this battlefield,
only to be haunted by the men we killed.

How were we to know,
the only thing which waited here was a deadly foe?

*Behold the pale horse,
after war has set its course,
the man that sat on him was Death*

In his wake nothing is left.

*Hell follows with him,
bringing Judgment to test our every sin.”*

The phantoms dissolve and animals make patterns
like lace in the freshly fallen snow.

The cries of these men I mistake for the wind.

That was long ago, I say, wars are no longer fought for glory,
even though those figures in the snow, say it isn't so.

Nowadays, I say, war is fought for freedom.

The winds howl, the snow turns to ice.

That must be the Devil,
laughing at me.



UNTITLED
SHANJIDA KHAN

DARK

Olivia Kingree

We knew that our parents knew. Mom was a light sleeper, waking up to the slightest creak of wood floors. But still, the exaggerated secrecy is what made it worth it.

We snuck out three times together that summer, just my brother and I.

Usually, it was his idea. At around midnight, with our parents and little sister asleep in the small cottage, he put on his bathing suit, grabbed a flashlight, and woke me up. Minutes later, I joined him as we slowly pushed back the warped screen doors and felt ocean breeze on our bare skin.

It was difficult to get out of this house silently. Everything we stepped on or opened was old, or wet, or broken, or salty.

The sea was black with strips of moonlight dispersed in lines on the left side of the bay.

We walked down the hill in the light of our flashlights, carrying bug spray and towels.

When we got to the top of the rocks outside of our cottage, we questioned our decision each time. It was usually late August. We were sweaty, the water was not too cold—that wasn't the issue.

The issue was mosquitos.

They loved wet skin, especially in the dark.

And so, we jumped quickly, and left fast. We plunged under the dark water, feeling close to oblivion.

And then arose, breaking the waves with our heads, laughing and shivering and feeling like the only two people awake at the time.

And then we grabbed the rope, crawled up back to land. Threw on a towel, grabbed flashlights and ran. But no matter what, we returned with fresh bites.

TO THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY

Matt Macaulay

Wake up and stand up boys,
we're going someplace else.
Where we go, only the wind knows,
where witches curse and maids talk in verse,
when knights died and legends sighed.
With broad shoulders we'll march abreast,
with solemn pride and subdued zest
we'll go to where we ought to be,
we'll live where we ought to live.
With peace and love and root and tree,
we'll be.
For a while, at least.



LULWORTH COVE
VIRGINIA HAND

THE PRICKLY TRUTH ABOUT BEING A PORCUPINE

Zarina Akbary

There was once a porcupine who didn't know he had quills.

Constantly, his mother and father told him, "You're as soft as velvet." And whenever Porcupine left the burrow to meet his friend, Dove, at the pond, he'd gaze down at his reflection and his soft face hid his spiky back from his view. Dove, perched on a branch, could see his quills, and was careful to avoid them. But she enjoyed his company all the same.

One day, Porcupine and Dove had an argument. Porcupine was so angry that the quills shot from his back. Dove stepped deftly out of their path, unsurprised. But Porcupine was shocked.

Have you known this whole time that I have quills, he asked.

Everyone knows you have quills, Dove replied. No one mentioned it because we thought it would be impossible for you not to know.

Porcupine went to his parents and asked if this was true.

Surprised, they said, of course you have quills. You are a porcupine.

But you said I was like velvet, Porcupine cried.

And you are to us, they said as they held him.

Angry and sad, he broke free and ran into a clearing in the forest.

I wish I had feathers like Dove, he cried. Or fur like a rabbit. Anything but this.

Porcupine started to shoot out all his quills. They flew like arrows in all directions, and each time he shot them out, it took longer for the quills to come up again. But they always came up.

Eventually, Porcupine grew tired and the forest floor was so littered with quills that, when he tried to move forward, he pricked his paws. Truly hopeless, he began to weep.

A hawk flying up ahead heard his cries and saw the soft creature huddled in the clearing. But, as the hawk swooped down, Porcupine looked up. Startled, Porcupine's quills shot out. The

hawk doubled back and flew away, leaving Porcupine in the quill-covered clearing with his tears and his bloody paws.

I am not velvet, Porcupine said to himself. I do not have feathers like Dove.

Porcupine gently removed the quills from his paws. But my parents still love me. Dove is still my friend. My quills can hurt me and others. My quills can protect me and others.

I have quills, Porcupine said, wiping his tears away. Everyone knows it, and now I do too.

PHOEBE

Yuxin Qian

Her tiny body jumping off the floor,
dancing in circles round and round.
Rolling over to tummy rub implore,
such happiness and energy abound.

Giving out hundreds of wet kisses,
as if one thousand years has passed.
Expressing how much she misses
all those part of the household cast.

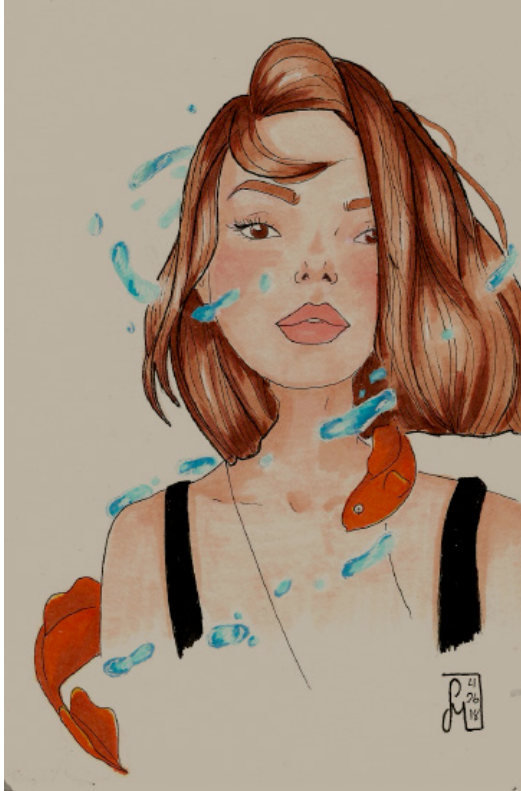
Enthusiastically bringing a toy,
yet oddly unwilling to share.
Her own hide and seek as ploy,
while shadowing us everywhere.

Forever seeking to be more close,
eyes wide and brightly shining.
Nearly embedded into legs of host,
extra appeal of sweet whining.

So aware of presence and mood,
bringing simplicity and harmony.
Such great joy and comfort exude,
from this little one we call Phoebe.

HOW TO GROW A SONGBIRD: A GUIDE

Emily Deuchar



UNTITLED
FERIDE MASACI

Step 1:

Find a soft patch of red earth and dig until your fingernails no longer look familiar,

full of dirt and dark colors

the way you imagine your great grandfather, the farmer's, would look after a day of work

or maybe the way they always looked,

even in the morning when he woke up in a hot, dusky room, light just peeking in, making shadows on his sleeping wife's face.

Step 2:

Gather your materials.

You will need sticks for bones,

there can be 11-25 just in their necks

so they can reach around and see the world and make their judgements upon it,

so you will need a lot,

though they need only be little ones

so I don't see why you can't just snap one long twig into many parts to make one whole.

And for the wings try positive thoughts,

or maybe more practically some leaves or feathers,

though be careful when going this route

as a bird that sees his own feather on another may go and rip it out and return it to its origin

and if this continues too long your songbird may only be sticks

and no one wants to hear a stick sing or we'd still have great forests and less papers full of words.

Step 3:

Breathe life into your songbird.
Plant a scream in the earth,
a nasty, ugly, promising scream,
one with your lost dreams and ambitions
and what you always wanted to be when you grew up
bundled up inside it.

Step 4:

Replace the earth.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Growing a songbird may take a while.

Early removal may result in a squawking bird.

Something unfinished and screaming back your failures in your face
and your mother already does that, so you don't need another.

Step 5:

Come each day to where it is planted and cry a few tears onto the
earth,

not too many,

and only tears of joy, remember we're making a songbird here.

Find at least one thing, though you can have as many as 8,

that made you smile each day and release them onto the spot
through your built-in watering cans.

That's why God made tears, so things could grow out of our
happiness or pain,

sweet things, peaches and lilac, bitter buckbean and arugula.

Step 6:

Wait.

Each songbird grows at a different rate,
it needs time to learn your melodies, the rhythm of your life, each
beat,
so when it sings you know it's the one that grew from you.
Be patient.

Step 7:

Walk away.

A songbird will not burrow up from the dirt while you are watching.
These are shy things.



MEGAN'S FAVORITE BIRD
SHANJIDA KHAN

FOR OLIVIA VOL. 4

Matt Macaulay

You offered a hand to hold,
a mind to link,
a heart to make mine.
I offer winter, the frost.
Damned be the cost
of what the poet's call love.
A frightful thing.
Do I love isolation's warm embrace,
or do I fear some friendship may yet be lost?
Still though you offer love,
and I, the winter, the frost.
I've wished to be with you
through toils and raptures,
but so too have I loved the cold,
and here we stand, upon a road uncrossed—
you offer love,
and I, the winter, the frost.

WORLD BUILDING

Sofia Amorim

I don't need to know
what it looks like above our sky,
beyond the moon,
Ultima Thule,
Andromeda
It doesn't matter if
voids consume light,
stars collapse in shadows,
or that constellations rearrange
Every day, the microcosm
of our cosmology, our biology
expands beyond your reach,
dimples the fabric of my cheek,
and bend the light around you and me.
There's no need for a grander scale,
when everything in the universe
is condensed and accreted
in you.



BLEEDING BEAUTY
KATIE REVELAS

ANDANTE

Leanza Rodriguez

Her dream
is that one day
her skin will hug her body
rather than tear and reveal
the roaring waters
of the Red Sea that stirs within her
that one day
she will be more
than the scars
that vaguely compare
to the pain that lies
beneath them.

Her dream
is that one day
she will be touched
like the keys of a piano
kissed by delicate fingers
she cannot take the beating
of the drum.

Her dream
is that one day
her cries will become music
her hands
will stop quaking
releasing the scissors
cutting the pages
of a song unwritten.

Her dream
is that one day
she'll awake to
the notes spelling out

“I love you
my goodness
you are loved.”

Her dream
is that one day
she will awake
from this nightmare
the voices
that sing over the piano
filling her ears
with a sharp melody
that one day
her staccato breaths
will become whole
that her song will play on.

LO QUE SOY

Leanza Rodriguez

You tried to bury me,
tried to hide me,
tried to disguise me,
tried to delegitimize me.

Like Maya Angelou I rise,
rise from the ground you sought to leave me in,
abren este caldero,
lleno de vida y lleno de espíritu.
Taste the flavors of my history,
the verduras that were tossed aside.

I am the caldero echo de hierro,
quemado, pero siempre sobreviviendo el fuego.

I am a bowl of sancocho,
mixed with meats and spices,
an amalgamation of stories and lived experiences.

I am my mama's worn hands,
scrubbing away at the dirt,
the dirt that suffocated us,
until we spit it out,
gritando, "ya basta."

I am the Taino Indian,
wondering why my pictures that speak volumes
are not worth their words that silence our song.

I am my tia's broken English,
only broken because she does not sound like them,
is not understood by them,
because she says, "jes please," instead of, "yes please."

I am the little girl,
with dreams bigger than her body,
praying to Papa Dios,
"Diosito Lindo,
mami está llorando,
y papi está en guerra.
ayúdame, para que un día ella pare de llorar
y él nunca más tenga que pelear."

I am the esl student,
hoping to learn about su pueblo, su historia,
but discovering only the cherry-picked stories
of Cristóbal Colón.

I am my truth,
and one day,
I will be the history books that they will study.

Now this doesn't end here.
This caldero is endless,
and has much more to share,
Te serví una vez,
pero hay mucho más para aprender.

"T.R.I.M."
Hailey Benson

Tangled torture tamed by neither mortal nor divine souls
Transformation speculation lacking any loopholes

Rummage through gray matter for pause
Rouge recollection satisfies out clause

Inexorably charged anticipation
Itch the shivering temptation

Maul misshapen quo
Moi...nouveau



PROVENCE
VIRGINIA HAND

THE ORPHAN OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Zarina Akbary

white horse, golden lion
slaughtered like lambs
on the blood-red sands
stained by her sacred tears

a companion for all those lonely
hearts

what do you learn at four?
the entire army drank
and teased her for being thirsty
the general showed her water
and poured it to the ground
she learned what it meant
to break someone's hope

where's the white horse
to carry her away?
where's the golden lion
to fight the army?

I pretend I can't hear her—
can't shed tears for her.
in the lands of the crescent moon
no humans are left, I'm told
only beasts and the creatures they prey upon.
she'll become a beast soon enough,
they assure me.

but I still hear her voice,
her prayers and pleas and love
resound through the whole world

QUESTION

Leanza Rodriguez

“why aren't you in a relationship?”

you know,
that's actually a great question,
one that i've been asked before,
one that i've chosen to ignore

kinda like the way i've been ignoring you
and him
and her.

no,
i'm not scared,
i'm not afraid of anything...

that's right, i'm not afraid of anything.

“why aren't you in”

a relationship?
yes, I heard you the first time.

okay, so, you know
how sometimes you starve yourself
because you're too fat?
you deprive yourself of something you need
just so that you'll be accepted
and it's okay that you're in pain
because you're told that means gain

oh wait...
you've never done that?

look,
what i'm saying is
that maybe i'm just thinking in advance
maybe by starving myself of human connection now
i'll be able to love someone later
and i'll avoid the pain.

“why aren't”

you in a relationship?
because i'm not

because when someone tells me i'm beautiful i think they're lying
because when someone cares i break their heart so they don't care anymore
because when someone enters my life they walk out a second later

because my demons are too loud and they come in abundance
because the voice in my head tells me i don't deserve to be
because i don't want you to see my body

because i cry when i think i like someone
because i cry when they don't like me

because i don't like me

why am i not in a relationship?

maybe because i am better off alone
maybe because alone is the only company i truly want to know.

TO BREAK IN A PILLOW

Jordyn Smith

You cover a cotton pillow with the pineapple yellow case your mother gave you. The case that once belonged to your great aunt Laura.

The one who died two years ago after brain surgery on her tumor failed.

The matching sunflower sheets with fringe around the trim makes you feel vintage. Maybe it gives you a sense of aesthetic.

(Whatever that is, since people have their preferences anyway.)

Once the sheets are unfolded and tucked into the corners of your mattress, you hug it like an envelope,

like an envelope holding the letter you wrote to your eighth grade English teacher because you still keep in touch even though you haven't been in eighth grade for six years.

You lay your woven blankets on top, one, two, three, four, how many blankets do you need. And the final addition, like the seashell flag at the top of a sand castle you built with your brothers on that beach you go to every summer on vacation, even though you hate beaches, your pillow.

Itsits atop the covers, in solitude.

Shoulders can be soft places to cry on, tears staining your white shirt with mascara,

but it's just a shirt so you let her cry as much as she needs to.

You try to remember the amount of times you felt a similar dampness seep through your shirt, and you decide that they're countless.

Maybe just as countless as the number of nights your dampness has reached the cotton stuffing behind that old coral case.

You rest your head on your soft place,
no one's shoulder, but your pillow.

And you let a tear build up in your duct and tip over the edge,
let it roll across your nose and plummet to the pillow beneath you.
Turning the pineapple yellow into a gray puddle.

And you sit atop the covers, in solitude, breaking in your new
pillow, realizing that this whole time it's not because of aunt Laura,
or because of the sweet words Mrs. EighthGradeEnglish writes, or
even because you miss your brothers...



EGON SCHIELE STUDY #2 - FEMININE ACT
LILLIAN ANN BARTLETT

SILENCED

Melanie Arpaio

My first thought was he was lonely and old, sitting at the airport gate and leaning his liver-spotted head on his cane. He looked grumpy, curmudgeonly, and maybe a little bitter? I immediately decided I didn't like him one bit, just from the brief glance across the aisle. First thought was, he looked like my dad's father, my grandfather, and I had no fond memories of that man. When I complained about the things he did to me as a child—I think I was nine when I finally realized that perhaps not all grandfathers did things like that to their grandchildren—I was told, "He's a dirty old man, just ignore him. Try not to be alone with him, unless you can help it. But don't be rude to him. You owe him your respect, because...."

Because what, I always thought. Because he's my elder? That warrants an exemption or automatic absolution? And the final warning from those I told, first my mother, then my aunt, and finally my daddy was, "Don't. Tell. Anyone. What. He Did. It would break your grandmother's heart."

And that was that. I isolated. I hid under the sweeping branches of the Norfolk pine in the side yard, or behind the daffodil bed, or I played in the oak trees that were far enough away that the old man couldn't see me. Anywhere but the cellar workshop. Anywhere but the wooden porch swing. Unless he summoned me, of course, because I was reminded often that to disobey would be rude and disrespectful. I didn't like him, and I Never. Told. Anyone. What. He. Did.

This airport man's eyes had the same detachment, selfishness, righteousness, boredom, entitlement. A man like him was why I only came back to *visit* Georgia, never again to stay, and was the ultimate reason I'd left in the first place. The reason I left home and made a new one from scratch.

Then I realized I was being ridiculous. This old man was not my long-dead grandfather, so I thought maybe I should try to talk to him, get him to smile, see if he was alive in there, and if he wanted someone to keep him company. But I didn't. Too much grandfather in him for me to approach. I did what I'd learned to do as a child, and that was to stay away and steer clear. No eye contact or chatting, because that's just an invitation to things you Can't. Tell. Anyone.

And then, a group of young men came in loudly, happily

boisterous and talking of the basketball championship game and of graduation and of deployment and girlfriends. All fist bumps and in search of charging stations and seats and a lifetime of excitement with a side dish of a secure future. The old man looked over, and instead of grouchy disdain, I saw cross his face a look of distant recognition. I realized that maybe I was seeing a glimpse of him remembering himself as a young man. A hint of a smile, barely. No, definitely not Grandfather. The young men caught the same vibe I had, and toned down their volume. They shared eye rolls and smirks, and they ignored the old man. With that, his scowl returned, and he closed his eyes, leaned his cheek down on his hands, folded over the rounded top of his gold-flecked cane.

He was all tan, this old man. Not Florida tan. Not Jersey spray-tan. *Tan* tan. Khakis, tan weatherproof jacket, tan socks, tan Rockports. Plaid shirt, though, as if to add some bit of spice to the monotony of the outfit. Appropriately Southern, a plaid shirt, with a blue pattern and a button-down collar. A tan woven belt to hold up those baggy pants on the ain't-got-no-butt old man. Then he moved, gradually unfurling a surprisingly tall and upright posture, and ambled unsteadily to check the gate announcement board, which still proclaimed the news that the weather was going to keep us in Atlanta another two hours, at least. I wondered why he was going north anyway.

I thought maybe I'd get up the nerve to talk to him after all, but as he fell heavily into the seat, a young-ish woman approached and looked to sit next to him. He threw her his grouchy glance, the one that should have warned of unfriendliness. The one that screamed "Don't talk to me!"

But blonde and Southern and forty-something and a little round in her capris and knit top, she smiled big and started talking to him. He looked startled and exhausted and just stunned that she didn't understand the body language, the "Don't talk to me" body language. Undeterred, she quickly said good afternoon and hello and settled in right next to him—even though there was room for the empty seat between them—and even offered him a Coca-Cola. Waving his own 20-ounce bottle in her direction, the old tan man smiled. "Got m'own." Then, "I come here to see m' youngest grandson, livin' up in New York with his mama and daddy. That's my baby girl, my Maddie, who's his mama."

And with that, a beautiful five-minute relationship began. She told of her fifty-years-married parents and her new master's degree and her exciting business trip to the big city. "First time there!" she gushed, and then dove into her own Coke as if somewhat embarrassed by her own enthusiasm. With her pause, he leaned in and he told of his sons, the oldest one dead from "the cancer," second one living in Florida with his life partner

("some man, and *about that* I don't wanna speak another word," he cautioned), one back home taking care of the dogs, and then of Maddie, the lone daughter, gone to New York when she was too young. Maddie'd gone wild, left home to work up north with them Yanks, married late at thirty-five. He chuckled and confessed, "Her mama, my Mamie—and I do miss that woman ev'ry day—thought Maddie'd die an old maid or turn to likin' wimmin', one or t'other". And finally, at forty-two, had given birth to one son, and named him William, after his grandfather in Georgia. After the old tan man.

"Lawd, a handsome boy, just graduated college. I'm proud of 'im, 'ats fer sure." The loud young men, gotten quieter, seemed to keep his attention all the while, and maybe talking about William made him take new note of their presence. They'd be about the same age, I supposed, as his grandson. He kept them in his line of sight the whole time, seeming a little wary but always watchful.

While talking, the old man didn't look quite as tan—quite as beige—and looked more like he had happy years yet to live. He sat straighter, eyes brighter, good strong teeth showing through his broad smile. I could see that he was clearly enjoying this conversation with his new friend, and so grateful to not be overlooked for once. I felt happy for him, with him, and I didn't dislike him anymore. He was nothing like my pervert of a grandfather, nothing at all.

Then came a scratchy announcement on the PA system, and the young woman got up to better listen. Then she grabbed her tote and hurried to the gate attendant. The man was mid-sentence and smiling broadly, but his face fell when she left without a word. The scowl returned, but it looked more hurt than bitter. Quickly, it was replaced with a defensive, stubborn set to his lips. It was amazing to sit and watch the transformation. This tan old man had gone back to his curmudgeonly state that quickly. She did come back, the round forty-something, to tell him that her own gate had changed, and that she had to hurry to her new gate, so she didn't miss her plane. But by then, his posture made it clear that he was done with her.

She looked at me, confused, and I just shrugged. He glanced across at me, noticing me for the first time, I think, and that glance threw a nonverbal warning to keep out of it. She hesitated, waiting for some reply from him, but he wouldn't look her way again. It was as if he'd shared enough and risked enough and regretted that he'd opened up to begin with. She went off, hurried but resigned, and he folded down again, onto his cane, into himself, eyes half closed and still keeping an eye on the cadre of young men. Reliving some lively past? Regret, hope, or just missing his lost youth?

Making a decision, a hard one, I braced myself for the

worst, but leaned forward to get his attention. He had his eyes half open but didn't invite me to conversation. I tried anyway. "Sir?" Nothing. "Sir?!" a little bit louder. Huffing out a breath, he acknowledged me with a raised and bushy gray eyebrow. He didn't turn his head toward me all the way, still resting on his cane and keeping an eye on the boys. I ventured forth. "Why'd she leave? Your daughter? Why'd she go away and never move back?"

He considered the question, and clearly didn't seem as enthused about starting a conversation with me as he had with little Miss Round-and-Forty, but his eyes grew thoughtful and almost sprouted tears, I think. Turning to me slightly, he spoke, "It was ma daddy. He done wrong by her, and no family took up for Maddie. Hurt'er, mos' likely, made'er hate mos' menfolk. She tole me she was gonna leave soon as she could get out, and she did. Strong gal. And I ain't see her since. Blames me, and rightful she oughta, 'cuz I dint stand up for her neither."

Bewildered, and thinking him a little confused and senile, I nodded to the gate and our delayed flight. "But I thought you were going to see her...and your grandson. William? Isn't that your flight?" Then the smile bloomed again on the old tan man, and the tears were for real.

Shaking his head, he informed, "No ma'am. I ain't never been on no plane, but I would, I would if Maddie'd welcome me in. No, ain't my plane, it's *his* plane." With the inflection on "his" he nodded slightly back at the group of young men, all caught up in themselves and their laughter, at the blonde mop-top in the middle of the group, clearly the most popular of the friends, the one that everyone else deferred to in that friendly testosterone way that only groups of men can do successfully.

"He writes me, has since he was 'bout twelve, and sends me pictures of himself printed up on his computer. His daddy, a fine fella, done give William my address. Maddie don't know. But he ain't never met me. Don't wanna defy his mama. He's a good boy, a good boy who loves and minds his mama."

I was beside myself! "Well, he's here! Go talk to him, tell him who you are? You have to know he'd love knowing you came to see him. GO!" I was desperate to see this old man meet his grandson. I imagined this happy ending where the man would get to reconcile with his Maddie, reaching across the next generation back to her. I needed them to be a family again before he got too old to see it done. My voice raised a little, and the pitch caught the attention of William and the other young men. The old man cautioned me again with his eyes, as if imploring me—commanding me—to keep quiet. To hush. To remain Silent. I did, and the William-group turned their attention back to themselves.

"Ma'am, this is my business alone. I did wrong by Maddie when she was a young'un by ignoring her. I ain't gonna do wrong again. It's her wish that she be outta this family, and I intend to honor that. Now this is as close as I'll ever git to my grandson, and it's fine enough by me." Still, I sat on the edge of my seat, chomping at the bit and *angry* at this order to keep quiet. Secrets—wow, I realized—secrets *exactly* like Maddie's, had taken me away from my family, and I never went back, not really. I think I saw in William and Maddie and the old tan man a chance to speak up and speak out, to at least let them find redemption and each other.

"Respectfully, ma'am," the old tan man spoke, "I'd like to talk no more. I wanna sit silent and watch 'n' listen. Might be the only time I git to do this, if'n it's awright with you." I nodded. He retreated back into his listening silence, putting on his brooding face once again, and seeming half asleep and utterly exhausted.

I needed to escape the airport, miss my flight, and go see my own dad to tell him how angry I'd been at being silenced by him when I'd really, really needed him the most. But I couldn't go see him, not really, because I'd also have to tell him much I'd missed seeing him grow old, how I wished I'd been there to help him when he was sick, how hard I'd cried at his funeral, and how filled with regret I am to this day.

I did walk away, though, and I did miss my flight. I know myself, and I'm a fixer. I'd find William on that flight, if I was on it, and I'd tell him the truth I'd heard from his old, tan grandfather, also named William. And I knew I couldn't do that, that it wouldn't be right. So, here I was again, forty-five years later, silenced again by the words.

"Don't. Tell. Anyone."

JUST BREATHE

Anonymous

Just breathe.

His hands were gripping me tightly, tighter than I anticipated...but I didn't plan for any of this.

His breath was warm, and the stench of alcohol was overwhelming.

Just breathe.

I repeated that phrase in my alcohol induced state, numbers blurred into figures and figures disappeared into blackness.

Just breathe.

I counted to 10, but blacked out at 5.

He kept kissing me after 7 shots, while I was still on the number 5.

His hands grasped harder; I couldn't feel my toes, but he felt me up past those.

Just breathe.

I came back to reality when he was inside of me.

I couldn't figure out how he got on top of me.

Just breathe.

I didn't want to keep breathing; I had to convince myself.

It must be over; it is almost over.

Make him stop. I didn't say anything.

Make him get off. I didn't move.

My brain became disconnected from my body, as if the plug to the rest of my body was ripped out.

Just breathe.

But I couldn't breathe, because he was kissing me.

But I couldn't breathe, because he was inside of me.

But I couldn't breathe, because he took every word of consent away from me.

It turns out the only one left breathing was him.



FAILED EMBRACE | FAILED GRIEF
TIFFANI WHEATLEY

The hope of ahead lies on the embrace I've failed at my past. New Beginnings.

HOW I SLEEP AT NIGHT

Black Crystal Fire

This is how I sleep at night:
My half-conscious body flips over and over,
relentlessly ripping me from rest
in the early morning.
It's 1:02 am.
I wish that I would cut away this dark hopeless feeling,
and fall into slumber.
However,
my attempt to sleep is as useless,
as my attempt was to save my friends.

This is how I sleep at night:
My fatigued body has me laying on my back,
my eyes looking at the door, the ceiling,
but I'm not really looking at anything.
It's 1:38 am.
I cannot escape from my emotions
that slice deep into my soul, my heart,
the heart that was battered from the battles before,
the heart that weeps now,
for I could not save my friends.

This is how I sleep at night:
My body holds the heart that is swirling with fear and anger,
as the image of his gruesome, horribly and graphically entitled
Hands.
Tried.
To.
Grab.
My.
Friends.

It's 2:06 am.
I am angered that I cannot destroy
this societally validated abuse
the way they can so easily
Obliterate.
Their.
Victims.
Lives.
Yet,
they are acquainted with this way of breathing
and the people of the world can't help but agree.
Thus, they are acquitted,
so that their monstrous lives are not ruined.
My friends become the bloody sacrifice,
a sacrifice I could not spare for torment and terror.

This is how I sleep at night:
My electric mind keeps my exhausted body awake,
black crystal fire
turning out words
With.
Every.
Exhale.
I don't care what time it is now,
because I wish I had words powerful enough to sock back at them
into my reality
because I know what they do,
because I know what they have denied,
because I know what foul words they have thrown at my friends,
since they do not believe what has happened.
But I know what he did.
And I feared what he would do to others if
I
did not try to stop it.
It is one person who does it to many.
It can be one who spares those of the future.

That is why I tried so hard to shield my friends
From the unjust cruelty the aggravators claim to detest.
Yet, I failed.

This is how I sleep at night:
My troubled body trembles with the knowledge that
He.
Will.
Never.
Face.
Fallout.
For.
What.
He.
Did.
It's too late for this shit.
How I had hoped for a better outcome
How I had hoped that he would learn for the better
How foolish I had been to hope he would change.
The society we all live in dictated the acceptability of such a
violation.
This society believes with
undeniably stubborn red boulders on fire
it is the victim's fault.
The victim asks for it.
The victim is lying.
There is not enough evidence to take further action.
So, nobody believes the victim.
So, nobody believes that the swimmer in the suit slid himself into
crime.
So, nobody believes that their precious friend could have done it.
Yet, I know he knows.
I know he knows how incredibly in the dark murky revolting pond
of wrong he is.
This is how I sleep at night.

THE STATIC AND THE NOISE

Elena Hooper

I was born with my wires crossed
Tangled, wild, and frayed
Sparking and sputtering
I spiral through life
The signal at fever pitch
Surging with violent force
A frequency that slices
Between my eyes
Frenetic and strange
As my legs carry me
Mile for mile
Until the neurosis catches
In my throat to scream
And when I think
I am far too high
My system will crash
And the connection relieves
But I know even in
My vacant transmission
The sound rings
Hollow through my skull
And I am still paranoid
Between the static and the noise



METADATA | TOKYO
JARAUN WRIGHT

See Jaraun's art through music in "Mass Pandemoneyum":
<https://youtu.be/lvDX-oZ9XjI>

NEEDLE

Maria Lupo

Blood moves down his fingers

Tight, stained spiders.

The athlete

Waits.

Bitter, fine gauge steel

Passes through his taught skin.

His needle is new, sharp.

He must wait
as the blood dries.

The holes.
never satisfied.

MEASURE ME WHEN I'M DEAD

Sofia Amorim

Measure me when I'm dead,
when I'm lying on the Examiner's table.
Stretch the tape measure
from head to toe,
flattening against the curve of my spine,
so as not to add inches that weren't mine.
Measure me when I'm dead,
when they are left standing in my room.
Fold my sheets inside my blankets,
and box the possessions left in places
I would never have decided on,
to realize within four walls that I was gone.
Don't count the trophies on the shelf.
Ignore the plaques on those yellow walls.
Leave behind my clothing and my make-up,
and empty out the boxes you've packed to haul.
Measure me by the words
in my books, on my papers,
the journals on my shelves,
the photos left unframed.

Subtract me from breath, and what is left?
The me I've claimed after death.

COMPULSION.

Lillian Ann Bartlett

You lay on the dining table of your childhood home.
Rummaging through your organs you
 can feel the slick warmth as they
slide around your hands.

Badump

Goes your heart, pumping so violently as
you dig in your body.
Squish, squelch, squash
You pick apart yourself before anyone
else can get the chance.

Click

Go your bones, tired from keeping your—
self together.
Clink, clank, clunk
Rattling on the table, your
body is—
 falling apart.

You watch yourself from the corner of the room plucking,
cutting bits of pieces.
Why don't you stop yourself?
"Don't fit the mold yet,"
 your body calls from the table.
 Swish, zoop, swoop
 Stich yourself together.

Carefully now, carefully,
whisper the songs of sorrow,
cuddle your falling pieces.
Oh, Raggedy Anne, you look so bad now.

Slumped, sagging, and dragging,
you pull your body into the pond.
Sleep there as the world roars.

ROADKILL

Jay Shovan

If my guts were spilled,
spread out on hot gravel,
in a soggy mess of stir-fried organs,
I don't think I'd feel
any different than how I feel now:
open.

With my insides exposed,
wanting to close them up in sutures,
wanting to stitch a thick cloth
over my heart
so that it can't be seen.

Instead, I've been dumped,
emptied out like that mug I shattered
on my bathroom's tile floor,
shattered like the curses I shouted,
shattered like my wish that maybe
the pottery could have cut me
on its way down.

I'M NOT A BAD PERSON (AN EXCERPT)
Holly Hoyt

When the orange Jeep pulled up, I entertained the idea that it might be him.

I imagined myself handing a caramel macchiato through the window with a smile I knew he'd recognize. He would double-take when he saw the coy way I looked down at him, the look I knew would cause him to climax.

But why would he come here? His office is uptown.

I've played out this scene more than once in my head, and not just with him. For instance, George, with the graying hair and black leather wallet, would have fit in nicely with the rest of my clientele from the site. The first time he winked at me after I scooped foam on top of his triple-shot, I felt a desire to see him fall to his knees and apologize for being cheeky. Otherwise, there are men from the site who, I think, would have done better as cafe customers than cam-dominatrix clientele. With some of them, getting them to finish is about as exciting for me as asking them what size they want their iced tea. I don't miss that type.

But as many times as I've wondered what would happen if my old job should bleed into this one, I never actually expected one of my subs to show up here, in my real life. And in his case, even if I thought I wanted him to show up, I didn't have any idea what I would do if he did.

It's when the driver of the Jeep ordered, in a medium-deep, throaty voice, a grande caramel macchiato, that the idea it may be him returned to me. This time, though, the pleasant, spicy feeling was not present. It was ice-cold dread instead.

I clicked off my headset and scanned the floor for a place to hide. Brandon was in the back doing assistant manager-y stuff, and the only other barista working that morning was Gladys, who was on her ten. The caramel macchiato was the only drink in the queue, and I was the only one here to ring it up. I had to face the Jeep.

"Four ninety-seven, please," I said.

He was wearing the same tailored suit he wore the day he camed with me before one of his meetings, plus sunglasses. "How's it going?"

"Good, you?" *He's just another customer. I don't know what he looks like without a shirt. I don't know how hairy his chest is. I don't know how small his dick is.*

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You remember me, don't you?"



ANXIOUS
HANNAH BOUCHARD
www.hannahbouchard.com

I really hoped I wasn't as red as I felt. "Of course I do, but let's keep it quiet, okay?"

"What for? We're the only ones here, aren't we?"

An alarm had gone off. We had entered restricted territory.

"How's, um..." I snapped my fingers, pretending I couldn't remember your name. "...Becca, isn't it?"

His smile faltered. "She's okay." Pause. "I'm actually driving up to see her."

The dread vanished. "Okay," I said, the same thing I say to my boyfriend when I want him to know I'm upset and want him to ask why.

He waited. *What does he want me to do? Crack a whip? Reach through his window and grab his junk? I'm just his barista.*

"Four ninety-seven," I repeated.

He took out his wallet. "That's pretty steep."

"I don't make the rules."

"That's not how I remember it," he said, handing me his Amex card. He was still smiling. Maybe he wanted me to punish him. Before you came along, he would once in a while misbehave on purpose just to test me and bring out my nastiest domme. He knew it would irk me, make me feel disrespected, and that's why he did it.

I made your boyfriend the shittiest caramel macchiato in culinary history: two half-squirts of vanilla, one glob of caramel on the bottom, and milk that I stopped steaming halfway through.

Then I started over and made it the proper way. I figured the least I could do was show him a competent barista. He'd already rejected me as a partner, and, by extension, a human being.

"Good to see you," he said as he drove away.

"Fuck off," I replied.

Brandon emerged from the back. "Meghan, did you just say 'fuck off' to a customer?"

"It was my dad," I told him as another car pulled up to order. "Good morning and welcome to Stubb's. How can I help you today?"

...

I didn't tell my boyfriend that I had seen him, but I told Sean, the only one with whom I've kept in contact since I quit the site. I call him every day on my way home from work.

"Did he know you worked there?" Sean asked. "Like, did he go to your specific store on purpose?"

"I don't think so." I was still numb with shock. "I never told him which Stubb's I work at."

"But you told him you work at Stubb's," Sean reminded me. "And he knows you live in Midtown."

I fished for a neutral answer. "Maybe."

Sean was drinking something with a straw; I could hear him slurping. "You should call the cops."

I laughed. "Why? He didn't do anything illegal."

"Well, at least tell your manager you're being harassed. Then you can take it to court, and you'll win—like, I guarantee you'll win, he's twice your age, which is creepy as fuck, so the odds are already against him. You can get a restraining order. Plus, knowing Stubb's, you'll get a fuckton of worker's comp money. And then his dumb ass will be banned from Stubb's and you can quit and focus on your drawing. And then you'll never hear from him again." Slurp. "Happy ever after."

I hesitated. I wanted to be honest with Sean and admit that I didn't want, don't want, to never hear from him again. But for months, Sean's been telling me to get over what your boyfriend did to me. I don't want to disappoint him.

That night, I read an article about a garbage man who got caught in a compactor. I watched the news report that first discussed the incident on YouTube. One of my recommended videos was called "'Mother!' - Baby Scene." In it, a lady in a movie tried and failed to save her newborn son from cult members who snapped his neck and then ate his remains. Then I put my phone under my pillow and read Yelp reviews of local allergen-free bakeries on my iPad until my hands stopped trembling. I told myself, as I fell asleep, that I'd stop doing this.

Hours later, my boyfriend rolled over in bed and pressed himself against me. When I didn't respond, he put a firm hand on top of my head and started to push me down the mattress.

"Babe, no. I'm sleeping."

"Aw," he said, but in the darkness, I could see the outline of his smile. "But I waited all night for you."

I wish I could say this doesn't happen often. But this is every night: coming home to a boyfriend, closing my eyes and sucking. Opening wider, going deeper. Ignoring the rest of my body to just use my mouth. Forgetting I was ever the most sought-after girl on any site.

...

In case you were wondering, your boyfriend wasn't the first man who contacted me on the site, but he was one of the first.

Assuming you know which site I'm talking about, you'll know that it's not a heavily populated site. That's because the themes found there do not attract the average person. On the contrary, they would more than likely disturb the average person, or at least make the average person worry for the mental health of the people who use this site.

For instance, when I first found the link between these themes and sex, I was thirteen. I wondered if being attracted to dark things made me a dark person. But after I saw an episode of *Family Guy* which mentioned Quagmire's foot fetish, I, over the years, came to the conclusion that everyone has "quirks." Quirks do not define us. They are just not something to talk about in polite company. For example, I don't engage my customers in conversation about the times I've dressed in a nurse costume and described to the man on the other side of the webcam how I planned to dissect him like the victim of an alien abduction. I stick to the weather.

By the time I turned eighteen, I had learned to embrace my "quirks". It may surprise you to know I was the only virgin in my group of high school friends. I had no desire to rush into sex if it was anything like the way other girls described it. It sounded arbitrary, joyless, and even unpleasant to me. They, like so many others, brought up things like torture chambers, handcuffs, and other 50 Shades shit in relation to sex, and in no stretch of my imagination did I find any of these remotely appealing—not unless I was in doing the torturing.

When I found this site, I realized that while I may not have had the desire to submit; there were plenty of men who would gladly submit to me. The erotic comic I had drawn and posted, "Dark Harvest," attracted a number of guys, most of them quite a bit older than me, all of them entranced by the odd, sadistic, very young girl who dreamed of dark operations.

Sean was among these men. In fact, he was the one who got me the chance to interview for the site's cam service. Having gone to an all-girls school and barely ever having spoken to a boy, I relished the attention. The requests poured in. My services were advertised on the site, where I streamed four nights a week from eleven to three, making twice as much as I made babysitting. I would smile at the idea that my username struck simultaneous arousal and terror into the hearts of the men who messaged me. I was virtually surrounded by men who were at my mercy.

Your boyfriend was one of the original group. I'm ashamed to admit that the first few times I cammed with him, the possibility that he'd become more than a client didn't occur to me. He and I would delight in my wickedness for an hour and say goodbye.

But when he'd announce he needed to leave, I wouldn't want him to. This didn't happen with any of the others; with them, I was aware of the possibility that we'd never communicate again, and that was fine. But with him, I needed to know it wouldn't be the last time. I'd ask him, holding back my desperation, if I'd see him again soon. He always came back.

After a few weeks of camming, he and I began to communicate via email and Skype, where I wasn't paid. It was a step beyond camming, one more intimate than a fetish site while still not crossing too many boundaries. I knew asking for his phone number would have crossed a boundary. He showed me his Facebook profile, and I showed him mine, but becoming friends was out of the question. I was a hobby. You are a career.

...

Tuesday had rattled me, but I mottled through my week, closing on Wednesday as I always do. I spent the whole night waiting for the orange Jeep to return, but no such car appeared. I entertained fantasy after fantasy of him coming back, asking for my number, and apologizing (even though he already had) for his ghosting me. Maybe he'd be cute and say my caramel macchiato was so good that he wanted another one. Maybe I'd give him another one for free.

But after every fantasy, I reminded myself that he has no use for me. He has you. He doesn't need a camgirl anymore. And if he wants a caramel macchiato, he can go to one of the fifty Stubb's in his own part of town.

All I wanted to do on the way home was talk to Sean, but he had told me earlier that he was with a client. I was on my own on the drive home I kept checking my phone as I ventured through the garage, stepped into the elevator, and fished for my room key. I'm not sure who I was hoping to hear from, because there's no one.

As I lay in bed after my shower, Baby Simba beside me, I thought about Avery and her dog, about how she never stops crying, about how her tail never stops wagging. I searched "dog abuse" on YouTube and found expository footage of a slaughterhouse in Korea that produces dog meat. There, dogs are clobbered to death and boiled for food. I rewound the part where a female dog was hit with the club again and again until she was still.

I rewound and re-watched until my chest felt tight. Baby Simba, I realized, had fallen onto the floor, and his leaf-blanket had come off. He had been a present from my family's trip to Disney World last fall. When I had seen the shelf of baby versions of Disney characters, I squealed and told my stepdad that if I were a kid, I would have wanted all of them. That night at dinner, he surprised me with Baby Simba: tiny, paws up, and wrapped in a big leaf-blanket.

I was shocked to feel a tear run down my cheek at the sight of Baby Simba on the floor. Re-adjusting his leaf-blanket, I scooped him up in my arms and rocked him.

"I'm sorry." I held him close to make sure he felt as precious as he was, to assure him I would never leave him.

... You say, "I am trying to be good"

but it reads like a snapped pencil

DEAR,
Heather DuPont

I'm not saying I don't believe you
I just think

you saw my crabgrass spine
and that's fine

I don't like summer but I do like
you and

when the sun sits on my skin
it keeps me warm

maybe we were just
July and the fireball

you drank
but I've been wondering

what your cinnamon
tastes like ever since

and I guess I'm trying too hard
to be a Beatles song but I do

wanna hold your hand and
I do believe the sky is diamonds and that

you are good
but that's honey

on my tongue and
the sunburn on

my cheeks

You say, "I am trying to be good"

say instead
we are not July
but all the months
to keep

and I will be cinnamon
I will be sunburn I

will try to be
good.



SELF-PORTRAIT
EMILIA DOMANOWSKI

DeviantArt: LadiePastelle

HERBERGER'S MOVIE

Adam Misner

The TV is square,
The movie is 90 minutes,
Everything else is pure conjecture.

A knee tips teeter,
heavy, it falters
An hourglass of tar, it leans
further
A drip
further
A *drop*
closer

The knee falls
Thighs collide

A full circuit is made

Muscles tense
Bodies freeze
A current abhors motion that'd break it

The movie is loud
The TV is bright

Neither reach us

We swim in a void of serenity where there is nothing, nothing
but the fairest flesh wrapped in the tightest leggings pressed up

against...
me.

too awkward to speak, too awkward to look, so nothing exists
We scream a deafness as we stare intently at a movie we're not
watching.
There is nothing. *Nothing* in the whole universe of *us*. Nothing but
my arm creeping down to *her*.

I did not yawn but my arm is the only thing in the universe.
so she knows it's there

She straightens, raising her shoulders the smallest fraction of an
inch, Eager to greet my arm.

I could not have noticed.
I could not have perceived a motion so imperceptible
so slight
so innocent
but I *have*
and her cheeks burn for it.

I look finally, not then, but later when I'm braver, and I see,
a blush,
for me.

On a face so pale she cannot hide it.
A princess, fair as snow and red as blood.

How long has the movie been over?

She stands. It's abrupt. Depression? Pessimism? Get to work.

But she sits again, abruptly too, punching hesitation and trepidation
in the face. and the shy girl lays her legs over mine, claiming the
territory, and she takes my arm and puts it back where it belongs

and she burns my chest with her cheek blooming so hotly.

I hold her long beyond any excuse to
any casual excuse to

We're both on the same page now or rather we've just admitted to
being on the same page.

still we're petrified to stone at the thought of *turning* that page

I hold her until the movie is done and the screen goes black
She doesn't make a motion to get up.

There is no light but the flickering blue modem light off her glasses
Again I am *here*, and there is *nothing* in the *universe*. Nothing but
me, and *her*

We both play it cool while our heartbeats call us liars.
I can't see her cheek but it radiates heat like a fever.

The raft is unstable and we're both afraid to flip it
mess everything up
to ruin the moment
but nature fills a vacuum.

I tell her she's pretty. She squeaks.
I can't make fun of her yet.

She blinks behind foggy frames
I don't know what it means... until I do

She's waiting for me to kiss her
So, I do.



LAUGHTER
BIANELLY TELLEZ

FINGERPAINTING

Heather Moscat Nash

I remember your touch.
(soft purple velvet fingertips)
The air was sucked out of the room and time died.
(candy apple green sweet)
My face, my hair, my skin;
upturned pleasure to downward-facing tilting world.
(yellow pansy soft like moths)
Tangible space of nothing but sensation,
slow motion seconds racing,
world illuminated.
(powder white flitters)
Deafening dearth of sound pulses like blinking
sinking into a bath, fragrant with translucency
Warmth in your smile (like cotton)

BEIGE

Heather Moscat Nash

You pet my agitation,
and make it lie down.
With you, life is beige.
Gone is the sense of orange confrontation,
black and purple thunderstorms in my head.
Red is not fire, nor is blue ice;
I do not feel the need to retaliate, or argue, or be right.
There is no right or wrong, just beige.
There is no acquiescence, or control, or the need to be in so.
I can say what I am thinking, if you don't say it first, and it just is.
You may not consciously understand, but do not feel the need to do so;
you just sense an understanding and say, "okay."



UNTITLED
FERIDE MASACI

TWENTY-FOUR CRAYONS

Maria Lupo

Waxed corn on the cob balances on a sun
burnt tidal wave. Kiwi snowballs
Saddle up to a bubble gum pink kangaroo.

Magic, pale, pudgy fingers
Cuddle an aqua greyed squirrel.
Molten lava flesh bleeds pages of
Lemony Lime, Berries 'n Cream.

Rockin' red violet spiders Scramble
across the beach.
Into the blue-black night chased by a
wild berry cat.



UMM
LIN LET NAUNG

WOMEN: AN EXCERPT FROM ANNA AND I: A LOVE STORY TOLD IN THREE PARTS

Jessica Jones

“I will never understand why you’re this way.”

My mother smashes the mashed potatoes in a giant metal bowl, staring down at the mushy white substance through her glasses. I peel more potatoes across the table from her. I am silent.

“The whole family will be here tonight,” she exhales loudly. “I asked one thing of you this Thanksgiving. *One thing.*”

My mother is redder now, her face visibly strained. She pushes the bowl of mashed potatoes to the side. She begins opening cans of corn, green beans, and peas, her hands squeezing the can opener tightly. They begin to turn red too.

“Your grandma is coming, you know. Your 85-year-old grandmother, Lillian. What is she going to think?”

I am somehow mashing the potatoes now, my arms limper than hers. The bowl of half-peeled potatoes is left abandoned. She is pouring the canned veggies into clean, white bowls, making sure all of the water is drained out of them. She will not have soggy vegetables. Not at her Thanksgiving.

“But you just have to make a big deal out of everything, huh? You just have to make a show. You just have to take a stand.”

My mom starts folding napkins in her lap, pushing them towards me to place around the table. I am still mashing the potatoes. The bowl is full of potatoes, but they are still only half-peeled. I begin placing the napkins around the table, setting them up as neatly as I can. I am silent.

She sighs. For a second, she is silent as well.

“You know I love you, Lillian.”

My mother’s voice is tense. I hear her words, but I can’t seem to find the love in them.

“You know I do, but I just don’t see why you have to be this way. You could meet a nice boy, you know?” She stops folding napkins to stare at me. “You could meet a nice boy. You’re pretty, young, and very smart. Now, not all boys like a smart girl, but you’re pretty enough. They probably won’t even notice.”

She laughs.

I stopped setting the table a while ago. I stare at her for a long time. I feel that anger—that hunger boiling up inside my chest.

I feel it, and I want to feed it, but instead, I push it down, farther into my stomach. It is killing me, but I am silent. My mother, angry at my lack of reaction, stands up, almost pushing her chair over.

“Why can’t you ever just answer? Why can’t you say things I want to hear? Why can’t you bring home a nice boy?”

The white lights hang in the living room around her head. They make her look whiter, angrier—beautiful. My mother is beautiful. The words she speaks are not. One of her folded napkins unravels in my hands, and she stares at it. Her gaze moves from the napkin to the not-fully-mashed potatoes, and then to the bowl of full, un-peeled potatoes.

“Agh! We’re barely ready, and the family will be over any minute! Lillian, peel the rest of those potatoes, would you please, dear?”

My mother begins mashing the potatoes again, her long thin, hands pressing hard into the giant metal bowl. I peel the rest of the potatoes across the table from her.

“Tell your grandmother that girl you invited tonight is your friend. Tell your grandmother next year you will bring over a nice boy.”

I am silent.

The doorbell rings.

I put the potatoes down and run to the door despite my mother’s orders to help her finish this mess before anyone else gets here. I swing the front door open.

“Woah there, roadrunner. What’s the hurry?”

Anna stands in the doorway. Her blonde curls are pulled out of her face in a loose bun. The gray coat she wears makes her eyes more distinct and I can’t help but stare.

“God, you have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

I pull her into me, hugging her hard and squeezing her until I hear her begging to be let go.

“Your mom, again?” She looks at me, her blue eyes sad.

“Oh, you know my mother. She refuses to accept the fact that I prefer peaches to pickles.”

Anna and I start laughing, and she reaches up to brush a straight strand of brown hair out of my face.

“You look good,” she says to me.

Her face has more lines to it nowadays. She’s only 27, but she works harder than anyone I’ve ever met.

“You look stressed,” I say to her.

She punches my arm.

“So, where’s Bobby?” I ask, motioning for her to come inside.

“He’s down by the car. He’s bringing in the desserts. We brought pie.”

As if on cue, Bobby comes jogging up the front steps, three beautiful apple pies in his hands.

“Jesus, Speckmen. I’ve never been happier to see you,” I say, making googly eyes towards the pie.

I pull him into me as well, careful not to knock the desserts out of his hands.

“Hi, Lillian. You look beautiful.”

I wink at him and pretend to blush.

“Why don’t you head to the kitchen. My mom could use some help. She’s a nutcase right now, though, so enter at your own risk.”

Once Bobby begrudgingly leaves the foyer, Anna gently grabs my wrist.

“You have to stand up for yourself, Lillian.” Her blue eyes pierce into me. “You can’t keep letting your mother take away your happiness.”

She stares at me, waiting for a response.

I am silent. She gets closer to my face.

“Do you love this girl, Lillian? This girl you invited over tonight?”

I look at her, taking in the beauty of her eyes. Taking in the warmth of her hand on my wrist. After a few motionless seconds, I nod.

She smiles at me, but it is a sad smile. She kisses my cheek and heads into the kitchen.

The doorbell rings again.

My heart suddenly begins beating faster than it ever has. I can hear it like an orchestra in my head. I turn around, straightening out my green dress. I fix my hair quickly in the mirror by the door, taking in my appearance. Soft brown hair, brown eyes—and a small but self-assured smile. I reach for the door handle, and I twist it, pulling it open to reveal the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.

Her long red hair is braided to the side. Her eyes, a forest green so deep you could get lost in them and never find your way out of the trees, stare at me with nervousness and love. My heart is racing now. I pull her into me, holding her tightly against my chest, smelling her lavender shampoo, relishing each second we spend blending into one another.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Lillian.” Her eyebrows are furrowed, and I see the panicked look in her eyes.

I put a hand on her wrist. We stand together for a second, staring at one another, completely still. My hand falls from her wrist to her hand.

“Lillian, get in here now! Family will be arriving any minute, and these potatoes still aren’t peeled!”

I squeeze her hand gently and pull her into the kitchen where my mother is preparing Thanksgiving dinner, completely against the love she sees before her. Where my best friend, and first love, is sitting placing cornbread neatly on a large plate, her fiancé’s hand placed lovingly on her thigh. They don’t know it yet, but this is the loudest I’ve ever been, for once in my life, my girlfriend’s hand intertwined with mine.

Anna and Bobby smile at me. My mother stares. I squeeze the hand of the girl I love. She squeezes it back. Like a cup of water poured on a painting, all of our colors blend together.

STRANGERS

Khloe Prem

She was dressed in white. I had seen her a number of times, but somehow never in white. I suppose I should have, being a somewhat crucial part of the wedding party, but it was her mother who picked and planned the event. I was completely unnecessary for the process up to this day. Her dress was beautiful; her mother did an exceptional job tailoring it, the embellished white lace looks so elegant against her skin.

I wish I had been with her more in the past couple of months, but we both became so busy with our separate affairs that we hardly had any coinciding free time. The time we did have together was monitored closely by her mother, who grew more suspicious of her decision to trust me with each passing day. The benefits outweighed the apparent flaws, however, so she allowed our few meetings to continue.

It was because her daughter wanted someone else when we met, someone her mother approved of. Our relationship began unilaterally, and I suppose that's how it will remain. The summer we spent in intimate proximity, where both of our feelings exponentially grew, seemed to not matter at all. She had moved on from me by the time the proposal came.

When she finally reaches me at the altar, her smile takes my breath away, and I can almost feel that we're both back, hands entwined, on the edge of the dock at her summer home, with our feet barely grazing the top of the water. She hands me her bouquet, turning to her soon-to-be husband, and I am left the maid-of-honor to the love of my life, a stranger now.



EGON SCHIELE STUDY #1 - TWO WOMEN EMBRACING
LILLIAN ANN BARTLETT

GOD'S SQUARE MILE

Emily Deuchar

The ushers march on Sunday mornings.
Filled with the organs tune,
you love this, your home,
but it will never love you back.
They've thrown stones and broken bones one too many times,
though one time is always too many.

But you were always hiding
under the radar, under the pews,
their words whipping women who weren't you;
you're just like them, but they don't know—
stay or go.

You know
you should leave.

But still you come back to work at the Christian bookstore.
Your coworkers, older women behind the counter whispering,
The lesbian. The blonde one. Right in front of you.
Tongues full of venom.
Or maybe curiosity.

you can't tell anymore, because your ear is trained to hear battle
axes not butterflies.

You want to go home and cry, because they know,
because you could be gone like the others,
because they could have grown.

Some were returned anyway, but you don't know which is
weaker—
stay or go

Be the belligerent Bulldyke,
or silent sinner complacent in their condemnation.
Call this place your home.
Love the enemy, you know?



PORT OF NO RETURN | BARCELONA
JARAUN WRIGHT

See Jaraun's art through music in "Mass Pandemoneyum":
<https://youtu.be/lvDX-oZ9XjI>

NEIGHTER CHEESE NOR WORM

Lance Lee

The only thing more humorous than listening to someone try to prove that there is a God is listening to someone try to prove that there isn't.

We spend most of our lives seeking answers to questions in life. Why are we here? How did we get here? How big is the universe? What if the planets that orbit the sun are all connected in some way, similar to the tiniest gears in a grandfather clock are all dependent on the functions of every component, from the smallest springs to the largest gears. Can we be certain that the huge mass and gravitational pull of Saturn does not exist to thwart comets from demolishing Earth? Is it unfathomable to suggest that Mercury, Venus, and Mars serve as shields to absorb harmful sun rays?

If our existence can be compared to a novel, life itself may be considered just one volume, as it resides as a part of a universal collection that represents our galaxy. Mankind has enjoyed identifying nearly every discoverable entity in existence. From the comets in other solar systems to the descriptions of the tile beneath our feet in department stores. However, unfamiliar phenomena have yet to be understood by science, such as the beginning of life or creation. Their best attempt to label our existence is "The Big Bang Theory," which leaves more unexplained questions than the theory was intended to answer. Just as a book has an author and a song has a writer, life has an answer. God is the author of that which cannot be explained or duplicated by man.

Philosophers and scientists alike have hearkened the opportunity to disprove the existence of a God by citing theories in evolution as well as the incredulous nature in which we treat one another. Atheists tend to dwell upon a notion that one cannot believe what one doesn't see or cannot observe; however, such skeptics are limited to disputing a biblical representation of God, thus ignoring the universal representation. Not every civilization depicts God as a Man with a beard speaking down from the Heavens. Ancient Egyptians and many indigenous American groups worshipped the sun as their God. Do we not have a sun? Some cultures observed the Earth as the center of life. Do we not have a planet?

What we know or feel we know about God doesn't even scratch the surface. To begin contemplating the true natures of a higher power, one must think outside of the spectrum. Attempting to explain or question the realm in which a God exists is similar to

a worm trying to map the circumference of the earth: there is an Earth, and there are worms, but worms undoubtedly lack the ability to calculate an entity of such magnitude. What we assume to know may have been inspired by a higher power through the minds of individuals around the world, but in terms which can be understood by humans.

God has revealed to us what we are capable of understanding at the appropriate times throughout history. Why would we be given the knowledge of evolution and creation before understanding how to make metal, convert energy, or understand the principles which we may currently conceive as basic knowledge? I wouldn't explain Einstein's Theory of Relativity to my infant child. Those among us who claim to be non-believers must soon come to the realization that the theory of evolution does not attempt to disprove the existence of God, but only strengthens the concept of a Creator. Science can only describe and explain what is observable, but it cannot and does not explain the existence of the matter that catalyzed the Big Bang. If everything has a starting point, what is the starting point of the void that existed before space?

It is imperative to recognize the deceptive manner through which we interpret reality—our propensity to downplay the majestic awe of the universe as a product of fortune or luck is simply farcical. Just as this essay has an author, so does our existence, along with the several billion planets in space. Everything we can see and observe is given a name: the items you read, the objects you see, the sensations you feel are each given a description so that we can identify them. Whichever names you elect to describe the phenomena that represent entities beyond the control of man, I chose to call such a phenomena God.

THE TYPE OF LOVER I NEVER KNEW I NEEDED

Leanza Rodriguez

wandering
through the paths of my brain
i bumped into you
your body a mirror
as if you were cut from my ribs

i knew that if i believed
you would manifest
there would be light
this was our genesis

you stood before me
our bodies at its most natural view
beauty in its purest form

ignoring the tree
from which we dare not eat
you were the only sustenance i needed

what was once yours is now hidden
the leaves sewn to my body
do not disguise the pain
your betrayal caused
your reckless abandonment

if my name were Forbidden
would you long to taste
me and place your lips
on me the way you did with Her
you are part of me
that i despise

i claw away at any rotting skin
that resembles you
and leave the earth
to feast on the flesh

tear my temple
open with a burning sword
remove another rib
and try once more
to create another lover
that will only dine from my garden

let us abandon this eden.

MEANDERING

Aidan Cserhat

Dazzling in the night like slippery emeralds,
green silk shivers through the scintillating black.
Dreams are cemented dangerously high above
and comfort lingers peacefully below.

The touch of your mother's hand
fingers long and lanky.

The fire dawdles along, embers cracking—
They speak their secrets to those who listen unknowingly.

The yellow pot boils everything you have ever wanted,
flavor fireworks.

A certain softness, a result of caring for the hard things in life.
That same touch as before, earnest and knowing
makes everything okay, as they were in fantasies.

Far, far away, you lay awake pondering,
believing and knowing those snippits of quantum time will return.
The light flickers off and the emeralds are gone,
no galaxy above, but only remembrance within,
because the emeralds never truly vanish.

Back to reality,
the softness of the dark isn't as sweet as it used to be.
Hoping to escape, for just one more semi-sweet morsel of time.

PLEASURE ISLAND

Annalisa Manabat

The thought of tomorrow,
monotonous, mundane,
weighs every part of me down,
mouth frowned, heart pained.
The thought of eternal ecstasy
tickles the tip of my nose.
Leaping forward, I seize it close.

Pockets piled, golden quarters
to spend, cotton candy on end,
why not take a ride again
round this carousel, up this ferris wheel.
At the top, I'll forever feel free,
at peace, without work restraining me,
a No-Complaining Me.
Perpetually pleased.

The only time I see the sun rise
anymore is when I close my eyes.
Waking up to midnight,
with no way to disguise myself,
darkness's delicious delights,
oversweet scents of vanilla spice,
apple pies and lullabies.
I wander around these tents,
once to me, like ruby slippers,
now the worst shade of red -
a vampire's smile,
moments after being fed.

I'm supposed to be going around

merrily, airily, but I'm sick to my stomach,
the horses just stare at me. I try to get off,
hate the sound of this melody.
I just want to be grounded again
in uncertainty, searching for purpose,
no such thing as guarantees.

Lulling my last night to ease,
I carve my name into the tree's
trunk, dagger stuck,
I stumble, wonder what I'm doing.
Crying, crumpled in this
plague of a paradise.
Take me back...
Take me back to that way of life

Jagged jitters jolt me back and forth,
in and out of fantasy.
Suddenly, I'm spit out,
the shell of a sunflower seed,
lying in the dirt, once again messy,
my pockets empty, troubles plenty.

Grinning, with relief running through me,
I dig my heels into the dirt.
magic disappearing
Reality has never seemed so appealing.



CONTROLLED CHAOS | TOKYO
JARAUN WRIGHT

See Jaraun's art through music in "Mass Pandemoneyum":
<https://youtu.be/lvDX-oZ9XjI>

WATERMELON

Olivia Kingree

I still remember
my great-grandmother's room
at the nursing home
with the toys and saltine crackers in a secret drawer

And her thin, soft fingers
Her whole being soft and crackly
I was three when she died
They said something about it but
I didn't understand

in that old video
i give her a handmade painting
on her birthday

I'm wearing my favorite outfit
the red shoes with the red cotton dress
and the red and green straw hat, the one that looked like a
watermelon

she was all there at ninety
and three months later, gone

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

Sydney Quinn

The poem is tucked deep within her left coat pocket.

Olivia worriedly fingered the paper. She had spent the whole ride, wondering if she should have typed it up and printed it on computer paper so that it would look nicer. So that no one would be able to see the words she had crossed out or spelled wrong. So that no one would know she had switched from green ink to blue halfway through, because the pen had run out.

In her right hand was Josie's. In the dim light of the evening, there were still sparkles on her little sister's face from two nights ago, the leftover fairy makeup she had begged their mother to do for her.

Olivia had leaned against the bookcase in the parlor, watching her mother apply the glitter to Josie's face while they sat on the piano bench. Theoretically, Olivia was supposed to be on trick-or-treater duty while her father was upstairs making dinner, but she'd just stuck the bowl of candy on the front steps.

"I'm going as a fairy chief, Mami," Josie was rambling. "Thomas is going as his cat, Felicity is a snowflake, and Parker is gonna be Spiderman!"

"Josephina, stay still," Mami murmured, and Josie squirmed in her seat.

"What about you, Olivia?"

Olivia glanced up from her socks to find her mother's eyes. Josie tried to turn around to be in the conversation, but Mami pressed her hand on her shoulder firmly.

"I'm not going."

"Not going?" Josie exclaimed. "How could you not go?"

Olivia shrugged. "I don't have a costume."

Mami's red lips pulled at a frown. "I thought you were going to be that detective from that show you watch with Gina."

"I'm not being that," Olivia said. "Besides, I'm too old."

Now her mother was definitely frowning. "You're fourteen." Then to Josie, she said, "You're done, baby. That's enough glitter to last you a week."

"I'm never giving up trick-or-treating," Josie interjected,

standing and shaking out her fake wings. "I'm going to trick-or-treat until I'm old and wrinkly."

"You'll look like an idiot," Olivia muttered.

"Mami! Did you hear what she said?"

If she did, Mami didn't fight her on it. Instead, she gave Olivia another concerned glance and lead Josie out front to meet up with her friends and the fellow parent who'd volunteered to chaperone.

Earlier in the week when Olivia had gone with her mother to pick Josie up from a playdate, and the parent asked if she was able to chaperone, Mami had smiled politely and said they had religious observances. Hearing her say that had made Olivia's stomach turn hot and sticky, like she had eaten too many Sour Patch Kids at once. Growing up, her mother had never used the term to describe the evening, even though she'd known how her parents spent Halloween: dusting the pictures on top of the fireplace, putting on music and cooking the pan de muerto. They placed the red wine, her grandfather's favorite, next to his picture.

But this year was different. This year there was a new photograph on the fireplace.

So, Olivia spent her first Halloween ever at home, curled up in her bedroom, watching Parks and Recreation on her laptop to avoid the sounds of her parents coming through her half shut door. But not even Andy Dwyer could distract her thoughts from wandering; Gina was probably with their friends from lunch period, and they were probably hitting up all the really good houses for candy, and Olivia would have been with them if she didn't have, as her grandmother often said, *la terquedad de un caballo*.

The truth was, she and Gina were going to go as detectives. Sherlock and Watson to be exact, but with cool tweed coats and lace up high tops that Olivia had found at Sugar and Spice and Everything Twice. It was all going great, until Corey from lunch said her older sister was inviting them to go with her and her friends trick-or-treating and then get slushies at 7/11. At first, Olivia had been unsettled with the change of plans, because she didn't like slushies, but she had resolved to be a good friend and keep her mouth shut for once—until Gina had changed their costume idea.

"I don't understand," Olivia had stressed to her while they walked toward their houses from the bus stop. "You said you wanted to be Watson, you came up with the idea!"

"I know, Liv." Gina bit her lip, then blew out a huff of air to get the strands from her ponytail out of her face.

"You said it was cost and weather essential," Olivia reminded, shoving her fists into the pockets of her jacket so her friend wouldn't see them.

“I know, okay?” Gina threw back her head, ever the dramatic.

“Then why’d you do it?” Olivia stopped in front of her mailbox, watching as Gina slowly turned to face her. Usually, they walked down the street to Gina’s house to eat her Yaya’s baklava and then back to Olivia’s to watch reruns of *The Golden Girls* while they did their homework, but Olivia didn’t want to make the walk today.

“Because, you know,” Gina shifted from foot to foot, “it’s not that Sherlock and Watson aren’t a good costume idea...it’s just that, like, we’re going to be in high school next year, so maybe we should try something different. Something cooler, you know?”

Olivia had the vague sense of whiplash; it was like when she sometimes listened to Mami talk on the phone to her sister, and their Spanish was so rapid, she had to make out the words one by one, flipping them to English in her head. Standing there in front of Gina, watching the dead leaves skitter past her boots, she knew the meaning of each of Gina’s words, but it took her longer than it should have to put them together, their meaning sinking heavily into her gut.

“You want to wear a different costume,” Olivia clarified, her fists started to tremble in her coat pockets. “You want something that Corey’s sister and her friends would think was cool.”



I DARE YOU | MADEIRA
JARAUN WRIGHT

Gina looked so relieved that Olivia felt nauseous. “Yeah, exactly, Liv. I’m so glad you understand.”

Olivia wished she didn’t. She wished she had stood there and made Gina sound out of every syllable of her idea, until she realized how dumb it was out loud. The worst part was her new costume idea: Gina wanted to be La Calavera Catrina, or in her own words, the “skull lady with the great highlight.”

“I could buy fake roses.” Gina was deep in her spiral, still standing at the edge of Olivia’s driveway. “And we could glue them to our contour lines with this makeup glue—”

“I have to go inside,” Olivia slammed the mailbox shut, her hands full of junk mail. “My Mom’s calling me.”

Gina knit her thick eyebrows. “I don’t hear her.”

“That’s not new,” she muttered, pressing the mail to her chest. Watching the confusion migrate across Gina’s features, Olivia stepped backwards. “Maybe it’s better if you just do it yourself.”

Seconds passed, the confusion on her friend’s face turned to anger. “Fine.” Gina shifted her backpack. “I guess I will then.”

Olivia had watched her go, her emotions scattered like wind currents.

In truth, she didn’t know what she wanted to do, but she knew that this argument was different. They’d fought about stupid things before, like who got to take home the class hamster and how many times someone could you rewatch *How I Met Your Mother* before it became annoying, but never had they fought like this, pulling their friendship from two sides.

Did she want to be La Calavera Catrina? She’d thought of what Gina had said, about the glitter and the fake rose petals. She’d imagined how she would look in the bathroom mirror with the smokey makeup lined around her eyes, how Gina was probably right—it would have looked cool. Walking into 7/11 to get slushies and laughing with the other girls. Just for that one night, Olivia could be someone cool.

But then she’d thought about what Abuela would have said, and her heart flipped back to the other side. All Olivia could remember was that picture Abuela had showed her, the one her sister from Mexico had sent. On *El Día de los Muertos*, the thick crowds of women gathering in México city, their faces painted like skeletons with wide brimmed, black hats pulled low. They’re celebrating them, Abuela had said, pointing at her heart. Olivia imagined trying to explain why she was dressed like them for Halloween, celebrating her youth instead of her history.

“Olivia,” Josie tugged her hand, shaking her thoughts. “It’s your turn.”

They were in the cemetery, the last hours of the day before it closed. There was a dusky sky arched overhead, streaked with pink and gold, all fading sunlight. Other families from church were spread out around her, each with their own thick bouquets of marigolds, one for each member who had passed that year. The García's daughter, Miss Luisa's husband, Mr. Jesse's brother, and the planter in front of Olivia, the marigolds so yellow in the candle light, she wished she couldn't read the name on the headstone.

Mami had first, kneeling in front of the stone, the flowers, and showing Josie how to clasp her hands in prayer. After her sister had stumbled through the Our Father, then went Daddy, bending as he placed his rosary beads as an offering. Now, Josie was right, it was her turn, but Olivia didn't know how to move.

"Come on," Mami placed her hand on Olivia's shoulder, "We'll do it together."

She knelt in the dry grass with Mami next to her and unfolded the poem. Smoothing out the creases and reading it in her best Spanish. She'd written it in her English class a week earlier, the first family memory that had popped into her head was of weeding the front garden with Abuela. They'd dug out the clover and onion grass until her hands were sticky with dirt and sweat, and Abuela and looked over through the brim of her straw hat, her dark eyes crinkling with a smile as she showed Olivia the first daffodil buds of the season.

"Te buscaré en primavera," Olivia whispered, folded it back and tucked it into the planter. She had not cried in two months; but as Mami wrapped her arms around her, her embrace was warm like the inside of a cinnamon bun, and the tears were building in Olivia's eyes. They splattered her jeans, the soil beneath her, and she wept for the unknown; the months forward without her grandmother, the changes in her friendship, and all of the women in México city, with their eyes shining beneath their black hats, and the people they danced for, feet tapping on the earth, hoping to wake old bones.



LAUGHTER LINES
SHANJIDA KHAN

THE ANCESTORS

Anne Nadel-Walbridge

The Ancestors are at my back.

I am fortunate.

So many not here,

because their Ancestors perished

in Pogrom or Holocaust—

Systematic slaughter,

killed by hate, suspicion, simple evil and greed.

Felled by others who feared them,

or were fed a steady diet of lies.

A feast of suspicion.

I live in a terrifying new reality.

It seems possible again—

the terror, being haunted and hunted,

being prey.

Tonight, I feel them at my back,

the Ancestors.

They have been there always,

but only occasionally reach out.

Go, they say, incant,

raise us in song so that we may

give courage and will

to endure these

terrifying times.

HOPE

Stefanie DeFronzo

Life is a flower

It grows, and it dies

It stands and it wilts, it smiles and it cries

Day becomes night

The sun and the moon

Dance through the sky

As the earth hums its tune

A tune of its present, of its future and past

Reminds that this existence is trying

And its landscape quite vast

Nonsense becomes war

And war leaves a scar

That quickens the heartbeat and dims every star

The sky becomes dark

And monsters crawl out

From under the bed:

No scream, no shout

No breath draws in, no breaths released

To hide from yourself is to hide from the beast

But night becomes day

And the beast can be tamed

Children are born

Their futures unnamed

These children, they sit
Eyes full of sky
They stand and they wilt, they smile and cry

Nature and nurture
Is that what they say?
We sing and we shoot, we pester and pray

A prayer for the children
For the monsters and beds
A prayer for those who have hidden their heads

In sands, in thoughts, in darkness or light
A strong flower persists with all of its might

From burnt out stars
Can new lights flow
That furnace the earth
That won't stop at "no"

The tune becomes the thread
That sews the world's seams
History becomes nightmares
But nightmares become dreams

To right the wrongdoings
And water the plants
That open the heart
And soften the stance

Remembering those feelings, with life one can cope,
For with love, dear soul, there is always
Hope



This poem is dedicated to my grandmother, Hanna Aron, who passed away in May of 2017. She survived the Holocaust in Essen, Germany by going into hiding and assuming a different name. The picture at the bottom of the poem is a drawing that she made later in life. I included it, as I feel that it complements the theme of the poem: she is the strongest flower I have ever known.

DAYDREAMS (AN EXCERPT)

Holly Hoyt

Lenny wasn't scared of roller coasters. In fact, his favorite ride in the world was the Mummy at Universal. The sharp jerks, the thrusts backwards into the darkness, the spurts of real fire that glazed your cheek—there was no ride more fun. He always put it at the top of his list of favorite rides.

He wasn't scared of being onstage, either. Being the Wizard in Wizard of Oz gave him a panicky feeling in his stomach, but he didn't mind it. He liked knowing the audience saw him as an extra-person, one who existed both as a citizen of Oz and as Lenny Mantione, one whose job was to impress and entertain.

The things that scared Lenny weren't regular scary things. That fact didn't occur to him until the morning Dr. Linden could finally get him in for an appointment, a grey Wednesday in early November. Lenny sat on his mother's lap, something he hadn't done since he was four, in his dad's car. Yvonne sat in the front, which made Lenny worry she and his dad considered his mom a child, one unworthy to sit in the front. Yvonne took two work calls during the hour-long drive. Lenny wondered why his dad had brought her along.

Lenny started out the window as they drove down winding rural roads, making sure to get a clear look at every house. Every time they passed a house with no farm attached, he blinked three times and looked down the road for the next property. When they turned corners where it was impossible for him to discern what was coming, he asked his mom to check first. Every time, she'd say, "clear," until the first time during the ride in which a farm lay ahead.

"Is there a farm?" Lenny asked, and when she didn't answer, "Mom!"

Rita shot a glare at Paul in the driver's seat and replied, "It's okay, honey. Just don't look."

"Mom!" Lenny wailed, covering not just his eyes but his whole head with his arms. He slouched in his mom's lap, but the image of the goats on the farm came to him nonetheless.

"Calm down, buddy," Paul said. "There's nothing scary about a farm."

Lenny wanted to scream at his father, who had assured him before they left that they would not pass any farms. His dad hadn't lied, but he had proven he didn't understand, which was worse. He didn't understand that the things that scared Lenny weren't normal things.

...

Dr. Linden saw Lenny alone first. He was old and skinny with white hair and a white beard, and the first thing he asked Lenny was, "Why won't you look at me?"

On the plush, mint-green sofa, Lenny had been staring at his own hands in his lap. With difficulty, he lifted his head and faced the goatish doctor.

The "farm animal" thing, Lenny explained, had most likely started when he was a baby. Stew Leonard's grocery store had a band of giant animatronic farm animals—a cow, a pig, a sheep, and that's all he could remember. Assuming he would enjoy the kid-friendly display, his parents, then still together, would bring him to watch the band play its cute country songs. Lenny could remember the dread the huge animals instilled in him, their lifeless eyes, the loud "moo" inches from his face. He remembered his parents clapping and singing along, cooing, "Look at him, he loves it!" as he screamed in terror.

Luckily for Lenny, when they moved out west, Stew Leonard's was longer a problem, as it was a Connecticut chain. By first grade, the memory of Stew Leonard's had faded deep into his memory and did not resurface until the pumpkin patch trip.

He had seen his classmates huddled around a fence and wormed his way through to see what was going on. They were marveling at a mother sheep, who was curled up in a dirt clod, nursing newborn lambs. Lenny smiled at her when she began bathing one of the babies with her long, droopy tongue.

"Here comes Daddy Sheep!" his teacher announced, pointing to the cave inside the fence. A male sheep with massive, curled horns trotted toward them.

His friends scrambled to meet the daddy sheep with pebbles of food in their outstretched hands. But Lenny hung back, anxiety filling his stomach. The ram was like a gargoyle come to life, a demonic presence shielding his family from Lenny and his friends. It didn't matter that the ram was gratefully accepting pellets from the kids' hands; Lenny couldn't look at him. Looking at the ram was endorsing him, accepting him.

The "sheep" thing had turned into a "goat" thing, but it hadn't become a real problem until this year, not long after his first day at Bear River Elementary. There had been a few times at his old school when the goats would appear out the window, hovering in midair, taunting him as best they could. As the first weeks at his new school went by, though, he saw them more and more, and they followed him home, too.

"Are they mean goats?" Dr. Linden wanted to know.

Lenny tried to conjure one of the goats into his mind, but they never appeared unless he didn't want them to. They weren't

mean, per se. They were a step above annoying but a step below mean. "They just bother me."

"They bother you a lot, huh?" Dr. Linden said. He scribbled something onto his clipboard as he spoke. "I hear you're sleeping in Mom's bed."

He phrased it in a way that was almost accusatory. Lenny felt a prick of irritation. "They get worse at night. My mom thinks it's because there's nothing to distract me from them."

"Are you hearing them?" This was even more accusatory, even sharper.

Lenny began to sweat. How was he supposed to explain that, although he didn't hear them, he knew what they were saying? Although none of his senses indicated their presence, he saw them, heard them, felt them? "Yes?"

"And you see them, too."

"In the same way that I hear them."

Dr. Linden gave him a curious glance, then resumed scribbling. "What do they want?"

One of the goats appeared out the window behind the doctor's chair and began singing "Boing Boing" from Dora the Explorer. Lenny averted his eyes. "I don't know."

"Do they want to hurt you?" the doctor prompted.

"I think they just want to make me feel bad," Lenny said.

"But you control them, Lenny," Dr. Linden explained with a calm smile. "Not the other way around."

Lenny covered his eyes, trying to drown out the image of the sheep bouncing around the room, and wished that this were true.

...

When it was his and Rita's turn, Paul did not hesitate before asking the doctor whether he had any ideas. Even though she had expected him to ask right away, Rita suppressed a groan. These things took time, and Paul had no patience.

But Linden did not hesitate, either. "To me, it sounds like child-onset schizophrenia."

Paul swore under his breath and rubbed his temples, but Rita sat up. "Hold on. Don't you need a period of time before you diagnose schizophrenia? Six months or something like that? And isn't it almost unheard of in children?"

"Yes," Linden said, impervious to her excitement. "But I'm

not making a diagnosis yet. I'm just going by what I see, and what I see are hallucinations. You're right, though; once six months have gone by, we'll have a better idea. You've obviously done your research, Rita," he added with a smile.

"It's not 'research,'" Rita said. "This isn't a goddamn science fair. I just want to know what's wrong with my son."

"Sorry, doctor," Paul said. "She's a little upset."

Rita wished she had claws to slice Paul's throat.

The doctor brandished a prescription and handed it to Paul, which Rita thought was interesting, considering they had already told him that Lenny lived with her and not Paul. "I want to start him on twenty milligrams of Geodon."

"No." Rita shook her head. "My child is not taking an antipsychotic. He's not psychotic."

"Rita," Paul said, "he's seeing flying animals. That sounds pretty psychotic to me."

"He's not seeing them!" Rita exclaimed. "He's just..."

"Seeing them?" Linden chuckled. "Let me assure you, I've treated many a psychotic child in thirty years. Let him try Geodon, then come back in a month and we'll see how it's going."

"A month?" Rita rose from the sofa. "We can't do this for another month! He hasn't slept in a month! He hasn't eaten in a month! I can barely get him to go to school!"

"Which is your own fault for letting him stay home in the first place."

"Shut up, Paul!"

Linden pushed his glasses farther up his nose, eyes darting from Paul to Rita and back. "Okay, okay. Here's what's going to happen. He's going to try the Geodon."

"And what if I say he isn't?" Rita demanded.

"That would border on medical neglect," Linden said. "I'd have to alert DHS about the matter, which, obviously, I'd rather not do."

Rita gaped. Paul said, "I'd let him take it." What a fucking child, Rita thought.

"Then let's give it a try," Linden went on, as if it were unanimous, "and if the hallucinations persist, we'll be closer to a diagnosis."

"Or we'll be farther." Rita looked out the window, fighting back tears.

They took the highway home and stopped at Five Guys. The knot in Lenny's stomach had loosened, and he was even able to eat some fries as he watched the mountains. The sky was still grey, and somewhere beyond the mountains, he could feel the looming presence of the goats. But they couldn't impose upon the hope he felt after having gone to a doctor who would help make them go away.

"How are you doing?" his mom asked, rubbing his back. Lenny said, "Good," but he didn't quite feel understood, at least not in the way he craved. Maybe he was on his way, though, and that was enough for now, as long as he could keep up the barricade that blocked the goats from his mind.

...

The goats must have torn down the wall, Lenny thought, because they were back with a vengeance within hours.

They didn't back off, as he'd hoped they would, during the first two weeks after he started medication. They got worse. Whatever he didn't want them to say, they said. One night, while he lay curled up next to his mom, they broke into a rousing chorus of the Fruit Salad Song from The Wiggles, sending Lenny to flee to the bathroom. One whispered as he cowered on the floor of the shower, you can't hide forever.

When he went downstairs the next morning, he found his mother with her head on the table. She did a double-take as she watched Lenny take a seat beside her. His waist was stockier, his cheeks rounder than she'd ever seen them. There was no denying he had gained weight, which she knew was a common side effect of Geodon, but his appetite was still nonexistent. How can you gain weight without eating? she wondered.

"Hi, sweets. Do you want to try some Lucky Charms?"

Lenny heaved a deep sigh. His mother read his response. She, too, was reminded of happier mornings when she and Lenny poured their own bowls of Lucky Charms and traded marshmallows before adding the milk.

He took a banana instead. His hands trembled as he bit it piece by piece, chewing for minutes at a time before relaxing enough to swallow.

When half the banana was gone, he set it down and asked, "Did you talk to Mrs. Shannon?"

"Yep. I called this morning. She said she understands if you don't want to be in the Christmas Pageant because of the manger."

Lenny nodded as a mean of thanks, but he couldn't forget what his teacher had told him when he'd approached her about it the week before. "She told me she thought I was being a 'wuss.'"

"I'm sure she didn't use that exact word." Rita rubbed his back. "She's known about this since we took you to Dr. Linden's. You don't have anything to worry about, sweets."

Lenny hated it when she said that. "Did you talk to Dad?"

Rita was quiet for a minute. "He wants to talk to you about it."

"Did you tell him I'm not going?"

"I told you." Rita closed her eyes, praying for patience. "You don't have a choice. It's only four days, Wednesday through Saturday. And we're going to Nonna's house for Christmas, remember?"

Lenny ignored the last part, which he knew was meant to be an appeasement. "I can't go! I won't go! I won't even eat the food, I'll just sit in my room and cry the whole time! Does he want that?"

"Honey, he just wants to see you for Thanksgiving. He loves you."

"No, he doesn't. If he loved me, he'd accept my feelings and let me stay here. He wouldn't make me spend holidays with his stupid family."

"They're not that bad," Rita tried.

"They're horrible, Mom! They don't love me! They don't understand me." Lenny locked his eyes, swimming with tears, with his mother's. "Haven't I been through enough?"

Another mom would have said their kid was being melodramatic, but Rita couldn't, because she'd said the exact same thing to Paul on the phone earlier. Hadn't their mentally ill nine-year-old been through enough?

IT'S MIDNIGHT

Lillian Ann Bartlett

Broken lightbulbs flicker in the closet,
some shattered.

Do you remember what they are?

One has trouble lighting
its glass encasing on the floor.
There's a buzz of electricity creeping in your ears.

Time stands grinning, foolishly.
The mirror refuses a reflection.
Do you remember who you are?

You feel the burning in the crevices of your eyes.
The room around you fades slowly...
It's time to go to bed.



SUNRISE SUNSET
CORY MEYER

HEARTBREAKS OF YOUR EARLY 20S
(AN EXCERPT)

Rebecca Filetti-Andujo

It is late. The clocks show 4am. The time never moves forward. ESPY is lounging in her bedroom listening to Maria Grever's "Cuando vuelva a tu lado" and "Asi." ESPY is sitting/pacing/laying with a notebook and pen. Although she comes close, she never manages to write anything. Frustrated, ESPY puts down her notebook and her pen. She walks over and lifts the needle on the record player. She speaks to the audience.

ESPY

[...] I keep going back to a memory with my dad. It's a recent memory. It happened just a few weeks ago and like all memories, it starts with a detail. This time it's basil. I keep smelling basil like its growing under my bed. It makes me think of pasta. That the first thing I think of when I smell basil. And when I think of pasta, I think of my father.

MEMORY: Pieces move to make up the memory as ESPY speaks. ESPY jumps back and forth between being in the memory and talking to the audience.

ESPY (cont.)

My father made our family recipe every few months. He made so much that he would keep several containers in the freezer and pass them out to people who came to our house. He'd pass them out like parting gifts. When I was a kid, I used to watch over the counter as he made it. When I got a little older, he let me smoosh up the bread into the meatballs with my two little fists. He'd make me count out my punches. 1, 2. 1, 2. On special occasions it was a 1, 1, 2. By the time I was a teenager, I knew the recipe by heart. With one whiff, I could tell you whether it needed more oregano or more salt. It made me an official member of the Lobo family. In this memory, I'm 23.

ESPY sits at a dinner table. In front of her is a plate with one basil leaf on it. FATHER sits reading, his face hidden from the audience behind a newspaper. Tito Rodriguez' "Los marcanos llegaron ya" plays softly. The music is still lively, but faded and scratchy. After a moment.

ESPY

I don't see my father much anymore. When I go home to visit, he's already got containers in the freezer. He's moved on. He makes the pasta without me. Now I'm vegetarian. I can't eat that stuff anymore.

FATHER

It's a family recipe. We can't just change it now because you've decided you're gonna starve yourself like all your new hippie-dippie friends.

ESPY

My father and I aren't so close anymore. It's funny. I'm taller now, yet we rarely see eye-to-eye. It's so much easier to look up to your hero when you're a kid, when you don't have strong opinions, when you're easily influenced, when you don't quite understand why your mother is so angry with your father. Back then it was simple. You just knew that you loved him and that all you wanted to do was smoosh that bread with your little fists, and he let you ... The first thing I think of when I smell basil is my father's pasta. I think of using my fork to pick out the meat and my knife to cut through the tension at the table. I don't speak anymore. Everyone cooks for themselves.

FATHER

(gesturing towards the plate) Are you gonna offer me any of that? I fed you for eighteen years of your life and you come home for one day and you can't make your dad one meal? I wanted more kids, you know.

ESPY

He has anger issues. Issues that have lost him his job, his wife, and soon his daughter. I came to visit him last year, trying to rekindle some kind of relationship. I kept making the wrong turn on the way to church. He made me pull over, threw me out of the car, and drove off. I walked for miles to my childhood neighborhood. I swore to myself I'd never speak to him again. The little fists that once smooshed meatballs were now punching the walls of my old bedroom. They didn't follow a 1, 2 count. They were sloppy and angry. I'm not a violent person, but when I'm around my father, I turn into him. I've endured way worse as a kid, but now I know what it's like to live without it.

FATHER

After everything I've done for you. Slaving my life away at a corporate job so you could visit home once a year and look miserable the entire time. I could've gone to a conservatory. I could've been something. But I chose this family. If you don't want to be here, then go! I don't want you here. Not if your choice isn't this family.

ESPY

I would go. But his brother just died. Heart attack. 39 years old.

FATHER

You know your cousin regrets not visiting her father more often than she did. She regrets that now. Fighting with him as much as

she did. She regrets not telling him how much she loves him. She told me that after the service. You should think about that. Of how lucky you are.

ESPY

Nowadays, it feels like I have to love my father. Because he's my father. But those words feel phony in my mouth and I'm constantly thinking of how phony they'll feel at his funeral.

FATHER

You're just like your mother.

ESPY

Does that make me a bad person?

FATHER

Selfish.

ESPY

I think it does. I think I'm a pretty shitty person.

FATHER lowers the newspaper, revealing his face.

FATHER

Hey. Espy. I'm sorry I said those things to you. I was angry. Will you forgive me?

ESPY reluctantly nods.

FATHER (cont.)

That's my girl. Te amo, Esperanza.

ESPY

(to father) Love you, too.

FATHER hugs ESPY. Her arms hang limp.

END of MEMORY. Things shift back to neutral.



PAHELA BAISHAKH
SHANJIDA KHAN

ARRIVALS (AN EXCERPT)

Sofia Amorim

I once heard a story about an iceberg that carved the Palisades, slicing through sandstone and silt, before it dissolved into the river. This probably isn't true, but I was fascinated by the image of a block of cold jagged peaks splitting the earth like wood. When I told my mom this story, she liked to say that that was her carving a path for the two of us, her words truncated by long winded sighs from double shift. It's not hard to imagine mom pushing through walls of stones, her strength alone forcing anything else to yield to her. I think about my mother a lot when I watch the sunrise from my car.

Mom doesn't like that I wake up earlier than her to push paperbacks to tired travelers. Her rheumatic fingers grip my lower jaw, pressing her disappointment into my skin in the shape of half-moon marks. Every morning, I remember to readjust the pillow that lies between us and cross myself as I pass the framed photo of Teddy Roosevelt, stacked on top of college textbooks that remain unopened. I feel her pull slack when the shuttle rolls up to the terminal, and I think of an iceberg careening through Departures and melting into an ocean around it. An island of departees, stranded in a fragmented airport lounge, with Arrival Bay miles away. I chuckle, thinking about how, in my mind, being marooned in an airport ravaged by destruction is the kind of solace that I look for.

I watch the sun split from the asphalt, burning a deep orange like the color of Granma's clay pot that mom keeps in the cabinet, and I watch it rise until the airport shuttle comes. My hands reach into my bag for the tangerine I stuffed in there, as my mom's thick morning voice groans a reminder to take something to eat. She mumbles something about an apple, but today I really want a tangerine.

My thumbnail pierces the rind, carving a line from its north pole to its south. The oils seep into the minutiae of my thumbs, and the smell of tangerine oils reminds me of when Granma peels rinds of oranges, and limes, and mangos, tossing them into her clay

pot, boiling them in rum for her novenas. I pop each wedge into my mouth and trace their edges in my mouth. We pass arrivals as I finish the first half, thinking that maybe I should have packed some tangerines for mom later. When the shuttle pulls up to Departures, I crush the last wedge in my mouth and let the juice roll over my tongue as I make way inside.

I step over blanket-bound travelers spread across the Departures Lounge floor like human icebergs. My pumps plod through the sea of passengers waiting on flights, as I count the number of foreign passports tucking out from luggage pockets. I nearly trip on a Burmese blocking the entrance to the bookstore, and Nacho, delivering the new James Patterson novels, catches my wrist with cardboard-calloused hands. My eyebrows rise in thanks, while my fingers twist keys into the locks. I lead Nacho inside.

"They say this storm is supposed to freeze the runways," he says, stacking boxes on my counter. "I'm just glad ma shift'll be over. Yours is my last delivery, y despúes, freedom, in all capital letters!" His fingernails dig into the packing tape, pulling the flaps open on his final words, like it was supposed to be a surprise for me.

"I don't care if the tarmac turns into Beringia, my ass is not gonna be here after noon," I respond between breaths, heaving hardcovers onto the trolley. "I gotta pick up my mom before one, so I'm dipping at 11:59."

"En tacones? Olvídate mija—" He doesn't. His words sound like tin, like Granma's.

"Nacho, I'm too far from the diction—"

"Gutiérrez, I keep forgetting you not one of us." He helps rearrange the stacks I can't reach, even with standard issue work pumps. "Too smart to be speaking Spanish." His voice dips like grooves in canyons, and my fingers tighten along the spines in my hand. I fix my eyes to the scar along my index finger, when my mom dug her acrylic talons to scratch the word Abuela from my blood. Building mountains from Patterson, I mumble a thanks to Nacho as he salutes me with box shells slung across his shoulder. The walkie talkie on his hip spits unintelligible sounds, and he throws his head back. He lets out a groan that rivals the sound Abuela made the first time I called her Granma. "Sounds like I

might be able to sneak you onto the mail car when your shift ends.”

“Hey, Nacho! Wait a sec. I’ve got something for you.” I pull out one of the Colombian coffee candies I smuggled home in my purse.

“Oyé! Thanks, Yenny!”

“It’s Jenny.” I pull the candy away, bartering his tin pronunciation for mine. He eyes me, then the fist holding the candy. When his eyes draw away from the candy, they bore into mine and I feel something frozen inside me crack. I was the one trying to get my name from him.

“Fine. JENNY!” I drop the candy into his palm, as though I were ridding myself of something he deemed sacred. He holds out cupped palms and picked up the coffee colored sphere between his thumb and index finger and drops it into his mouth. He blesses himself to the Virgensita. I cross to mom’s Teddy. “Que Dios me perdone, pero those things are amazing! I can’t find that stuff in Newark!”

“That’s why I go to Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth! Isn’t that a little too Hispano for you?” He was baiting me, so I take a page from my mother’s handbook.

“Then you can go there instead of asking me.” I turn on my heels and walk back to a stack of new Díaz books, setting one aside for me to ring up later.

“Aw, c’mon Jenny. I’m juss sayin that you ain’t ever leave Morristown unless you drivin here. Morristown is white as hell, and the brown section by Speedwell don’t count because there’ll like five families in a two-block radius.”

“That’s why I gotta go to Elizabeth.” The hardcover slams shut on little Colombia. Nacho shakes his head in disbelief.

“Aight then. Show me. I get paid Friday, I’ll go witchu to see where you get them candies at. For all I know, you just sayin Elizabeth for street cred.”

He trips on the Burmese boulder, eliciting a wheeze of laughter from the base of my throat. I prop the glass doors open and

continue reshaping and reclassifying books on the stand. The 6:35s to Frankfurt huddle by the travel guides, practicing their English on each other. Their voices sound like echoes that sound foreign, yet faintly familiar, just like Nacho’s Spanish. I recognize the sounds from a past my mom has all but tried to wipe from our lips, but still feel my tongue try to recreate the blurry words Granma used to say. I remember her braiding my hair with yellow ribbons, singing my name like psalm. *Yennifair*, it sounded like.



SUNSET FROM PLANE
CORY MEYER

I know there was more, but mom wouldn’t let me remember before bursting in, shouting, “Her name is JENNIFER!” Mom never rolled her r’s or softened her j’s. She punctuated each letter as though her voice’s recognition gave them individual purpose. “You are her GRANDMA, not ABUELA,” she would continue, stumbling on the last word.

Granma had wiped my tears with a steady thumb, plaiting my braids and weaving red ribbons, while my mother stormed out for work. “Granma,” I said, rolling the ‘r’ over the soft ‘a’ that was crashing over the ‘n’ like a small wave. The ‘m’ flowed right into it, and the ‘a’ carried the word from her lips to my ears. She rubbed the crust on my thumb, scraping the crystallized blood like dust

off a fossil, holding my hand gingerly as she led me to bed. I put mom's pillow in the middle of the bed and crawl under the sheets. She took the pillow and tossed it to the floor, her caramel skin glowing like the Virgensita around her neck. She sang me Spanish lullabies, her fingers brushing over my lips when I tried to sing with her.

“Abuela.”

“Yennifair.”

Last boarding calls crackled on the overhead, and the pamphlets fall like snowflakes on the tarmac. Being pulled away from Granma, I bend down to collect the pamphlets, my eyes struggling to recognize my language as I quickly return them to their slot on the shelf. For the rest of the morning, I stand behind the till, charging cards, counting cash, and placing receipts in inside covers before sliding them into tissue paper sheaths.

This reminds me of the archaeology class I audited in college, where they wrapped arrowheads from the Hudson. Come to think of it, I think that's where I heard the story about the iceberg. I had bought the books for the course without having registered, poring through photos of artifacts of cultures that have faded away into the rock beds over generations. Mom said I was better off taking an environmental science course, because she said it was relevant to the development of our future. I wasn't sure if she meant humans, or she and I. Forced retirement wasn't easy on her, so I dropped Anthropology and failed Environmental Science. All my mother had left was her paying for school. Her receipt was a story about an iceberg.

And what did I have?

The Spanish-English dictionary I had returned for an Englishman was still on the counter, the torn tissue revealing a stream of blue flanked by jagged brown cliffs. My hands tremble as I hold it and wonder if it felt heavier in my hands than in others'. The passengers on noon flights rolled covers and curved spines into their carry-ons as they rushed to their gates. With the last of the 11:55's to Mallorca out of the shop, I unsheathe the dictionary and crumple the tissue paper. My fingers remain stiff as they drag over the cover, my thumbnail pressing the pages down to make them fan in front of me like sticky note animations. I don't see words. I see

shapes that bleed into each other, fitting into fault lines like tectonic plates. Only, my world is moving.

“Por qué tanta prisa, chica? I said I'd bring the chariot,” Nacho calls, driving one of the transport cars, nearly bowling through a pack dressed in Spanish jerseys. Not wanting to wait for the mumbled complaints of the group, I slide into the passenger side while fingering the cover edges of the dictionary like a rosary.

“Thanks.”

“Ya know, I didn't mean nothing by that Spanish stuff. It's just—”

“It's fine, Nacho.” I drop the words like rocks, hoping they would thud to the floor. We could leave them unturned.

“But it isn't. I mean, I get pissed when you give me them looks cuz I don't know nothin' about them books you stock up. Shit, just cuz I ain't in school don't mean I'm a dumbass.” His knuckles pull the fabric of his work gloves taught, his hands fixed on the wheel at ten and two. He relaxes them as he turns past loading, and I turn the collar on my jacket up to block the wind and, by extension, his view of me biting my cheek. “But just cuz you don't understand Spanish don't mean you're not really one of us. Mira, I may be Colombian but I ain't never been there or dance salsa!”

“I'm not really Colombian. My granma was. My mom was American.” His hands push the gearshift down to a lower speed, puttering past the shuttle stop. I could feel his eyes on my ID, but I kept mine glued to the tread marks on the ground.

“You never learned Spanish?” He takes my silence as confirmation, letting out a low whistle that embodied the slow and powerful plummet I felt resounding in my chest. My brain fishes for the words in the dry riverbeds of memories of granma. My tongue flops like trout in the dredged shorelines of the Hackensack, speared by my mother. How do I find words when my tongue is being pulled and tied, knotted to the point of muteness?

“Nope.” The ‘p’ pops the bubble around us.

“For someone who reads hella books, you don't say much.” I dig my car keys out from my bag as we pull up to my car. He

waits until I unlock the car, toss the purse into the passenger seat, and turn the key in the ignition.

“Thanks, Nacho.”

“Yennifer,” he calls out as I put my right foot in the car and sit down, looking back over my left shoulder at him. That name was new, and as the car warmed up, melting the thin layer of ice on the windshield, I realized that name was mine. “I got a word for ya.” He starts moving the gearshift up, his foot easing up on the gas pedal. “Miedosa.”

I shut the car door and pull the dictionary out, scanning for the arrangement of letters that came close to the sound. The muscles in my face wobble like rolling stones, stumbling across the pronunciations until I found the right one.

Miedosa. Adjective. Fearful.

I pulled Granma’s prayer card from my visor and set it in the page fold, my fingers rubbing traces of tangerine. My lips press together and my tongue pushes the back of my bottom teeth, pushes itself up, suspends itself in the cave of my mouth for a moment, before crashing against the back of my incisors. The skin around my mouth contract like an ebb tide, my teeth barred as my tongue held up the roof of my mouth, air hissing around it, before I open it wide to let the word tumble out nettled cattails in the wind. I close the dictionary and stuff it under my seat, practicing the muscle shifts in my cheeks and tongue.

I put the car in reverse, ready to lift my foot off the brake. Nacho’s transport car skirts along the horizon of the airport parking lot, and my eyes squint at the brightness of the sun behind the down colored clouds. I shift the car into drive and cut through the empty parking space. Once again, I am reminded of that iceberg, and this time, I think that I am the iceberg carving my path.

My engine seizes for a moment when I hit forty on the speedometer. I take a deep breath as I ease the accelerator. The thin layer of ice crunches and cracks beneath me, and I drive straight past Arrivals.

STUDENT BECOMES TEACHER

Annalisa Manabat

Thick skin,
you said,
as you hurled crippling words
and razor-sharp insults
at the heart of an eight-year-old

Thicker skin,
you chided,
pouring out your anger,
your chaos and your thunder,
onto the mind of a twelve-year-old

The thickest skin,
you reminded,
as your mouth spewed sentences that
burnt, bruised and scarred
the soul of a sixteen-year-old

Thick skin?
I ask you this now
at the ripened age of twenty,
as it appears you are
unable to endure the
piercing daggers that
have bounced off of my
rock-hard, tough,
calloused body.
They now make their way
back to you

ODE TO THE MURKY VOID

Madyson Griswold

It's a shame that ideas must be bound to ink and paper for reverence,
to be carried throughout generations, steadfast in intent,
for the mind's voice is often hindered by a lack of paper
and a slow hand,
as my thoughts wash down the shower drain

THE MAN UNDER THE SMOKEY ASH

Matt Macaulay

I remember a man who lived and died under smokey ash.
He lived without the sun, under the clouds of suburbia.
“His friends must have forgotten him.”
“His family must be away,”

I remember a man whom I feared.
Under the sea of a rotted yellow,
candied glass and unanswered doors,
I can make out a wave and a smile.
But nothing more.

I remember a man whom I envied.
A world of grey and matter,
surrounded by tomes and candles, perhaps.
Yet no one remembered his face.
To be a faceless man,
to be apart from the crowd,
from the lovers and their vans.

I remember a man whom I mourned.
He was found dead in his home of sickly yellow,
of rotted wood and musty smogs.
His face had become gaunt by the time they found him dead.
My mother complained about a smell.
It rose above even the must and the smog.
They buried him down the street, outside the cemetery walls.
He lays their now, overlooking a busy road.
The man without a face.
Or a past.

I remember a man whom I forgot.
His wave and smile long gone.
I'll forget him in an hour or two,
The man who no one ever truly knew,
not truly.

But every time I reminisce, I am brought back to the rotting home
and the sickly must.
And the man I never knew.



PONDERING
BIANELLY TELLEZ

YOUR NEW BABY!

Lance Lee

Hey, is that your new baby?
He's handsome.
I see he's so busy;
you need both hands to hold'em,
you must never let'em go.

His big sister has grown so much!
And, look! She's able to walk behind you all by herself.
What's her brother's name?
Galaxy? That's a wonderful name.
You said he's talking already? He listens and responds?
That's amazing! How old was his big sister when she began
talking?
You don't remember? I guess that's ok.

It looks like you're taking good care of them both.
Do they play well together?
Does lil' Galaxy act up?
Do you turn him off during time out?
Do you change his battery when he gets a fever?
Do you charge him when he's hungry?

That is a wonderful outfit he has on.
I haven't seen a camouflage case in a while.
So, where are you guys headed today?
To the store! Is Galaxy getting a new outfit?
You're gonna what?! Trade him in?!

But he's only a year old. Can you even do that?
Oh. Wow!

Well, did you trade in his sister, too?
I don't see her behind you anymore.

"OPULENCE"
Hailey Benson

Glittering gold
Bloodied rubies
Polish perpetually
Still never enough,
Enough!
Plastic pestilence
Planned obsolescence

Product: the human race.



RAINFOREST
CAROLINE POLICH
www.carolinepolich.com

ONE CHANCE

Hailey Benson

my soil is melting.
an ovulation ozone. we
shred our defenses, cents-ing superior.
sink into briny depths, a morsel
of essence expectations.
reflection for security,
blue hues stained in permanent rainbow.
emeralds to ashes, biology
to biography, orbiting flesh consumes all.
doctrine denotes the musing mortals' pedestal - lest
we consign to oblivion our mortality, sense of modularity.
Buoyant flurry of dust, universal composition - bacteria
to soil, feral to refined. capitalist consumption
compulsion contamination cue clean, conserve,
compost, control, caution. blue-green orb scaled
to 46 years- mortals enlight 4 hours ago, industrial
catastrophe: 1 minute ago. 60 seconds to ravage 50%
life-longing lush. lungs combining, collapsing to
gether, our isolation impossible. one sky,
one earth, one soul.

ANTHROPOMETRY

Sofia Amorim

The inscription reads:
Heman Heads
800 BC – 100 A.D.

And I look at each of you,
suspended, cradled
by metal rods,
like three pronged hands
presenting me
an offering
of you.

'Adult female skull,
Westbrook Stream, Bank of England'

You have caught my eye,
demanded my attention.
You have no holes,
no battle marks.
We are eye leveled,
and those barren,
dust and clay encrusted crevices
pull me in for a closer look.

I wish I could touch
the bump blooming on your top,
but imagine you'd wince away.
Your brow ridge is soft,
as though you stare back at me
with a blank stare.

The gentle curve of your cheekbone,
like a reed for a base

of the bone bodice surrounding
you, your brain, your thoughts,
and my own brain
colors in the tendons
connecting jaw to meated muscle,
and imagine I hear you speak.

No mandible, and only two top teeth,
and already you've told me more
about our history
than any other skull or cast
that I've been presented.
I look back,
into the shadowed halls
that housed your eyes,
squinting to mirror that darkness with my own,
wondering
if when my own skull
is presented
to some other girl,
she will read:

'Adult female skull,
Somewhere in New Jersey'

And our bones will speak
their own dead language to
one
another
so that the cycle may begin again.



CORFE CASTLE
VIRGINIA HAND