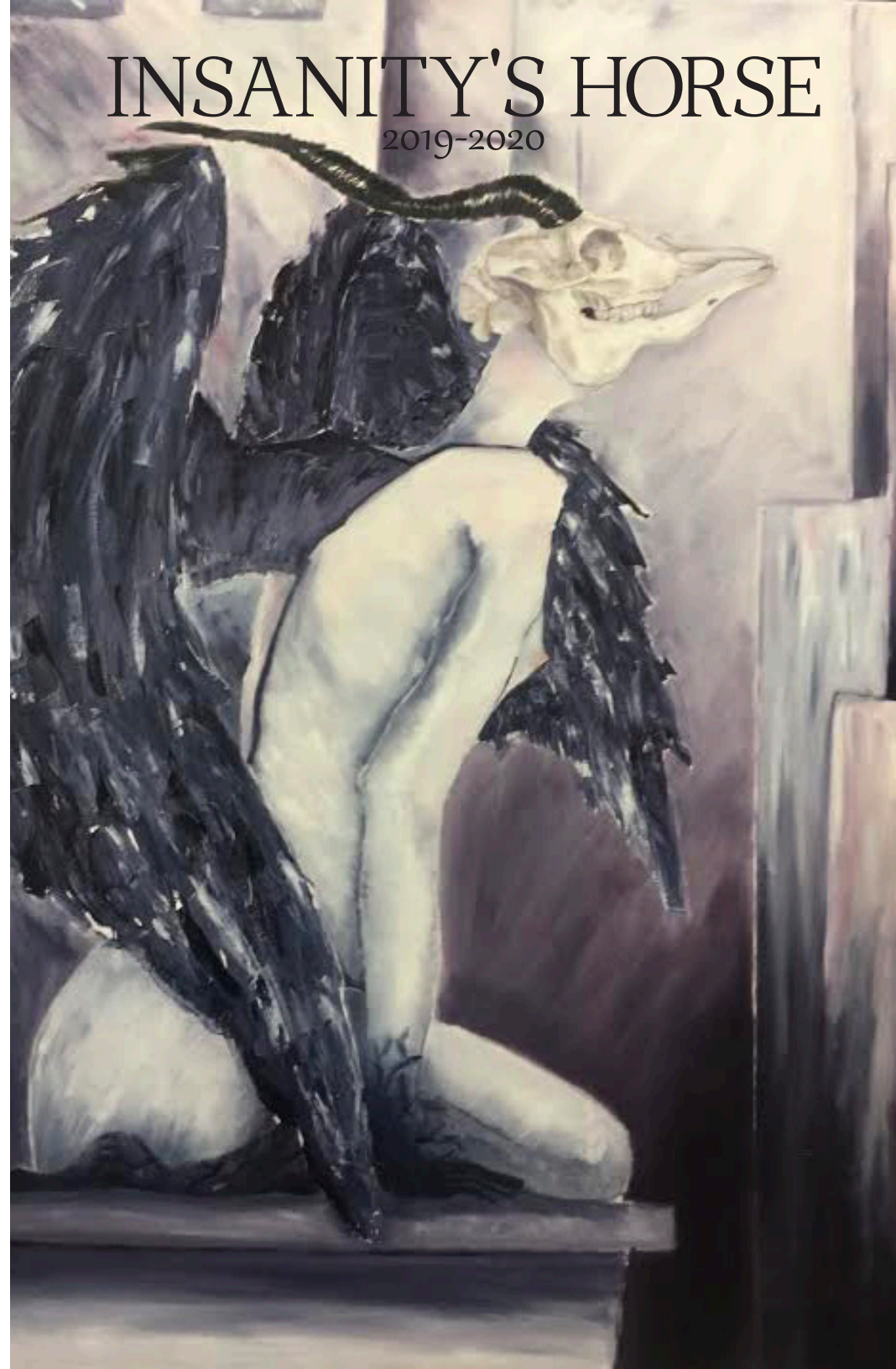


INSANITY'S HORSE

2019-2020

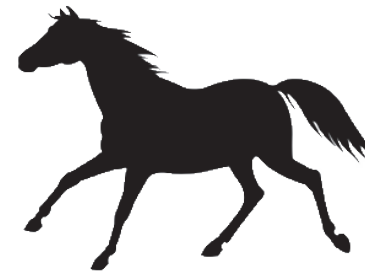


Cover Art by Lillian Ann Bartlett

INSANITY'S HORSE

Drew University's Art & Literature Magazine

2019-2020



Website: www.insanityshorse.wordpress.com

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Foreword

In these trying times, we want to offer you a reprieve. Each of these pages transports you to some place new, lets you explore love, anger, sadness, and frustration. As these pieces showcase, the days can be tough, but we are stronger. Don't look back in sadness but persevere with determination. Thank you for marking this moment with *Insanity's Horse*; we've loved reading your work and look forward to doing it again soon.

Thank you to Courtney Zoffness, who always strives to help *Insanity's Horse* be the best it can possibly be, and also to the English Department and Drew University for their continued support during this difficult and momentous time.

Sincerely,
The Mad and Insane

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Madison, NJ
Sam Hecker

When Manning Kicks a Field Goal

Sydney Quinn—Fiction Contest Winner

Six months after my mother's death, on a rainy Sunday in early November, Dad stands in the crack of space left by my almost shut door, and asks me to go visit his father with him.

He doesn't say, "Keira, why haven't you seen him since last Easter?" or "Why haven't you seen him since the funeral?" or "Why didn't you come with me on Grandpa's birthday?" or any of the other dates that are calendared by my guilt, as I sit there in my bed, the glare of my laptop screen illuminating my half finished essay. My words start to pull on my uvula, my gag reflex forming. But through my almost shut door, I can see from this angle the coffee stain on his Giants tee shirt, the fidgeting shadow of the car keys, and his eyes full of sentences that he cannot construct. The one he says is weighted with all of them:

"Do you want to go with me to Green Mills?"

There is little traffic, and we zip onto 287. Rain spits against the hood of our SUV. Along the highway, the reservoir shimmers with gray water through the thinning gaps of gold and orange leaves. The rest of the trees along the highway are naked shades of brown seeping into one another. In the rearview mirror, my nine-year-old sister Shannon draws her fingertips through the condensation on her window.

A week ago, she was a bumblebee for Halloween. While she sat on the toilet seat in the bathroom as I dusted her eyelids with glitter, she told me, a seventeen-year-old, that I was a loser for not dressing up, and then when I was done with her makeup, she stomped on my bare feet with her black tap shoes. I watched her walk down the street with Dad to meet the other neighborhood kids, her black and yellow striped dress reflecting the lamp light, and I wrapped myself tighter in one of Mom's cardigans until Shannon and Dad rounded the next block.

My plan to curl up on the couch alone was interrupted by trick-or-treaters: a princess and Spider-Man, twin cats and a construction worker, a herd of baby chicks and two stressed

mothers. Every time I wanted to just stick the candy bowl outside on the front porch I heard my mother's voice, telling me someone would steal it. When the doorbell rang again, I yanked it open to find a tall, dark skinned boy wearing an Eagles jersey and jeans, his curls sticking out from a backwards baseball cap. Two black lines were smeared across his cheeks.

"Trick-or-treat?" Darwin offered me a shy smile.

I hugged the candy bowl into my chest. "Your costume doesn't make sense."

"I'm a fake fan." He grinned now.

"All I've got left are Almond Joys and you're allergic to those." I started to shut the door but he stuck out his foot to stop it.

"Wait, listen, Keira, can you hear me out please?"

Darwin explained to me that he was drunk when he kissed Lexy at the basketball party while a group of fifth graders in pin striped suits snagged candy from me. He told me he was sorry and he would go back in time to change it as a kid wearing a UPS costume asked me if I had any more Reeses. Finally, Darwin stammered out the question I'd been dreading: could I forgive him? A miniature Batman and Robin duo shrieked with laughter at him until their parents dragged them away. Then it was just me and him and the moths circling between us in the front porch light.

My words, practiced in my head, hurt me more than I expected. "I'm sorry but I don't know if I can right now."

I closed the door so I wouldn't have to see his head dip towards the ground. Then I heard him, muffled, "You don't have to forgive me, but I'm not going to stop trying to make it up to you." A cluster of squelched anger and sorrow morphed together in my collar bone, blistering as I listened to the crunch of Darwin's sneakers across the dead grass.

Now in the car, on 101.5, Frank Sinatra is leaking Christmas Music out of the radio. I try to turn down the volume but Shannon hurls insults at me so fast, like she's been storing them in the gaps of her missing teeth. "Don't turn it down! You're so stupid, Keira! You ruin everything!"

Dad says, “Don’t speak to your sister that way.”

His voice gets lost to Big Joe Henry booming about how fast the holiday season is coming up. Shannon’s fingers squeak across the glass. I cross my arms over my chest, tuck my hands into my armpits, and tally up the exit signs we speed by. Two. Three. Four. When Mom started her first round of chemo, Dad and I started a counting game. We threw numbers back and forth in waiting rooms, during her surgery or radiation treatments, not stopping until we knew she was done, until we were told she was okay to come home. Now there is a never ending number line circulating in my heart, through my arteries, riding my bloodstream to my toes and back to my temples.

At Green Mills, we check in at the front desk and Dad signs our names. It smells like hand sanitizer and oily chicken soup. Nearby, two men play Go Fish with upside down cards. The urge to correct them twitches my fingers until one of the aides nearby flips their cards right side up.

In the lobby, Shannon and I sit on a floral loveseat, the plastic cover sticky with dots of spilt tea. We are surrounded by an army of drooping ladies in wheelchairs, staring us down with cross eyed, unsteady glares. One woman in a checkered sweater stops her walker in front of us and drops Shannon a mint dug out from her pockets. My sister stares at the candy. Before Mom died, Shannon would have whispered to me, asking what she should do. Back when she thought I knew everything, when she told me stories she picked up during her lunch time. But instead she untwists and retwists the striped wrapper until I have to curl my hands together in my lap so I don’t rip it away from her and crush it beneath my boots.

I watch Dad make coffee in a styrofoam cup. The back of my throat aches from unsaid things. If I had said no to coming, he would be here by himself, no one watching him pour milk in his cup. When he comes to sit down next to me, my ribs wince, one after the other, knowing he’s been sitting here alone since the brain tumor swelled up Mom. Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. I want to tell him I miss her. I don’t want to be here. How to connect the two. I have enough numbers in me to fill up this whole waiting room.

Shannon unwraps the mint and pops it into her mouth. It

protrudes from inside her left cheek for three minutes, I count, until she gets up and walks over to the nearest trash can and spits it out.

“The nurses said he’s getting his legs wrapped right now,” Dad says to me, slurping his coffee.

I try to sound interested, concerned, and not grossed out. “Why?”

“This sore burst open on his thigh. So now the nurses have to wrap it. He’s got too much water in his legs apparently.”

“Apparently?”

Shannon is now filling her own styrofoam cup at the coffee station.

Dad nods. The old ladies are being wheeled into the television room, a parade of colorful sweater ensembles and thinning hair. Dad pulls his phone out and types on it with his free hand. Someone is playing the piano; the sound wandering into the waiting room. The two men playing Go Fish set down their cards and push their walkers to the noise, sea creatures swimming towards a light. Shannon comes back over with a cup full of milky coffee.

“You’re not going to like that,” I tell her. She won’t look at me.

“Apparently when you get older, your body experiences more water retention,” Dad says to me, Shannon, anyone who will listen. He shows me his phone; he’s got WebMD up. “Edema. It’s caused either by heart circulation, kidneys, or lymph nodes.”

He recites a long quote. Shannon spits her drink back into her cup and sets it on the ground. Fifteen seconds. She picks it up and throws it out. As Dad shows me another article, this time with pictures of swollen feet, my sister is taking creamers from the ceramic bowl next to the Keurig. She drinks them standing by the counter, downing them like shots. The piano is escalating, someone is singing, voice wobbling. Dad reads the first article again.

When Mom got sick, the Google Search History on our computer was filled with Dad’s questions in all caps. HOW LONG DOES BRAIN TUMOR REMOVAL SURGERY TAKE.

HOW PAINFUL IS CHEMOTHERAPY. CHEMOTHERAPY EFFECTIVENESS RATES. IS THE MEDICAL INDUSTRY HIDING A CURE FOR CANCER. HOW DO I GET IT. DO SUPPLEMENTS HELP CANCER. SUPPLEMENT STORES NEAR ME. WHY DO SUPPLEMENTS NOT HELP CANCER. CANCER REMISSION. WHAT CAUSES BRAIN TUMORS TO REFORM. CHEMOTHERAPY EFFECTS ON THE BODY. CHEMOTHERAPY TIREDNESS. CHEMOTHERAPY LIVER FAILURE. FUNERAL HOMES NEAR ME.

Shannon sits back down and wipes her mouth on her jacket sleeve, remnants of her milk mustache appears on it. She burps in my face. Dad finishes his coffee. The old people are clapping out of time with the music. Through the large frosted glass window that divides us from them, I see figures, blemishes, shifting back and forth. The revolving door in the lobby whirs as another family comes in, shaking out their umbrellas. A woman with dusty hair and a pink sweater with stitched birds on it comes over and touches my cardigan, my mother's cardigan, and asks if it's Chenille. She kisses my sleeve and she smiles and thanks me like I've given her a gift. She hobbles over to the family nearby and they all tell me with their eyes that they are sorry, she didn't used to be like this, please forgive her, and a nurse comes by to tell us that my grandfather is almost done getting his legs wrapped. Shannon tells me to help her find a bathroom.

I wait outside the stall while she pees.

"Keira, do you think Grandpa is going to die soon?"

Her voice echoes in the beige tiled restroom. I touch the drool spot on my sleeve.

"I don't know."

"Just guess."

"I said I don't know."

"Are you going to miss him when he dies?"

She flushes. The sound ricochets through my inner ear canal. I make her wash her hands and she flicks water droplets at me. She's giggling now.

"I'm not going to stop until you answer my question!"

Darwin. His voice muffled through the door. I'm not going to stop trying to make it up to you. My heart cinches.

Ten, fifteen, thirty seconds and her hands are dry. She goes for the sink again and with one hand I pull the door open and with the other I yank her by the hem of her shirt and swing her out of the bathroom and as I'm swinging her I remember how much older and taller I am than she is and every word, every snide comment, every insult she's tossed at me in the past six months crackles in my chest and I think how easy it would be to just throw her into the nearest wall so hard she would come out the other side.

I don't. I let go and Shannon stumbles past a guy reading the newspaper in his wheelchair and when she turns around, she looks caught between crying and yelling at me, but worse, she stomps away so hard that her sneakers track dirt on the carpet. The old guy offers me his newspaper. I say no and go back into the empty bathroom and punch the button on the hand dryer so no one can hear me yell, "Fuck-you-Shannon!" loudly, repeatedly, until my knuckles hurt and I cry.

Mom told me how, when Dad was ten, Grandpa left him and Gram to go be an actor out in California. She told me how Grandpa failed, was homeless for three years, and came back only to get a divorce and a realtor job. She told me how, during the divorce, Grandpa picked Dad up and chucked him into the television cabinet. I asked Dad about it one time, after Gram died years ago, if he was still upset about his parents divorce, and he asked me what there was to be upset about. I never asked him again. Mom said he was never going to give me the answer I wanted, the one she wanted. What was he ever going to say? Whenever my grandfather used to come over on Sundays, he and my father watched football in the den and my mother kept herself upstairs, and told me he didn't deserve a son like Dad, or a place on our couch.

A nurse knocks on the bathroom door. She asks if I'm okay. I say yes so she will leave. I splash my face with cold water and pat it dry with paper towels. The place on my cardigan where the old woman kissed it has dried. I touch my fingers to it, and then press them into my cheek.

Dad and Shannon are sitting with Grandpa in the waiting room, the audience from the piano show is dispersing, wheel chairs squeaking. “Nap time!” the nurses are calling. Shannon asks Grandpa if he is going to take a nap and that makes him grin, showing yellow teeth. His eyes are squinty from cataracts, or maybe from the years he stared at the California sun in disillusion. He curves like a C over his walker. He tells me I’m starting to look like my mother. Dad says the game is on. Shannon walks on the opposite side of the hall, pressing her body against the wall, as far as she can get away from me.

In Grandpa’s room, he sits on his bed, Dad in the stiff arm chair, Shannon on the carpet. On the television, the Giants are losing. Grandpa tells me about his leg sore, pats it tenderly. I worry for a second he’s going to show it to me, but instead he smiles, his yellow, toothy smile, and tells me he missed us. Shannon says I’m unmissable and stupid and she moves out into the hall. Dad starts to get up but I tell him it’s fine. I find my sister sitting outside, knees to her chest. Her anger is a fever, I feel it glowing when I sit next to her.

When Mom went into remission for nine months, a year before she died, before the brain tumors came back and speckled her insides, she started going to Grandpa’s apartment to clean it once a week. She took me with her. I sat on his couch with him while she scrubbed his floors, sprayed his toilet, threw out molding bread. On the ride home, I asked her why. Don’t you hate him? Why are you making sure he’s not eating expired ice cream? We were flying back down route 10. It was spring, our windows were down, the wind whipping, catching her voice and throwing it backwards as she spoke. I heard bits and pieces. Don’t hold grudges like me, Keira. Maybe people show love differently. Maybe it will never be fixed, you know? Maybe this is what fixed means for them. I love who you love, what Dad loves, what Shannon loves. Maybe that’s all we can try to do. When Grandpa got moved to Green Mills, we came to visit him all together, a few months before Mom died. I remember that clot of emotions sticking together under my tongue, sitting between her and Shannon and Dad and Grandpa in his new room, the game on the television. My mother reaching for my hand, for Shannon’s, and gripping them both at the same time, and Shannon grabbed for mine to connect us together.

In the other room, I think my father and my grandfather

speaking a love language of football stats and plays and final scores. Giant’s get a first down. Maybe that’s Dad saying he forgives Grandpa. The ref gives a play to the other team. Maybe that’s Grandpa saying he’s sorry. When Manning kicks a field goal, maybe that’s my mother talking, maybe that’s my father and my grandfather saying all the things they never will to each other, maybe that’s my father telling us we don’t need numbers to communicate, maybe that’s Darwin, his promise nudging me forward. The frozen bile in my throat melts, trickling into my chest and cooling my veins.

“Yes,” I tell Shannon.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’m going to miss Grandpa when he dies one day.”

She looks at the wall. I take off Mom’s sweater and give it to her. She throws it back at me. I hug her. She hits me. I squeeze her until her sobs seep against my t-shirt, until her apologies wet my hair with her snot.

“And Dad?”

“And Dad.”

“And me?”

“And you.”



Untitled
Laura Alaez

Eskimo Kiss

Annalisa Manabat—Fiction Contest Runner-Up

Mercy Hill Farm is just as picturesque as the photos on *villagegreenrealty.com* present it to be. Her house is huge, farmhouse-style, a combination of cream walls, stone columns and myrtle green windows. A chimney stack juts out from the slew of dark gray shingles. My mother and I would play a game when I was little where we pretended we were rich, perusing our dream estates online. This house fits perfectly into that catalogue - where it's enormous, but the wealthy owner refers to it as "quaint." I pull my iPhone from my purse and examine my reflection. One brief breath. Then I knock.

"Come in," someone yells. The door doesn't move as I fidget with the knob. Putting all my strength into my shoulder, I manage to get it open. Inside, I face a large staircase where a woman stands on her toes, attempting to take down one of the many paintings hanging above it.

"Here, let me help you," I offer, dropping my bag to the ground and pulling the canvas into my chest. My arms are stretched wide around it and I peer over to see her. Both my parents have blue eyes, but her brown ones mirror mine. "Where should I put this?"

"You can just prop it on the bench there," she says. When I face her again, this time empty-handed, something inside my chest begins bouncing, a frenzy of fear and excitement. She is smaller in person and my heeled boots only emphasize our height difference. Her skin is smooth, except around her eyes, and faded freckles dot her cheeks. My hand moves instinctively to my own face which has always been peppered with those freckles. A black and white pattern adorns the scarf draped around her neck and her brown hair is pulled into a loose bun. Smaller, baby hairs poke out from around her forehead, the same way mine always do before I smother them with hairspray. At forty-seven, she is clearly aged, but not depleted.

"Jacqueline, yes?" she asks, knowing only my name and my position as the journalist who emailed her to arrange a time.

"Hi, Miss Leonard. Thank you for allowing me into your home," I say, the only one aware that our conversation is more than artist and interviewer.

She flips her hand. “You can call me Audra.”

Audra.

Renowned artist.

My mother.

I pull my phone out again, this time for recording.

“Where should we start?”

I am in a large room, barren of furniture. Rich reds and golds snake through the wall-to-wall carpeting under our feet. While Audra brews her tea, I survey the walls, saturated with dozens of canvases, none the same size or picture, but all to be auctioned off in a few hours. Ken Chang, *Affinity*’s lead photographer and my one-time-lover, came three days ago to photograph each one before it’s sold. Some of those images will accompany this piece.

“You look like an appraiser,” Audra says, seeing me study her work.

“I’ll leave that to the bidders this afternoon. Though I will say I’m not as interested in what they’re worth as I am in what they’ve cost.”

She smiles. “Make some sacrifice for your art and you will be repaid, but ask of art to sacrifice herself for you -”

“And a bitter disappointment may come to you,” I finish. Oscar Wilde’s words, discovered in a letter in 2013. The same quote rests above my office desk.

“Isn’t that stellar? How they just found that after so many years?”

Growing up, I’d never been interested in meeting my birth parents. There were times when it saddened me to think about never knowing who I came from, never comparing our traits, but at no time was the wonder strong enough to act on. Four months ago, I watched some random movie about a father and son reuniting after decades of being kept apart and thought I might as well. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families handed me the envelope and as fate would have it, I opened it to discover my birth

mother was a millionaire, not twenty-four hours before *Affinity* announced that we were given exclusivity to the Audra Leonard auction.

“As you know, everything will be recorded and anything can be used in the final article.”

She sips her tea, nods. “One hour.”

Journalists who have the opportunity to talk to Audra must avoid the wrong topics at all costs. Children, for one.

Kerry Baker was set to write this and I’m sure she was thrilled, but I knew it was mine. I cover the entrepreneurs, self-starters, so it isn’t that much of a stretch to cover the artist’s journey to self-fulfillment. That’s exactly what I told my boss, Cheryl, before she said no. Then I said, *Maybe I could write a piece about your gym trainer who follows you home instead. I’m sure your husband and kids would find it fascinating* and she suddenly thought it was a great idea for me to take the story.

“I was born in Buffalo. Raised by two very good parents - objectively speaking. They fed me, clothed me, never hit me. But,” she says, holding up a finger, “they were afraid of my dreams. Told me that they’d never support me as an artist, so I left for school in New York, age seventeen.”

“Eighteen,” I correct. First apartment: 301 10th St, Park Slope. Not much about Audra Leonard’s personal life has been made known, but I’ve read everything that has, purged each interview she’s given - seven in total, so the minute details are secured in my brain.

“You’ve done your research.”

I knew who my mother was long before I opened that envelope, along with millions of others. I just didn’t know she’d given birth to me. In freshman art class, we were tasked with choosing a modern-day artist to present on. After typing that exact phrase into google, an article mentioning her appeared first. In the photo, she was lying on her stomach in a lace bra, finger painting onto tarp spread across the floor of an abandoned warehouse. Pieces of her wavy hair spilled into the paint. She intrigued me. It was the only *A* I earned in that class.

“What is it about your painting that you feel speaks to people?”

“Those first four letters - *pain*. I’m drawn to simple moments, but when I recreate them, every brush I use is dipped in a thin coat of grief. Even in the happy ones, some kind of sadness is ingrained.”

Maybe there is something she will never share. An exceptional trauma. Something that would explain her pain. A reason for her aversion to maternity. “Yet, I find there’s quite a bit of hope throughout your piece as well.”

“You’re an optimist.”

I move forward. “Can I ask about *Girl in Silken Light*?”

“Perhaps the saddest of them all.”

Girl in Silken Light was the piece that put Audra on the map. Everyone in the art world flocked around my mother, the mysterious twenty-two-year-old behind the image of a glistening angel dusted in speckles of gold.

“You keep your personal life highly private. Why was that important to you?”

“It brings me comfort knowing it’s my work people are talking about.”

“Even now?”

Everyone says how accepting we are nowadays, how loving, but I find that I’m more scared than ever to be judged. In the past, there were a set of critics I anticipated, but now every person is opinionated, every person has a say. I’ve shied away for this long, what’s the rest of my life? Plus, I can imagine the horrible things they’d say about me if they knew all the ways in which I’ve screwed up.”

She is neither Lady Tremaine nor the Fairy Godmother.

I feel the urge to shake her, to tell her to say that I know her secret, am the secret. But her aversion to interviews holds me back. How would it make her feel knowing this has all been one-sided? It’s not exactly ethical.

The Intro to Psych course I took in college taught us about

behavioral genetics. As a child, I not only wrote dozens of stories, but I designed covers, bound them with packing tape, and made sure to include an extensive biography in the back. After I pestered her long enough, my mother made copies for me, which I handed to everyone at school. *A go-getter that girl is*, people would tell my parents. *James*, they said to my dad, *she must get it from you!*

My parents are hardworking people, dedicated to what they love.

Audra is too, I suppose.

I think about my reluctance to fail, my determination to snag this piece, one I am technically unqualified for.

I am not sweet Cinderella.

Perhaps it’s in my genetics to be ambitious.

“Retiring before you’ve even hit fifty. Can you take us through your reasons for that choice? Your art has served you well in terms of wealth, but it seems to have nourished you as well. If not art, then what?”

“I want to relax,” she says, removing her scarf and freeing her hair from its bun. She shakes her curls loose. “Go off the map.”

She wants to leave, restart. Again. “Nothing else?”

“What else is there?”

“Not to center all women’s stories in relation to romance, but how has love influenced you?”

“I’ve never been in a serious relationship. I’ve made love, but it is nothing to making art. ‘Aromantic,’ I read somewhere.”

I’ve always assumed I’d get married one day, but as the oddity is that as I get older, the idea of a settled relationship seems more and more distant. I’ve never loved anyone like I love writing.

“In one interview, in your beginning years, you cited someone named Richard Dox as a close friend.” That’s false. Audra’s never mentioned him, but he was my father. After my initial shock seeing Audra’s name, I turned to him. Looking him up gave me a number, leading to his daughter, my sister, informing me that he died as a firefighter twelve years ago. I’ve only been able to find a single photo of him and Audra. In it, they are photographed

from afar, their small bodies intertwined on a Manhattan balcony. “What can you say about him?”

I see her swallow, steadying herself. “I said that, did I? I think the name rings a bell. Maybe he was in my art class in college. I could have done a portrait of him, but I’m unsure,” she says. “My legs are numbing. Could we walk and talk?”

She guides me up the stairs, describing the art gallery she founded as we go. Her voice is musical, airy, and I realize it is her coolness that bothers me. The readers won’t mind hearing about a self-made, happy woman who craves peace and nature. But something in me needs more. Her contentment outweighs her guilt. Or maybe I am hoping for remorse that doesn’t exist.

People tried to make me feel better, even if it meant fabricating the version of the story they think will help most. *Know that your mother loved you, so much that she wanted to give you a better life.*

I run my fingers along the carved staircase, my boots clacking on the marble floor.

Audra Leonard was a young twenty-something without a penny to her name.

Current net worth: five million dollars.

What am I upset about? I adored my childhood and am actually friends with my parents. We weren’t rich, but it certainly could have been worse. Why imagine some alternate world where Audra and I stay together when apart, everything’s turned out well for both of us. Is that what they meant? *She did it for you, Jacqueline.* Maybe. But there’s no doubt she did it for herself, too.

“So you’ve tied up all loose ends it seems.”

She tucks a hair behind her ear. “I have.”

“No big regret? Something you could go back and do over?” I hold my breath.

“What are you asking, dear?”

“Nothing.”

My curiosity has shifted into anger and it’s close to spilling out.

A daughter, I want to say. But you declined your motherhood, as if it was an appetizer you didn’t want to sample, hungry for the main course.

I’m aching to scream.

Mom!

I want to fling the word at her. We are in an open room, again, filled with paintings and I sense them probing at me with their non-existent eyes. Taunting. I am engulfed by them - the paramount children. Reminders of my rejection splattered everywhere:

Independent Woman! Independent Woman! Independent Woman!

Audra opens a side table and retrieves a newspaper.

2004 – Talent Only Goes so Far: How Audra Leonard’s Choices Have Put Her on the Path to Glory.

“It’s the only headline I’ve ever kept,” she says, putting it back and shutting the drawer. “They say that I inspire young girls to succeed. Do you think that’s true?”

I look down at my feet. “Who am I to know?”

As we walk back downstairs, she asks “Do you have sisters, Jacqueline?”

“Only child,” I say. “I was adopted at birth.”

“Adopted?”

I stop on the steps. “Yes.”

Her lips turn upwards for a second before she frowns.

“Can I take another look at this one before I go?” I move towards the canvas I carried when I first came in, an unnamed pain in my chest. A half-finished puzzle is drawn in neon tones. “A little harsh for my taste,” I say, turning back to see her head tilted and eyes squinting, as if she’s peering into something only she sees. “I think my time is up. Sounds like they’re ready for you,” I say, hearing the buzz from down the hall.

“Audra, love.” A man who I recognize as the auctioneer interrupts us, putting a hand on her shoulder. “It’s time.”

“Jacqueline?” She whispers my name and I look at her, eyebrow raised. “Nice meeting you,” is all she says before making her way into the auction room. I follow, seeing that this room, too, is dressed in gorgeous carpeting, which is covered with hundreds of seats and chattering bodies.

I linger in the doorway, watching as she and the man take their spots up front. A screen looms behind them, so that everyone can better see each painting’s details. The two of them are magnified, as well, and I see Audra rest the underside of her thumb’s fingernail between her front teeth. My own fingers were manicured yesterday, but only to mask the fact that I’m a rabid nail-biter. We must have that in common. A few latecomers hurry past me, grab seats before the auctioneer taps his gavel onto the podium.

He introduces the event, this special occasion where you’re given access to her house, her paintings, and her, there in person. A woman brings the paintings in and out of the room we spoke in. The first to go is the puzzle I pointed out. It sells for twelve-thousand dollars. I make sure I’ve saved the recording on my phone, anxious to listen back. Before I go, the next painting catches my attention.

“Next Number Nineteen - *Eskimo Kiss* - a particularly gorgeous and touching image. A rendering of a mother bear and her cub.” Audra taps him, whispers something into his ear and he smiles. “As honest as only a true artist would be, Ms. Mural has informed me that it is in fact a ‘rendition’ rather than a ‘rendering’ of the mother and her baby. Meaning that -” Audra speaks over him, her voice almost too soft without the microphone and I take a step inside the room to get a better listen.

“It’s a unique image because I’ve never seen it before. Maybe in a dream once,” she says. “Anyway, I imagined it myself.”

“There you have it, the opportunity to snag a nugget of the visionary’s brain for your home. Let’s start the bidding at one thousand.”

Bidders’ hands operate in a whack-a-mole-like fashion, rising and falling at lightning speed.

I look back to Audra to find her staring at me. Her mouth parts, barely, and I can’t tell whether she’s startled or on the brink of speaking.

“Okay folks, looks like this piece will be going for a wonderful twenty-seven thousand dollars to the lovely lady in blue.

Last chance for any counteroffers.”

I look from the painting to my mother. She is proud of her pigments, compositions and designs. She basks in her freedom.

Going

Her eyes stay fixated on me and the expression she wears is the same one I imagine she makes while absorbing an image, already painting it in her mind. Who does she see? I haven’t called my parents in months now, convincing myself Affinity drains me too much. I’ll call them on my car ride home, tell them about the interview, the easy stuff. My mom will ramble about her pride in me and convince me to visit them for a weekend, while my father teases her and makes us all laugh. At the end of the call, I’ll thank them.

Going

I break the gaze and head toward the front door. I struggle to swing it open, the way I did when I entered two hours ago, but it’s somewhat easier now. Before it closes behind me, I hear the auctioneer’s booming voice.

Sold.



Trivices of Flora
Diane Velasco

Homecoming

Virginia Hand—Nonfiction Contest Winner

I once had a boyfriend who had a very large Nazi flag, folded up neatly in a clear bag. In black ink were the names of the American soldiers who captured it. He bought it years before from a guy who was closing down his tattoo shop. “Can you believe it?” he told me. “I got it for only \$350. He had a whole bunch of Nazi shit upstairs, and he was selling it cheap. I should have bought more.” Sometime after this he had spinal surgery, and spent the next few months sitting at home, bored out of his mind. He decided to look up the names on the flag. He called me, excited when he got a lead, called me again, dejected, when he talked to a widow or found a picture of a headstone. One day he called me and asked “How would you like to fly out west to meet an old-timer?”

We got to their house, an unassuming little ranch house on a quiet, tree-lined street. Both the old-timer and his wife greeted us at the door, and they both looked much younger than they were. They were quick to welcome us into their home, very interested in us and why we came. The old-timer said he had no memory of capturing a flag, let alone signing one, but he would very much like to have a look.

The four of us sat around the kitchen table, not knowing where to start. We talked about his childhood, growing up in the middle of nowhere. War broke out while he was in high school, and he joined the army the second he graduated. He immediately solved the mystery of why he was the only man on the flag from the Midwest, as he fell ill while training in Texas. By the time he was well enough to be shipped off, everyone he trained with was already overseas. He told us of his time during the Battle of the Bulge, and the more he talked, the more things in the room seemed to get quieter and darker. We let him talk as much as he wanted to, but eventually he needed a break. He said it was the first time he talked at length to anyone about his experiences, and he never even told his kids. We switched the conversation to what his life was like when he came home from the war. He didn’t get much of a break, as he went off to Korea. After that, he settled down, got married, got a degree, had a bunch of kids. Eventually he got divorced, and shipped out to Vietnam. “I’m not ready to talk about Vietnam yet,” he cautioned. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to talk about that.” He said he went through some rough times after that. That was when

he met his current wife. “There was this guy in the apartment below me,” his wife said, her face brightening, “who always had friends over and stayed up late most nights being loud. His friends kept parking in my space, and I was so mad I thought I was finally going to go over and give him a piece of my mind. I baked him a pie instead.” The mood in the room restored, we offered to take them out to dinner.

At the restaurant, we got to be ordinary people, just friends enjoying each other’s company. We talked about happy everyday things while eating our food. After my beau excused himself to use the restroom, the two of them turned to me, doing their best to convey both their surprise and gratitude that he went to such great lengths to connect a flag with a man who signed it. The old-timer leaned over to me and said, “Any man who would do something like this is a keeper.” I considered this for a moment, unable to respond. We had spent a day in close conversation, mysteries were unraveled, revelations walked reluctantly out of the shadows. But even so, he didn’t know my boyfriend. Not really. I wondered how the old-timer would feel if he knew this man who had just told the story about rescuing a puppy also left one of his cats outside on the front porch, covered in lesions. That he called his mother a bitch and an asshole in front of me when she refused to give him money. That he called the police on my family twice, telling them that they abducted me when I sought refuge with them. That he ambushed me at what was supposed to be a secret meeting with a friend at a café, told the other person that I was a liar and a whore, demanding I leave with him at once. That he couldn’t go a single day without using the “n” word at least once. That he believed a race war was inevitable and imminent. That in his basement, behind a framed print of a dragon, he had painted two large “SS” runes. I wanted to acknowledge his observation, but all I could do was nod.

Back at the house, the flag was finally unfurled, and the man looked upon it in awe and disbelief. We pointed to his name, and he stooped down to have a closer look.

“That’s my name, and it’s in my handwriting, but I don’t remember doing it.” He continued to stare, touched it tentatively with his fingertips, then backed away. “I remember all of them, though. Clear as day.” He pointed to the other names. “I honestly don’t remember what this is from.”

He sat down on the couch, and we gave him some time to mull it over. I could tell the search through some unpleasant memories was exacting its toll. After a few minutes, he seemed

exhausted.

“It had to be the first week of April,” he announced suddenly. “I can account for everything else except that week.” He said he was certain, as there were two names missing from the flag. “They didn’t go on vacation,” he said, turning to me with a grave look. Another man whose name was on the flag died immediately afterward. He knows for sure because that man was his best friend. It is the only time his eyes watered and his voice wavered, as he described how they were both enjoying a moment of quiet when two planes flew overhead and started to strafe each other. They stood and watched for a while, until a stray bullet went right through his friend’s head. “I completely lost it,” he said. “That was it for me. I was hardened to the world.”

We could see that he was in distress, and his wife announced that she would make us strawberries and cream. We went to the table while she was busy preparing dessert, but he was still deeply in thought. He said nothing, but his eyes were full of remembrance. We let him be, figuring he would start talking when he was ready.

We made pleasant chit-chat for a while, and I tried to finish my strawberries even though I was still full from the restaurant. The old-timer was still preoccupied, his eyes were stormy and he pushed around the strawberries with his spoon, eating slowly. We could tell he was about to say something, and we were prepared to give him as much time as he needed.

“There was one day that I blacked out,” he said, his eyes focused on his empty dish. He started to explain that they came across what they thought was a military base. It was not heavily defended but there was a brief skirmish. When they made it inside, they could not comprehend what they found. “There were piles of bodies, burning.” He shook his head in disbelief. “We had a look around, but we didn’t know what we had. A man comes stumbling out, a prisoner in rags. He’s just skin and bones, and he is saying something and crying and he falls into my arms.” He still couldn’t look at us. “We figured out pretty quickly that the prisoners were Jewish.” His eyes narrowed, and he made a face like he tasted something bad. “And then this woman comes running out, this buxom nurse, and she waves at us and says she needs help. We thought she meant the prisoners, so we followed her. But she led us to Germans.” He shook his head again, and he quivered with rage. “After everything that was around her, she wanted us to help Germans.” He stopped, looked up, stared us in the eye. “Everything

went blank after that.” He was lost in a place we could not see. “I don’t know what happened after that, other than I killed a lot of people that day.” All our eyes fell down to the table.

It got late, and it was time to say our goodbyes. Inexplicably, I started to cry. The old-timer looked at me sheepishly and said “Please don’t think of me as a hero. Because I’m not.”

On the way back to the hotel, my beau asked if everything we had been told was true. I said it was hard to doubt it. “He couldn’t say what town, or what camp. He couldn’t even remember where the flag was from,” he said. “I hope he’s not a storyteller.”

I told him if the flag was indeed from the camp, he should donate it to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., or some kind of historical society. “No,” he said, indignant. “I paid for it, it’s mine.”

Over the next few weeks I tried to do some research on my own. I looked up the old-timer’s division, and maps tracing their movements. It was Ohrdruf concentration camp that was liberated by his division that first week of April, just as he said. Between his account and the maps, this was almost certainly where the flag came from. I had a look at some of the photos, to compare with what he told us. I wondered if one of the men in the pictures was him. One photo in particular caught my attention. It was the photo of a dead woman lying across the ground, face badly beaten, bruises on her stomach, a bullet hole in her side. The picture caption was “Dead German female guard,” but I noticed she was not wearing the female camp guard uniform. She was wearing men’s clothing, and I could not see any hat or insignia. I wondered if she was, in fact, a nurse.

At some point in the year afterwards, we will lay in bed and my boyfriend will announce that he thinks the Holocaust didn’t happen the way everyone thinks it happened. “There’s no way it was six million, that’s impossible. A million, tops. And that was from disease. There’s no proof of any gas chambers.” It was almost impossible for my brain to process the absurd level of willful ignorance informing his proclamation, but I told him he was very wrong, and he told me that I wasn’t there. His words circled around and around in my head until I started to feel angry and sick. I already knew the evil things that people did to the ones they claimed to love; it was not much of a stretch to consider the things they would do to the ones they hated.

Before most people I knew stopped talking to me, they

would ask what I saw in him. I never knew what to say, but I came to realize that it wasn’t so much about what I saw in him, it was about what I didn’t see in myself. When I met him I was about to lose my place to live, my car was on its way out, I had no money and no luck job hunting. The only person I had ever had a relationship with before him beat, raped, and suffocated me, so in comparison this guy was gold. When you are truly adrift, you will cling to anything that floats in your direction.

“Just leave him,” they said. Like it was so simple a solution. People always wonder why you can’t just walk away from an abusive relationship. It is like having a malignant tumor, one so big that to operate would be dangerous. You have to cut it out yourself, are left alone to heal, and have to live with the scar. You can leave the relationship, but it doesn’t leave you. Some who manage to get away wander the earth like those who were released from a very long prison sentence: bewildered, friendless, unwelcomed by a world that has forgotten them. No one has saved you a place in line, you have to go all the way to the back. You can crawl around on your hands and knees begging for scraps, or you can stay where you are. Those were the two choices I was confronted with. Before I met him, I thought there was no place for me in this world, so logically there would still be no place for me if I left. In the end I realized that it might be possible to forge my own way instead of waiting for an invitation that would never come.

I wish I could say that I left with my head held high, that I didn’t look back, that I moved on without a second thought. In truth, the day I left was one of the worst days of my life. For two weeks I had to carry on as normal, knowing that 150 miles away I had reserved a couch to sleep on and a start date for a new job. In the meantime, I had to look him in the eyes and tell him I loved him; we went to the store together, we went out to eat, we still shared a bed. Every moment felt like a betrayal, and I hated myself for it. When the morning came and my boyfriend had gone to work, my sister and her girlfriend came over in her pickup truck. We loaded all that we could, and the moment she said the truck was full and we had to go was the moment that I lost it. The full weight of what I was doing fell upon me, and I was reduced to rubble. What ensued was more like an exorcism than anything else, with the wailing and the gnashing of teeth and the wringing of hands. It was a battle for my very soul, one that I had to fight alone. My sister stood by, knowing that there was nothing else she could do, that I had to come to my own conclusion in my own way on my own time. At the time I thought she was looking on in pity, but

afterwards I understood it to be patience. I did manage to get in my car and drive away, but it would be another six hours before I could stop crying.

I had two days to pull it together before I started my job, but it would be another year before I started to feel like myself again. The heart is as fragile as tissue paper, but tears like cardboard. I was not prepared for the grief, or the guilt of actually mourning him. Outwardly I could function, but inwardly I was a wreck. He tried to get me back of course, but his calls followed the stages of grief too and lessened in frequency until he said he had found someone else. I also moved on, but I chose to get to know myself rather than anyone else.

I remembered a story the old-timer told us, about how he had trouble readjusting to civilian life and decided to go to a reunion with some of his army buddies. He said he left feeling empty and disgusted by the way everyone there talked about their wives, kids, houses, and jobs, like nothing ever happened. Everyone seemed to have moved on, and instead of feeling better he felt worse. He would have to wait many more years before finding peace. I didn't know how long it would be for me, but at least I knew it was possible.

I wondered how the old-timer was doing, and I decided to look him up. The first thing that popped up was his obituary. It mentioned him as a veteran and Purple Heart recipient. Mostly, it said how beloved he was by the community he served right up until the time of his death. That he always sought to put a smile on the face of everyone he met. I looked at his picture, and his eyes still twinkled as if he was sitting across the table from me. He has taken his stories with him, some never to be told.

I still can't tell if I'm better off knowing some of the things I know now. I still have my cynical days, where I try to stick to my ten-foot circumference of personal space and quietly scrutinize everyone I encounter for signs of deception. Even on my good days, I still ponder how we are all safely swaddled in a cocoon of certainty that evil abodes on far away shores, that we can be so thoroughly convinced that the worst is behind us and that we have learned from the mistakes of the past. That we can't be tricked or misled away from our deepest convictions. That we are somehow different, or better than what came before, simply because we are the after, we are the now. I'd like to believe that too sometimes. But when these doubts start to creep in, I try to remember the morning after I left, when I woke up in my sister's guest room, alone for

the first time in a very long while. The light flooded in through the window, brightening the white curtains, white walls, and the white linens on the bed. I stretched my arms and legs out in all directions, feeling nothing but soft, cool space. Everything was quiet and still, and for a glorious moment I was existing in a place that was all my own. I didn't know what it was then, but now I know it to be the feeling of freedom.



Amsterdam
Virginia Hand

To the Daughter I May Never Have, A Letter You Will Never Read

Maxxe Albert-Deitch—Nonfiction Contest Runner-up

I do not know how to raise a child in this America. Moreover, I do not know how to raise a girl from fetus— or heartbeat— to woman in this America.

As of right now, I am not pregnant.

I am not a mother.

I do not know how to be either of those things.

I do not know if I will have wanted you.

I do not know if I will have had the ability to plan the circumstances of your existence.

You will have friends who— or perhaps you yourself— will be brought into this world as a result of violence. There is no therapy in place for the trauma of that— for eighteen years of unwanted, for eighteen years of pain, for the infinity of the repercussions.

Your body is a footnote in the legislature of your time. The men who wrote it will likely be dead by the time you are of age to vote, their wealth safely in the hands of their sons.

I do not know how to explain to you that once, we believed we were free.

I do not know how to explain that we must constantly fight.

I will teach you to carry your keys between the fingers that make up your fists.

I will teach you to use your words, because lashing out hurts both of you— bruised hands, kickback, shoulder sprains— but words can have a lasting impact, in the press, in history books, on the Congress courtroom floor.

I will explain to you how each level of the government works, so that it is instilled in you so deeply that the mechanisms of how to make a change make perfect sense.

You are likely to be unsafe. You are Jewish by my blood. You are a woman by your birth. You are a threat to the very

establishment that holds this America in its thrall. You are unsafe, and you will grow anyway. You will be the climbing wisteria branches and the tall sunflowers, choking out those who would try to cut you down. You will suck the nutrients from the earth in order to grow tall. You will have to take what you want. You will have to stand your ground.

You will not understand, at first, that you are different. That your rights are diminished, that you have been given an unfair place behind the starting line, that you have to finish ahead for your finish to be counted at all. You will learn, and it will be the world who teaches you that. Not I.

Perhaps you will discover that you like girls. Perhaps you will not consider yourself a girl. I want to say that I will love you regardless, in spite of, and because of, the decisions you will make. I want to. I do.

But I worry that I will not know how to love you.

I worry that you will come about because of fear.

I worry that if I do not want you, in your embryonic state, the size and shape of a squashed cherry tomato but perhaps with a bleeding beating heart, I will have no choice but to have you. I worry that I will resent you.

I do not know how to explain to you that there are people in the world who will hate you because of what you are, what body parts you are born with, what blood runs in your veins, what you choose to say and how you choose to say it. They will insult you. They will try to hurt you. There will be days when you are too exhausted and broken and battered to believe that you will rise up again. And you will.

I do not know how to explain to you that I will not be able to shield you.

I do not know what horrors may come next.

I will have to explain the Holocaust. I worry that I will explain it while we live in its revival.

I wonder if there will be days when I am too exhausted from fighting to teach you how.

I wonder if I fight all the time, will you only learn how to fight, and never to love?

I think sometimes it would be better if you never happen. I think sometimes that it would be cruel, to bear you to term, to allow you to breathe in the toxic air of this planet whose ruination seems so imminent.

None of it is your fault. But I wonder if they care about your life when it is not yours, and not mine before, during, or after you.

How can I explain that you are only a body to them, to be used and perhaps loved, but still thrown away when your political purpose has either failed or served?

They will want you to serve.

If I have you, am I succumbing to serving their ends myself?

Or will you be the Revolution, my pushback against their ways, and you the master's tool to dismantle the master's house?

The world is large and sometimes beautiful, but also small and cramped and dark, full of the same pitfalls again and again.

I am wrapped up in claustrophobic city walls.

I do not want you born inside of them.

I do not want you born of hate.

Perhaps I do not want you.

But will I have a choice?



Serenity
Katie Revelas

Where Were You When the Girls Came? *Sofia Amorim*

Where were you when the girls came?
When they stood up, one by one
 post modern pillars of the Parthenon
 reconstructing our Acropolis.

Where were you when they stopped in your tracks?
When they planted their oak heel roots
 deep into your dirt,
 digging up the parts of them you tried to bury.

We wrote the laws of nature,
and run the rivers.
We carved the mountains
the forefathers claimed.

She is the tree you tried to remove
for your corner office
But she is still the foundation
you built upon.

Where were you when the girls came?

Probably sitting on our stump.

We're not going anywhere.



In Neon Light
Abigail Haven



Sunday Afternoon
Genesis Perez

Sunday Barbeque at Abuela's Ranch

Annalisa Manabat

They wear their Corona cologne,
laid back in obnoxious,
green and blue folding chairs.
Pointed boots suffocate their
cigarette butts beneath patchy dirt.

My aunts pregnant, burping their
infants, gossiping and *ay que*
chulo-ing, while scooping rice and
beans onto white, styrofoam plates.

Y mis tacos, gorda?

Bilingual cussing, backside slaps.
My uncles' lips - dog whistles
that quicken their bitches' steps.

Belly on the trampoline at the edge
of the yard, Virginia Woolf in my hands,
I watch as my aunts get my cousins to
join the assembly line. Veronica and
Natalie ordered off the tire swing, Maria
and Gloria forced to forfeit their kickball win.

Javi, the oldest grandson, pounces onto the tough,
black mesh. The springs creak and flip me hard
on my back, send my pages away, into the air,
where they scatter amid dusty wind. *Hey niña,*

*you don't get this all to yourself y no escuchaste?
You're supposed to be serving.*



Edouard Manet Study – Peaches
Lillian Ann Bartlett

Songbird

Anthony Tagliaferro

(why do you wake?)

(in what seems to be a loop)

Songbird

fresh holy water
Disguised as dew
the morning brew
burnt

on my mother's stove
and I, alone

and you,
wake and give me hope
with your precious morning hymns
looping, perpetually.



Untitled
Seldon Kwafo



Olivia
Diane Velasco

Frequency

Lisa Sisler

It started slowly. At first Sean chalked it up to faulty wiring, unclear connections, laziness, but after a few days, his annoyance was apparent and he couldn't deny that something was happening beyond his control.

"I'd like a burger—cheese, no tomatoes," he boomed into the little box.

"What? A cheeseburger?" the young girl asked.

Sean repeated his order. Twice. And then proceeded to the first window to pay.

When he arrived home and opened his burger—tomatoes, which he hated because the liquid of them always seeped into the bread and made everything soggy.

"Dammit. You want this?" he asked his wife, Sheila.

"Huh?" Sheila asked from the next room.

"You want this burger? They put tomatoes on it."

"Why don't you want it?"

"To-ma-toes," he stressed. Was no one listening today?

"Nah, I told you on the phone, I ate already," she yelled back.

Sean set about pulling off the vile fruit, attempting to salvage the burger, chucking the top bun in the garbage and eating what was left.

"Stupid girl," he muttered under his breath.

"What?" Sheila yelled again.

"The girl at the drive-thru, stupid," he said louder.

"In all fairness," Sheila said walking in the kitchen. "You have one of those voices."

“What does that mean?”

“It’s low and quiet, makes it hard to hear sometimes.”

It happened again on his way to work the next morning. This time Sean was at the local coffee shop. As he approached, two women were chatting about their kids. He stood there for a few seconds before interrupting them.

“I’ll take a coffee, cream, no sugar,” he announced.

The taller woman stared at him for an unusually long time before moving to the pots behind her to make his cup.

“Coffee, cream and sugar, coming up,” the tall one called from over her shoulder before resuming her conversation with her co-worker.

“No sugar,” Sean said, but the women were already back into their conversation and when the tall woman called over her shoulder, “Sure, hon,” he wasn’t quite sure if she’d heard him.

When he was back in his car, he realized she had not. His first sip was so sweet with syrupy sugar grains that he almost had to spit the coffee out.

“Christ, is everyone an idiot lately?”

He called Sheila from the car to tell her that maybe she was right. Maybe he did have that kind of voice.

“You’re breaking up on me,” Sheila said.

“Fucking bluetooth.”

“What’s wrong with your tooth?”

“No. Blue. Tooth. The phone. It’s always cutting out. You can never hear me clearly.”

Sheila laughed.

Sean knew that this was sometimes Sheila’s way of ignoring his tirades about stupidity, sometimes her way of not acknowledging

that she couldn’t quite hear him.

When he got to work, Sean was still pissed about the coffee, and when Gina, his assistant, asked what was wrong he shared his tale of woe. She smiled and laughed and went on her way shaking her head as she departed down the hall.

“Make your own coffee,” Jerry said coming around the corner. “The same thing was happening to me, too. Drive thru technology sucks. I was always yelling into the little box and still I’d get the wrong order. Just easier to do it yourself.”

“But this was in person,” Sean said. “Those ladies were probably just pissed I interrupted their soccer mom stories about Johnny and Sally.”

“What ladies?” Gina asked walking back through the hallway between Sean and Jerry.

“The coffee ladies,” Sean said.

“You need coffee? Gina asked. “I can make a pot.”

“I have coffee, the wrong coffee.”

“Make a pot,” Jerry told Gina. “Can’t have the man cranky with a client on the way in.”

Gina was already half way down the hall again, files filling her arms.

“You want me to make a pot?” Gina yelled.

“Yes!” Sean and Jerry yelled back.

“I swear she’s a great assistant, but she’s flighty as hell,” Sean told Jerry.

After work, Sean met Sheila for a drink. She was already at the bar when he got there and she didn’t hear him approach.

“Shit. You scared me,” Sheila said.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to.”

Both of them laughed realizing this conversation mirrored

the one they had when they first met ten years ago. Different bar. Same approach. They had both been stopping into Murphy's for an after-work drink and after about a week of seeing her, Sean worked up the nerve to go talk to her. Sheila was sipping on a gin and tonic and leafing through a *New Yorker*, oblivious to her surroundings. When she introduced herself, Sean broke into song.

"Sheila take a, Sheila take a bow..." he crooned.

"You're no Morrissey," Sheila told him and they chuckled at the common reference.

Three drinks later, they decided to move to a table and order food. Three months later, they moved in together. Three years later, they got married. Sheila always joked: 333, *half a Satan*.

"So how was work?" Sheila asked

She knew this was a loaded question. Sean would launch into another tirade about stocks and trades and clients demanding too much of his time. Honestly, Sheila only half-listened to him. Ten years ago she would have probed, asked questions about the intricacies of Sean's work, but now all Sean did was bitch and Sheila was tired of listening to the same old record. But she felt bad not asking, even though Sean never really asked her about her days any more.

As Sean recounted his day, Sheila watched his lips moving, but her thoughts drifted to her own day—colleagues bitching about clients, clients bitching about poor customer service, the attractive woman at the cafe who offered to buy her coffee. All of it swirling around in her head. When she focused back to Sean she realized that she hadn't heard a word he had said.

"Sheila?" Sean asked.

"Sorry, got lost right around the thrilling part about the securities trade."

"That's the best part."

"Yeah, about as stimulating as a naked man in black socks."

Three days later, Sheila was in the kitchen making a cup of

tea, when Sean came in to ask her if she'd seen his keys. She heard his approach, but wondered why he was just standing there.

"Hey, Sheil, you seen my keys?"

Sheila didn't answer.

"Sheil," Sean said.

She still didn't answer.

"Sheil-a," Sean was getting impatient.

"Why are you just standing there? Say something," Sheila said. Feeling Sean's presence,

Sheila turned around to see Sean standing there dumbfounded.

"I've been trying to get your attention for, like two minutes," Sean said.

But Sheila couldn't hear him. She saw his mouth moving but no sound was coming out.

At first she thought she had lost her hearing. She went to the doctor. The small examination room felt oppressive and she worried that she'd have a panic attack, though she supposed that she was in the best place to have one. When the nurse came in to ask her if she needed anything, Sheila was startled.

"I can hear you!"

"Of course you can," the nurse said. The nurse was wiry, she moved quickly about the small room. It made Sheila dizzy to see her bounce from one end to the other, like a pin-ball hitting the tilt.

But when the doctor came in and began to explain the hearing test to her, she couldn't hear him and the panic came back.

"I could hear the nurse; I can't hear you." Sheila heard herself speaking louder than usual. The nurse still in the room calmed her.

"Sometimes hearing loss isn't complete. Perhaps you have lost the ability to hear certain registers and Dr. Havers may have the

lower register that you are having trouble hearing,” the nurse said. Assured a bit, Sheila put on the large earphones and prepared to take the test.

But Sheila passed with flying colors—the test revealed no hearing loss and she left the doctor’s office frustrated and confused. She called Sean and yelled into the phone.

“I can’t hear you, but the test said I was fine.”

“I don’t know if you’re talking. I’m gonna hang up.”

Sean FaceTimed her back. This way Sheila could see his face as they talked.

“Speak clearly—I mean move your mouth clearly,” Sheila told Sean.

But it was no use. Not used to reading lips, she had a hard time understanding Sean, and she spent the time trying to “read back” what Sean said, with him shaking his head no when Sheila hadn’t understood him.

Finally, at home that night, there was silence. Sean had given up trying to get Sheila’s attention and Sheila was taking advantage of the quiet to work on projects she’d long neglected—an article she promised to write, watching a series on the BBC she DVR-ed six months ago.

Over the next few days, Sheila began digging up articles and podcasts about what researchers were calling a phenomenon—women who lost the ability to hear the male voice. It was happening more and more. It started on the east coast and by now it was reaching women all across America.

At home with Sean it was quiet. He’d attempt to speak to her, but he’d get frustrated and sulk in the bedroom as Sheila prepared tea or an evening snack. He spent more time at the office and they no longer met for drinks after work. Instead Sheila began meeting girlfriends at the bar and talking for hours about one thing or another.

“Why are you ignoring me?” Sean asked Sheila one morning. He pronounced the words carefully so Sheila could make

out what he was saying.

“I’m not. I can’t hear you so I’m not sure what to do now. Maybe we learn sign language?”

“I’m not learning sign language,” Sean snapped as if creating a plan around Sheila’s deafness made it real and permanent. Sean kept hoping it was a temporary hearing loss and that Sheila would be back to normal soon.

“Who says I’m not normal?” Sheila shot back at Sean one afternoon.

“You’re not,” Sean said.

And so the two fell into the motions of being a couple again—cooking dinner, making love, sitting in the living room reading together, all done in silence. There was a certain comfort in this for Sheila, but Sean hated it. Nine months passed like this.

Sean and Sheila tried to make it work. Sean eventually relented and joined a class with other men to learn sign language, but the group mostly fell into complaining about the situation rather than learning the fundamentals needed to communicate with their wives and girlfriends. Sheila and her girlfriends took up sign language, but their increasing ability to speak with their hands further alienated their husbands. Now the women could speak to one another in a way alien to their husbands. At least when they spoke aloud, the men could hear them. Now as they furiously moved their hands, the men were lost. Sean was lost.

Sean couldn’t help regretting all the times he’d prattled on about work, about colleagues, about nothing. He wondered if he hadn’t spoken so much about nothing, if Sheila would be able to hear him now when he told her the important things.

He’d lay in the dark next to her and whisper, “I love you. I miss you.”

One night she told him about the events of her day, telling him the funny things this girlfriend or that one said at lunch. The animation in her voice irritated him as it was the same animation she used to have when talking to, and about, him.

“You used to be excited about our conversations,” Sean said, but he wasn’t sure Sheila even heard him. “We can’t keep doing this. We need to find a solution.”

Sheila watched his lips moving, trying to figure out the words from the curvatures in his lips, but she could only make out the word “we.”

“Yes, we are still a we,” she said.

But Sean didn’t feel like they were. It was increasingly his life and hers. And maybe, Sean thought, it was always this way. Her life and his life. Separate, though living under the same roof. Though less silent than things were now.

After trying to communicate for a year to no avail, Sean moved out. It wasn’t what Sheila wanted. She tried to get Sean to go back to sign language class, she tried to learn to read his lips, but nothing worked. With Sean out of the house, Sheila felt more alone than when she first stopped hearing his voice. She’d put the TV on to mask the silence, but she missed the sound of his voice, the silly antics of his singing in the bathroom as they would get ready for the day. She missed his long, convoluted work stories. She missed his scathing rants about this thing or the other. Conversations she once hated and ignored, she wanted to recapture. But she didn’t know how to tell Sean that she needed him, that she missed him.

Sheila went to hearing specialists to try to find a solution. She tried a hearing aid, but it still didn’t help. The doctor had talked about a surgery to repair the ear, but Sheila thought it was a bit too extreme. And there was no telling if the surgery would work, if Sean would come back. She wanted to call him, to see him, to try to work out a solution, but she suspected that Sean was learning how to live without her so she hesitated.

Sheila went to the bar alone, hoping Sean would come to find her, but he didn’t. She’d wait to almost closing, sipping her drink and reading, but only she and the bartender, Jimmy, remained.

“I hate being alone,” she told Jimmy.

He just nodded, knowing that his words would fall on deaf ears. He’d point to her drink and she’d nod her head and Jimmy would replenish the gin and tonic. She missed the witty banter she’d usually have with him. She was feeling more and more invisible in the world and she wanted to be seen.

One night she sat at her computer and wrote Sean a long letter. She had had too much to drink and the letter was messy and confusing, but Sean realized that they could communicate this way. He wrote her a long, messy letter back remembering all the good

times they’d had. For the first time in a long time, Sheila felt a connection to Sean. And so they lived their separate lives, connecting through texts and letters. The physical distance, each in their own homes, made bearable by the words they could type out on a screen. Sean would send her funny cat memes, and she’d send him articles she read in the *New Yorker*. Sean would read them and type out long critiques of them that made Sheila laugh. They would carry on long threads through Twitter during the day and post photos of the things they saw that made them think of one another.

One afternoon, Sheila realized that she felt closer to Sean the more distance was between them. She wondered if this was sustainable, if she could love Sean from a distance, and he could love her. But for now, it was all they had—cat memes and the *New Yorker*, tweets and photos, and they could call it love, as quiet and painful as it was.

white boys and Black Girls

Mariange Charles-Antonio

they say he won't like my Black Girl hair. Black Girl hair coated in cream the color of his white boy skin. say he won't like the way my Black Girl lips swallow his white boy lips; whole. Black Girl lips are ugly. obsolete. Black Girl lips are worn by white women, painted in liquid lipsticks—not the \$2 gloss from MiMi's Beauty Supply. they tell me his white boy parents won't like my Black Girl skin. skin that'll mix and dirty generations of clean white genes. tell me that Black Girls and white boys don't mix because a long time ago, white boys raped Black Girls. owned their bodies. came in the night and took what was theirs. beat their "love" into Black Girls who wouldn't accept midnight visits. midday quickies. they say white boys don't know how to love Black Girls, but they don't talk about the black boys that chain Black Girls up. side piece. wifey. stigmas used by black boys to ensure his seed will always thrive. baby mama drama got Black Girls looking stupid. got Black Girls being called "ghetto." acting "crazy." they're telling me the way he looks at me with those ocean hued eyes is hungry. say he can't possibly listen to what I'm saying 'cause of all that ass. all that nose. all that hair. those lips. tell me I'll never be equal to him, so cut the coon shit out and go find a black boy. i just tell them that white boy, wonder stuck by Black Girl, don't need a fucking history lesson on how to love.



summer walks
Shanjida Khan



Untitled
Laura Alaez

My Biggest Fear

Alexandra Garcia

My biggest fear [REDACTED] not staying together
[REDACTED] maybe not fear, [REDACTED] what really has me hurting
I love [REDACTED] his aesthetic, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] its sensual to me. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and i know [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] being together affects me but all i can think about
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] running all over the place. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the greater the storm, the brighter the rainbow...



Memorial Lake
Abigail Haven



Crepitus
Lillian Ann Bartlett

Inamorato

Cat Marin Rivera

It burns without end,
passionately dancing,
deadly and sacrificial,
it razes and twirls,
filling my bosom with a warmth
that seizes my body
at every single thought and glimpse
of you.

It holds me captive,
it finds a dwelling in my mind,
as I remain infatuated
with the simple thought of the blaze
that burns and blisters
when my mind runs off
and I find myself in musings
of the concept of your plain existence.

I cannot stop myself,
from reaching within and running towards the flame,
ready to give myself completely, wholeheartedly,
to the inextinguishable blaze that thrives off of me.

I lunge in,
the sparks holding me so tight,

as I lay vulnerable and naked,
to the fire you've set in my heart.



Death's Contortion for Curiosity
Lillian Ann Bartlett

Virgins

Mariange Charles-Antonio

You always seemed to like the sweet taste of fruit. And cherries were your favorite. Like a predator you'd watch smooth legs hidden beneath skirts that hugged rounded bottoms—and dream of the garden blooming between unscathed thighs. And you liked them that way because she'll put up a fight, maybe scream, maybe bite—down on her lips, leaving them red and raw. And you'll smile and kiss her, drinking up every last drop of doubt she might have left. And afterwards, when she is tainted, like the blood in your veins, you'll shove her to the side as she kisses you goodbye.



Transference, Countertransference
Maria Lupo

My Fire

Santi Zapata-Gomez

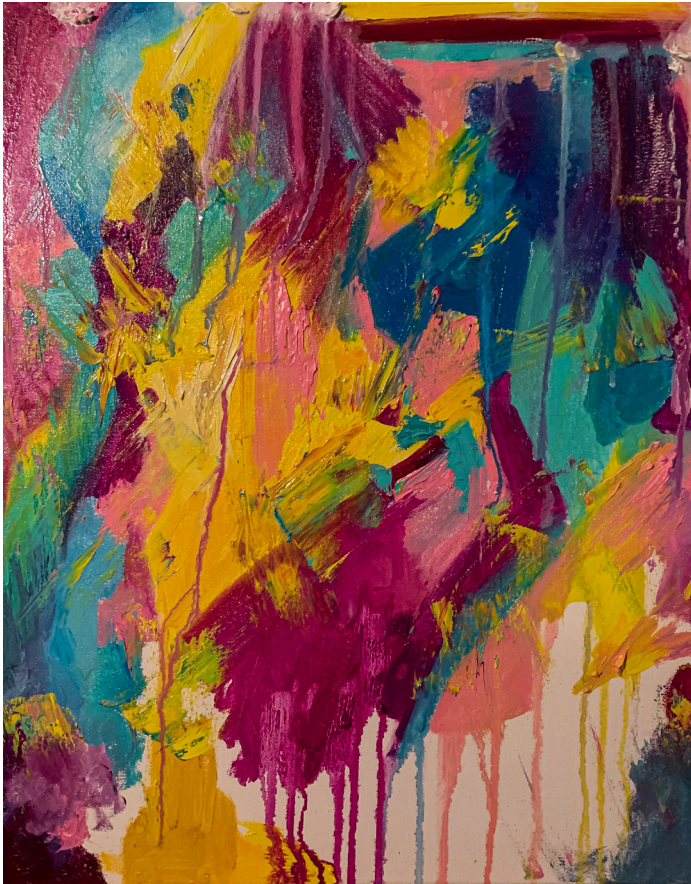
I have a fire, and I love her so much. She starts as bubbly sparks that make me feel unstoppable and furious. Then she finally ignites in my ears and whispers sweet seductions. Quickly, her crackle drowns all common sense. Soon she'll make her way to my hands. And when she does, she'll burn away at my savings. And with my savings, she'll have her fill with superficial indigenouses. Soon, she'll make her way to my mouth, and when she gets there, she'll have her fill with all kinds of substances to sedate my mind — the wilder they are, the higher her euphoria. Eventually, she'll make her way to my loins, promising to cure my loneliness with pleasure.

Finally, she consumes every aspect of me. It would be nice if she had her fill with only devouring me. But she won't have that. She can't have that. She has to burn down the world around me. Eventually, she'll have her fill with the world, but only when she's left it in ashes. Then, she becomes frosty, causing my mind to turn to wrath. I feel such intense, wicked anger, malice starving for tears. It buries deep inside my soul and scuffs out my light. Then, and only then, she goes out. But only for a bit. There'll always be a next time.

Trigger warning; counting to ten

Mariange Charles-Antonio

One thing I'll always remember is the way you shut off the lights when my eyes locked with yours as you pinned me to the counter against your manhood. i remember the Two times i refused you and the Three words that were enough to change my mind after Four beers. Five hard thrusts, i let out a fake moan and glanced at the clock that glowed in the dark like a beacon for the lost. Six o'clock and the sun was setting, with my face pressed to the window, i ignored your grunts of sadistic pleasure and gazed at the sun that kissed the treetops with his warm lips of orange and pink. i tried recounting Seven times you kissed me that way—tenderly. but i could only come up with three and that was after scoring Eight bags for flashing my boobs to the teenage boy on the corner of 150th. as i stood in the shower letting the water scald my tender skin, Nine little drops of blood stained the white enamel before running down the drain. I thought of running too. but i knew that running from you was something i'd never do. besides, it was Ten o'clock. i crawled into bed, and kissed you goodnight.



it wasn't always a given
hannah bouchard

www.hannahbouchard.com

Cassia the Lupa

Katrina Aronovksy

It is the mornings I hate the most. The realization that he's still there. Very rarely do they leave before I wake. And when they do, they usually wake me up in the process. My room is so small that it's almost impossible to move without disturbing the other person. When I wake up in the mornings I just lay there, as if I was still asleep, and imagine what life would be like if I wasn't a *lupa*. I would wake up in my own house, on a bed made of wood with a mattress of feathers instead of stone, with no one by my side or on top of me. Then I would open my trunk, filled with ornate fabrics dyed in all colors, and wear any of them, as long as it wasn't a toga. I would go outside, and walk the streets of my city without shame and without any man bothering me. I would belong to no one but myself.

But this fantasy doesn't last long. Sooner or later the man besides me stirs, and I am reminded of where I am, and who I belong to. Although I know his name is Augustus, he demands I call him A. He is a merchant of some kind, and comes once a week on the same day, at the same time. While he is here, there is no talking. I don't remember if it's a rule or a practice, but at this point I am too afraid to ask. It always starts the same way. He kisses me, so hard and so furiously my lips are always sore the morning after. He takes off my clothes, and lays me down on the bed. I'm not allowed to take off his clothing. When he's inside me, I scream and cry in pleasure, while in my head I'm counting his thrusts to see how long it takes. I can tell whether or not he's been with his wife that week by how long it takes for him to finish. When he's done he lays down on me and kisses the side of my head. After a few minutes he stands up and straightens his clothes.

"How many visitors this week?" he asks.

"Eight."

"Ah, you've been a naughty girl this week," he chuckles. I stare at the wall behind him. "You've got my share?"

I roll over and loosen the stone in the wall that covers the hole I use to store my money and one personal treasure, a miniature mosaic with multicolored tiles I found on the street. I take out half and hand it to him. He counts it and stuffs it in his wallet.

“See you next week, Cassia,” he says as he pulls aside the curtain separating my room from the hallway and leaves.

The others always stay the night. They always have the same look on their face, no matter their age, or status. Their face is smooth, with no lines or wrinkles, their lips are opened so a few teeth peek out. It is in these moments that I see the boy that must have existed years ago, the baby that their mother’s gave birth to. Sometimes, if they were nice to me the night before, I kiss their forehead. They remind me that not all men are monsters, and that love can be pleasurable, not always a chore. On even rarer occasions, I put their arm around me and cuddle into their chest. Then I imagine what it would be like to be a free woman with someone by my side, offering me comfort, but never forcing themselves on me.

Today, the man sleeps until midday. I even get up to use the latrine and grab an apple from the tavern downstairs, and when I return he is still sleeping. I forgot his name, something akin to Octavius. I sit on the floor and eat my apple while I watch his chest slowly rise and fall. It was a bad night. He didn’t want to look at my face, and as he pounded into me he cursed out a name over and over again. When he finished he laid beside me and promptly fell asleep. I leaned over his body and carved instructions into the wall. *Thrust slowly*. They never follow them, but I never lose hope that one day someone will read the manual I have scratched around my bed.

Octavius brushes his hand across his face and turns his head to see me leaning against the wall. He sits up and picks his clothes up from the floor and starts dressing himself. When he’s done, he stands up and takes out money from his belt. He throws it on the bed and leaves.

“You’re welcome,” I whisper. They never thank me.

Cornelia makes her rounds in the late afternoon, after the patrons have left and before we have gone out to work. Although our owners pay her directly, we are expected to have a clean room and give her some form of offering. It can be jewelry, money, or exotic food that we were given. I always give her a few *aureuses*, even though she berates me for my jewelry. I always say they are not mine, but my owner’s. She glares at me, but moves on. She knows the battle is not with me, but with A. I breathe a sigh of relief and close my curtain. The other girl next to me argues with her everyday. She claims that her usual customers are away on business

or that he left without paying. I pretend I don’t hear the blows and the sobs that echo down the hallway.

“The rules are simple. You pay your share, your owner pays the rest. You get food, wine, and a roof above your head. You are entitled to nothing, everything you have is given by the grace of others. Never forget that,” Cornelia yells as she beats her. Even though she has never laid a hand on me it feels like she is punishing me too. I close my eyes and read my manual for the thousandth time while tracing the tiles on my mosaic.

When I go out, I put on one of my two togas. They’re a little big, the straps always fall down my shoulders, but I think they’re supposed to do that. When A. bought them for me he said my old clothes were filthy and below him. Now my togas are made of fine cotton, instead of the scratchy wool I had to make do with before. Today, I decide on the white one. I put on my anklets and sandals, and walk downstairs. There are a few patrons at the tavern, but I know not to speak to them. I leave out the back door.

Out of all the cities I have lived in, Pompeii is my favorite. It is by far the most diverse in class and race. In Herculaneum and Ephesus it was always the same type of men: rich, Roman, and old. My last owner, Cyrus--an aged politician that used to be a respected general--kept me in a small room near the government buildings where he or his coworkers could visit me after work. It was boring, the same people at the same taverns at the same time every day. I like change. That way, I can be whoever I want to be, instead of the meek woman that the government men desired of me.

Sometimes, on the rare occasion when I could not find a man, I dream of making love on my own terms. I take off his tunic, and make sure he is naked before I even take off my sandals. I make him sit and watch as I undress, taking my precious time, because in my world time does not exist at all. Then I kiss him. I kiss him until our lips are swollen and the idea of going one more second without touching feels like death. I insert him inside me, always looking in his eyes. I set the pace. When I come, he does too, and we embrace until we do it again.

But then A. bought me, and brought me here. Here, people are different from each other, thanks to the ports. I walk down the crowded streets, by bustling merchants trying to sell their goods, politicians rushing to the municipal buildings, women chattering on their way to the bath houses. As I get closer, more and more men roam the streets, sailors and the poor that have little to no work. I

wait at the top of the stairs that lead down to the docks. I marked it with graffiti on the stone walls, similar to the ones around my bed, so no one else will try to find patrons.

I take out my hair from its braid and comb through it with my fingers. In my experience, men are more likely to talk when they see long hair. They want no resemblance to men, even in hair length. A group starts walking up the stairs, done with fishing for the day. I prepare my stance so I appear casual but flaunt my figure at the same time. I look up through my eyelashes as they walk by. Some look, but keep walking. Others ignore me completely, eager to be with their wives. But there's always one that stops and approaches me.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“What's your name?”

“Cassia.”

“Nice to meet you, Cassia.”

I never ask for their name, sometimes they don't want me to know. I tuck my hair behind my ear and look up through my eyelashes. He clears his throat and shifts his weight. It must be his first time.

“Have you had anything to eat?” I ask as I put my hand on his arm. “Why don't I take you somewhere? I know all the best places around here.” I pull his arm, taking a step forward.

“All right.”

I lace my arm through his, and squeeze. Nobody bats an eye at us as we walk towards the center of the city. I turn my head and look at the man for the first time. His skin is tanned brown from hours on the boat, and several lines on his face are symptoms of squinting for long periods of time. His eyes are a golden brown, almost the same color of my hair. The mop of black curls on top of his head make it easy to pick him out in a crowd. I know tonight I won't have to close my eyes and pretend that he's someone else.

“It's that place over there.” I point out the building with tables and chairs spread outside. We sit down at a table and wait for a vendor to approach us. A man walks out of the main tavern and approaches us with a bottle of wine and two mugs.

“Welcome to the *taberna* of Pompeii, how can I help you?” he asks as he sets down the bottle and mugs.

“Your standard dinner meal,” my patron orders. The man nods and returns to the tavern. I uncork the wine and pour some into our mugs. He grabs his and takes a long gulp.

“Thirsty?” I ask.

“I never want to drink watered-down wine again.” He grabs the bottle and fills his mug up again.

“I assume that's one of the downsides of being a sailor.”

“Yes, but it's not the worst.”

“What is?”

He looks at me with a certain fire behind his eyes, and I understand. I smile and look down at my mug.

“Have I told you my name?”

I shake my head.

“It's Felix.”

“Felix. I like it.”

He chuckles. After that he doesn't look at me. Instead he's observing the people milling about the square. The merchants, the politicians, the children. He seems to be soaking in the presence of people of all ages and sexes. I stay quiet and sip my drink.

The man returns with our food. It's a simple salad, fish, and a bowl of fruits and nuts for desert. He also brought a second bottle of wine. We thank him and begin to eat. We don't talk until we're nibbling on our desert.

“Have you lived here long?” Felix asks me.

“A year or so,” I respond. “Do you live in Pompeii?”

“I don't really have a home. I just sail around all year and stay with a friend during the winter.

“Oh.”

“At least you have a room, right?” he jokes. I play along and laugh.

When we finish the bottle, Felix pays for both of us. I lace my arm through his again, and lead him to my room. Thankfully no one is in the hallway when we climb up the stairs. I never enjoy having other girls size up my patrons. I pull aside my curtain and turn around. Felix sets down his bag and pulls the curtain closed. I wait for him to make a move. Instead, he looks around my room.

“Small,” he notes. He sits on my bed and notices my graffiti, the rules. He traces them with his finger. “Did you write this?”

I nod my head.

“Impressive.” He walks over and stands in front of me, his chest inches from mine. He pushes my toga straps, and they quickly slide down. He observes my naked body, a small smile on his face.

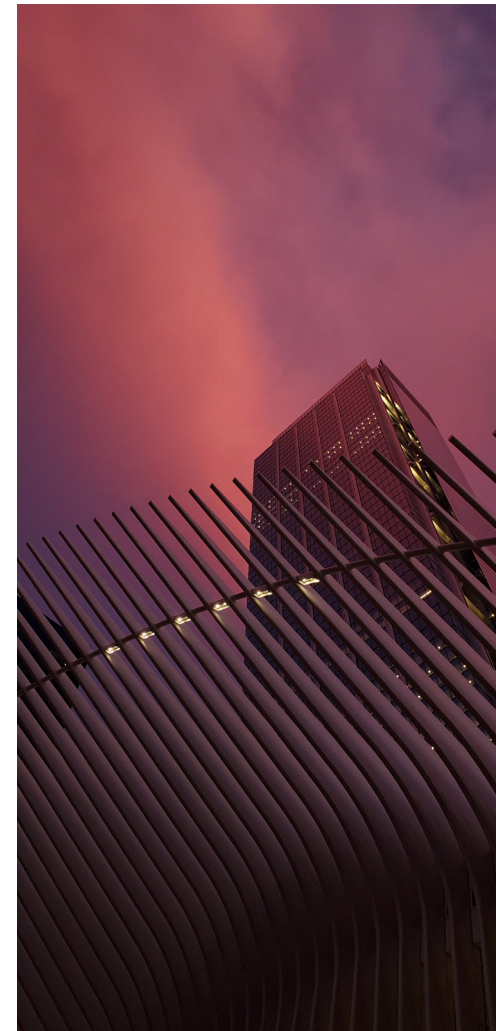
I barely breathe. This is my least favorite moment. When I can’t tell if he’s going to caress my face or slap me. If he’s going to kiss my neck or hold my breast in a death grip.

This time, it’s a slap. It wasn’t hard, there won’t be a mark in the morning, but it still stings. Then he slaps my other cheek, and grips my face in his hand.

“Will you do everything I say?”

I close my eyes. I try to forget the fantasy that I subconsciously constructed when I looked at his eyes and hair earlier today. I erase the images of being caressed and caressing back, of kissing him all over, of finally having an orgasm. It’s more difficult this time, knowing he read my words: *Thrust slowly*. I make my mind blank, and open my eyes again.

“Yes, sir.”



Pink Oculus
Shanjida Khan

Goodmorning

Mariange Charles-Antonio

i often stay awake into the early hours of the morning, when the trees are set ablaze by the sun blooming on the horizon. and in these special moments, melancholia slips his hand into my panties—uninvited. he tells me my complaints are unsolicited. i get up for school.



Mead Hall
Sam Hecker

health services

Erin Gruodis-Gimbel

The receptionist hands me a white slip of paper, which asks me if I have been feeling hopeless lately, followed by an imposing “CIRCLE YES OR NO”. I reach into the wire cup by the sliding window and pull out the world’s driest ballpoint pen to circle “NO”. She tells me to sit down, someone will be with me shortly. I start to hand her the slip, figuring she is the best person to handle my admissions of no depression, but she instructs me to keep it and hand it to the nurse practitioner. I sit, the worn leather of the couch groaning crankily under me as I perch on the edge, trying to get comfortable in an uncomfortable place. I stare at the foreboding block letters- “HAVE YOU BEEN EXPERIENCING FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS? CIRCLE YES OR NO. ‘’ Something feels wrong here. I concentrate, perplexed, on my paper, wondering if it is the fact that my black circle of ink looks like a lie. It isn’t. It’s the fact that the music coming from the official health services speaker in the corner is “Toxic” by Brittany Spears. This rubs me the wrong way. At least they don’t share a playlist with the counseling center next door, where they just play piano versions of Buddhist-adjacent songs.

I turn my attention back to the slip. Why do they want to know? Do they collect them? Do they just want to know what portion of their student body is depressed? Is there a competition with FDU and St. Elizabeth to see how many students admit they’re depressed while trying to get a flu shot? I just want a vaccine, not for a nurse practitioner who probably has a husband named Brad to ask me why I don’t feel like a person anymore.

What happens if I say yes? Yes, I have been feeling hopeless lately. Yes, I have been extra sad. My legs are too short, I think everyone hates me. What does Brad’s wife want to do about it while jamming a needle full of bacteria into my arm? They might just write it on my sheet and keep it in mind. See if I come back in to get a cold checked out with bandages peeking out of the sleeves of my sweater. Maybe they’ll give my name to the counseling center, where my therapist will look and say “Yes, she’s got regular appointments. She thinks one B in a class will mean that she

doesn’t get to have any good things for the rest of her life. We’re working on it.” Or maybe they’ll email me in two weeks, “On a slip of paper the width of a middle school appropriate tank top, you said you’d been feeling hopeless. Still happening?” Maybe they’ll have the counseling center send it, and it will start with something like “Hello. Your mental health is just as important to us as your physical health.” And I’ll invite all my friends to stare at my laptop screen as we collectively wonder “You told me to make an appointment in five days when I just wanted a concussion test, exactly how important is my physical health to you?”

They’re playing “Maniac” over the speakers now. I think this music choice might cause me to change my answer to “YES, I HAVE BEEN FEELING HOPELESS LATELY.”



Mariel
Diane Velasco

Why Can't I? / My Mind

Annalisa Manabat

I'm wary of my cravings, my mind strict and stricken with fear of feeling more, filling more than its quota and I hear so much about butterflies, but instead of delicacy, there's rampant weaving inside, solid spider silk sits along my stomach lining and I am sick, "too sick," I tell him, to be present, intimate, interested and why do you want me? Not a reel out for compliments, but curious and serious and everyone's eyes roll back, fed up because "why can't you see?" well I'm sorry to be so blind to anything resembling optimism, but as the spiders know, living in my skin, my mind means jitters and dread, and spiraling, and all the while, I'm aware it's irrational, but it's me, it's me and it's not me, and I care and I can't and I'm sorry I'm like this and I'm sorry I struggle and I'm fragile and I shudder and I ramble and

I crawl, instinctive, abdomen glazing the hollow caves, inside, eight legs dedicated - weaver in the dark.



Cogitationem Interiorem
Lillian Ann Bartlett



Excipit in Duo
Lillian Ann Bartlett

Nipping Nervosa

Annalisa Manabat

It was there I found her, nestled in a grove of flurries. The sight sent my hand to my heart and the gasp I devoured, overpowered me, seared my lungs, numbed my toes. The powder not sugar, but polluted snow and although she looked angelic, I was terrified she might already be in heaven.

Foreigner me knelt down beside her - a trigger for branches atop my head to spit ice and all around, the woods chuckled, scratchy sort of laughs. My heroic attempt, hilarious and even my friend seemed to agree, ghost smile in her sleep as if to insist she was safe.

A blizzard of hemlock, pungent, bleached, contorted itself into a blaze that blinded and reminded: it was my final cue to go. *Let her be happy*, they whispered. The voices of the trees and the parents and the other dancers at our school replicated, circulated until they were all I could hear, but the image of my friend, diminishing to bones, dissipating to air was all I could see, so I muted voices - rejected hearing in favor of vision.

Cradling her translucent body in my palms, something about our skin-to-skin generated sparks in my veins and the malice melted, sludge dripping down my arms. A shameful place, I chided before setting it ablaze, scorched footsteps marking our razed road to release.



104 Birch Lane
Sam Hecker

The Black Dog Hotel

Megan M. Vu

The light flickered, a stuttering yellow that made Billie Jean's eyes throb. The sign outside was flashing, dull blue neon shining in the inky night. Old cars were parked sporadically through the parking lot, rusted Chevys and peeling Fords sprinkling paint and mud across the pavement. Billie Jean popped her gum, small, tight bubbles that exploded against the back of her teeth, making her jaw crackle in her ears and a rippling sensation travel down her neck.

Head balanced in her hand, she flipped the page of her book idly, seeing the words but not registering them.

The light flickered again, three fast pulses, brightening, dulling, illuminating the ratty old couches, mismatched chairs, and old magazines that made up the waiting area. She was pretty sure there were bed bugs here, but that wasn't her problem. Nothing that happened at the Black Dog was her problem, because no one cared. No one noticed anything. Ever. Billie Jean stopped trying to explain it, understand it.

Below the buzzing static of the dying lights, Billie Jean could hear the clock ticking, just over her shoulder. It was the night shift, three in the morning and not a soul to service. She didn't mind, in fact, she enjoyed working the graveyard shift. There was always this feeling, something looming over her, an ominous eye that she couldn't shake. It made her shiver and piqued her interest.

At the edge of the road, the sign for the hotel flickered, the blue neon that surrounded the dog faltering, like fireflies. The vacancy sign gleamed an obnoxious yellow, the only light for miles that wasn't busted. Their welcome board boasted messages about "FR E C BLE & MINI FR E IN EVER R M." She didn't know the last time someone changed the sign, but she knew for damn sure almost none of the TVs worked.

Her eyes roved across the pages, reading a word here and there, a sentence that jumbled itself in her mind. She popped her bubbles, expecting the strange feeling of shivers down her jaw, but the sensation faded the more she popped and she grew bored.

The bell over the door tinkled, a light sound that felt out of place.

A man, jeans covered in mud, knuckles bruised, with an eye swollen shut, hobbled over to her. He placed his hands on the counter and leaned into her space.

She didn't move.

"I need a room," the man said, his voice gruff and gravely.

"\$125."

"\$125?! For this flea infested shit hole? There's flies circling that bowl of fruit."

Billie Jean flipped the page of her book, popped another sensationless bubble.

"I don't set the prices. You want the room or not?"

The man grumbled, shifting his weight to one hip and digging in his pockets. He slammed down a red plastic card and Billie Jean flipped a page. "No cards, cash only."

The man's face tomatoed, and Billie Jean almost laughed. "There's an ATM over there." She gestured to a corner in the waiting room, where a small machine seemed to buzz in anticipation.

He hobbled over, hips jutting out at weird angles as his shoes stomped mud across Billie Jean's "clean" floor. He slammed his card into the machine, eyes narrowed at Billie Jean. She waved, wiggling her fingers like a child and smirking. The man took his cash, slammed it down in front of her. When she gave him the little brass key, because yes this hotel was so old it still used keys, he flipped her off.

This time she did laugh.

"Bill! You gotta be nicer to the customers," a voice from the back yelled. There was a huff, a puff, and her larger than life boss, Jimmy Hagerty, folded himself through the doorway, hands on his large hips.

Billie Jean didn't bother to look up, slipping the cash into the bare register. "Kiss my ass, Jimmy."

He huffed again, his thin pink lips puckering up. “Gotta early check out in room 23.”

“It’s 3:30. In the morning,” she added, when Jimmy didn’t attempt to explain.

Jimmy smiled. “I’m aware. But we gotta keep the rooms ready for our paying customers! You’ll need a mop.” He laughed as he walked away, his booming guffaw turning into hacking coughs.

“Fuck you, Jimmy,” Billie Jean whispered, slamming her book closed and slipping off her stool.

The night was dry, the air scratching at Billie Jean’s throat. There was nothing around for miles, the only sound the crickets hiding in the desert. Maybe a muffled scream or two, but Billie Jean often overlooked those. The outside of the hotel was all red and brown brick, one level. Black doors were locked, shades drawn, numbers nailed up lazily.

Room 23 was unlocked, the door open. No lights were on, but from the glow of the vacancy sign, Billie Jean could see the mess that awaited her. Arms heavy with cleaning supplies, Billie Jean shoved the door open the rest of the way, wrestling everything to one arm to hit the light.

A small lamp flicked on, the dying light illuminating a small patch of the floor

“Oh, shit,” Billie Jean murmured.

The room was an absolute mess. Blood covered the walls, the bed was disheveled, and she could hear the water running in the bathroom, a quiet stream.

This wasn’t an unusual occurrence, but Billie Jean would’ve appreciated it if whoever stayed here would’ve cleaned up a little bit. Blowing her blonde hair out of her face, Billie Jean rolled up her sleeves, the worn denim stained and comforting against her rough fingers. She easily stripped the bed- the sheets were already untucked, and the comforter was sloping onto the floor, soaking in a blood puddle. Her fingers were stained red when she gathered everything up, and they were sticky. Standing in the middle of the room, she pressed her fingers together, watching as the blood oozed out between them, dark red filling the crevices of her fingertips. She pulled them apart, a little smacking sound sending shivers down her arm.

Shaking her head, she wiped her hands on her pants, moving her attention to the blood seeping into the carpet and bruising the walls. As she was scrubbing, all she could think about were the new stains, piled on top of old ones, ones she no longer knew where they came from. She followed the smudges of blood-handprints, dragging along the wall, the TV, the knob- with her rag, the smell of bleach making her eyes water.

Thankfully, the bathroom was cleaner than the bedroom, but when Billie Jean went to close the window, she noticed that the glass was broken, shiny little shards sparkling with fresh blood. Standing on the edge of the tub, Billie Jean pressed her hands to the cold tiles, leaning her body across the bath and peeking over the slivers. Blood was splattered against the bricks, and right underneath the window was a body, neck bent at a weird angle, eyes wide and glassy. He was laying in the dying brush, and there were scratches on his face from what Billie Jean could only assume were the mountain rocks scattered behind the hotel.

“Aw, shit,” Billie Jean whispered, frowning. Pushing back from the tiles and jumping from the edge of the tub, she fumbled around her pockets for her phone. “We got another one, Jimmy.”

It took him exactly ten minutes to walk from the office to room 23; Billie Jean timed it.

“Well fuck,” Jimmy said, spittle flying from his lips as he took in ragged breaths and looked down on the body.

“What do we do with it?”

Jimmy shrugged. “We got all this desert around.” He thought for a moment. “Bury him.”

Billie Jean looked at him through slitted eyes, hands on her hips. “You don’t pay me enough for this shit, Jimmy.”

As he was walking away, he yelled over his shoulder, “Feel free to quit at any time!”

“You gonna pay for college?!” she shouted to his retreating form.

“Who signs your paychecks!”

Several hours and one less body later, Billie Jean was throwing her cleaning supplies and a shovel back into the closet. The sun was just coming up, the red rays slicing through the brown

of the desert. There was dirt smeared on her cheeks, and her hands were raw. For her troubles, she slipped the \$125 out of the register from earlier and gathered up her things to leave.

“Fuckin’ Jimmy,” she muttered, folding her muddied, bloodied jacket up and showing it into her bag. Grumbling to herself in anger, she missed when the bell over the door tinkled.

“I need a room.”

“No vacancy,” Billie Jean dead panned, back still to the counter

“Sign says differently.”

Billie Jean whipped around, eyes furious and cheeks blooming violent red. Maintaining eye contact, she bent down to the counter and flipped a switch. The neon sign outside twitched before going out completely, the yellow of the vacancy blending into the rising sun. “No. Vacancy.” Billie Jean enunciated again, standing up straight. The man in front of her was tall, with raven black hair and grey eyes. He had a chiseled jaw, and Billie Jean thought of the rocks the body was laying amongst earlier. Inconspicuous; he didn’t look like the type the Black Dog usually attracted.

“Do you know what kinda place this is?” Billie Jean asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

He smiled at her, white, shiny teeth behind pink, unchapped lips. Without thinking about it, Billie Jean liked her lips, very aware she was covered in mud and blood, and had been handling a (dead) body for the past three hours.

“Sure,” he started again. “So. About that room?”

Billie Jean swallowed, her own spit thick in her throat. “\$125, up front, cash only.”

He took out his wallet, black leather that was uncreased, and pulled out several crisp bills. “I’ll stay for the week.”

Billie Jean took the money smoothly despite the shakiness in her fingers. She retrieved his key and dropped it in his open palm, and he smiled again before turning, winking at Billie Jean before walking out with his fists in his pockets.

Days later, Billie Jean was still drawn to him, keeping him in her eyesight as he traveled to and from his room. He was strange

for a place like the Black Dog; his shades were open, door unlocked, lights on. When she was cleaning the other rooms and would pass his, she could hear the low muffle of the TV, broken into pieces by static but nonetheless still on.

“You’ve been eye fucking him from afar since he checked in,” Jimmy observed one day as he was counting the money in the register. “Why don’t you do something about it?”

“That’s disgusting, Jimmy,” Billie Jean chastised, even though she was looking out the window, waiting for him to pass and smile at her. It had become part of her routine seamlessly. “Stop spying on me.”

“Stop waiting, or life is gonna pass you by. In this business, you can’t miss chances.” With that, he waddled back into the office, closing and locking the door.

“Whatever, *Dad*,” Billie Jean said sarcastically to the wood. Jimmy didn’t often give advice. He usually only spoke to her about all the other suspicious attributes of the Black Dog: old meth labs, obvious sex rings, or those weird black eyed kids who stood outside, just staring in at her on the occasional Sunday night. Business as usual *never* involved Billie Jean’s life.

Choosing to ignore Jimmy’s fatherly advice, she took her usual place behind the desk, boots twined around the bars of the stool, book open, and bubble gum popping. Despite being at work, Billie Jean was having more fun thinking about the mysterious stranger, slipping off his jacket, running her fingers through his perfectly quaffed hair.

People came and went, none of them registering as a blip on Billie Jean’s radar. Without her noticing, the sun disappeared, and the sign for the hotel lit up the night like a beacon, too bright for this area but still never enough to attract any attention. Nothing ever did, not the sign, not the messy cars, not even the people coated in slick blood. Anonymity was the rule, not the exception.

“Busy tonight?” A gravelly voice asked, trim nails appearing at the corner of Billie Jean’s eyes as the raven haired mystery man leaned into her.

Billie Jean looked up at him, her breath hitching. Shaken from her daydreams about tying him up, she took a steadying breath, and was impressed with her resolve when her voice came out steady: “So busy. Can’t you see the long line out the door?”

He laughed, lips pulling taut against his pearls. "I want to steal you for the night." He said it so nonchalantly, calmly, like it was commonplace. As if they had known each other for longer than three days. From afar.

"Steal me? I don't even know your name."

"Robin. Can you leave now? I know a place."

Without breaking eye contact, Billie Jean called out "Hey, Jimmy, I'm taking the night off." She closed her book, popped a bubble, and jumped from her stool. "I know a better place."

"You don't even know where I have in mind."

"Doesn't matter. I know a better place."

Robin ducked to the side, gesturing out extravagantly as Billie Jean rounded the counter. "Lead the way."

It was four in the morning, and Jimmy's phone was ringing. He slapped the night table, knocking over a glass of water and causing the table lamp to totter. Finally grasping the little flip phone in his fist, he flipped it with too much force and slammed it against his face. "What the fuck do you want?" he garbled, eyes pinched closed and mouth sticky with sleep.

"Jimmy, it's Billie Jean. We have a problem, room 13. Come. Now." She hung up before he could even start yelling,

He stomped into his pants, stomped out of his shitty room, and stomped all the way to room 13.

Twisting the knob, he rammed his shoulder into it when it didn't budge. "Billie Jean, I *swear to God!*" He screeched, his face an angry, blotchy color. "You call me up at four in the *fucking* morning this better be good; someone better be fucking--"

"Dead," she finished for him, unlocking the door and pushing it into him. Billie Jean was covered in blood. It was splattered on her chest, staining her white shirt, dripping down her face, tinting her pretty blonde locks a pissed off pink. Grasped in her hand was a bloody pocket knife.

"Jesus kid, what the hell did you do?" Jimmy stepped into the room, foot squelching in a bloody pool. Laying on the bed was

the raven haired kid, eyes staring up at the ceiling, a long bloody trail from his neck to his abdomen still leaking. There was a gun on the floor beside him, along with Billie Jean's jacket, and what Jimmy could only assume was an unopened condom.

"Got him before he got me," Billie Jean explained, still standing in the doorway and twirling her knife.

"And how did you know he was going to do you in?"

"Most dates don't end with 'Now get on the bed and don't make a sound' for one. For another, guns are cold, especially when pressed up against my temple."

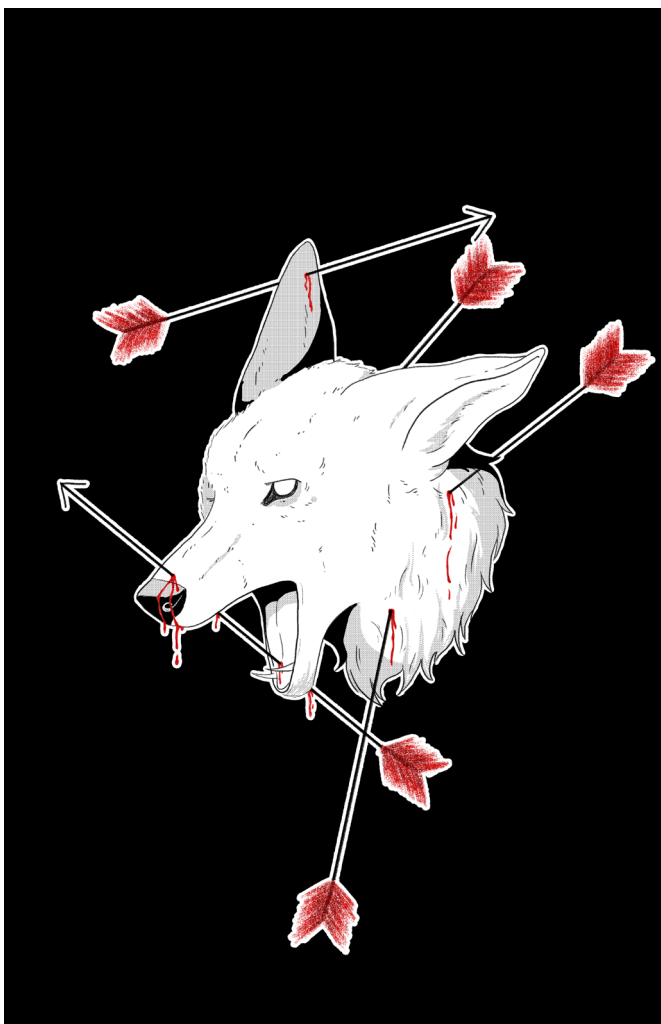
Jimmy looked back at her, then again at the body on the bed. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"Help me clean this shit up," Billie Jean demanded, already moving to wrap the body up in the comforter.

"Aw, hell kid, not my blanket!"

To read more of Megan's writing, visit her website:

www.meganmvu.wordpress.com



Arrow
Mary Prachthausen

We were talking about the space between

Matthew Macaulay

There's a space I know well

He's here now

He's waiting.

And I'm anxious to get on with the day the sun

Is waiting on me.

Now I'm shaking

Weak eyes sinking

But I'm alright, just a bit tired.

And I slump back to the space I know well

He's there now

He's waiting.

And I'm pressing at the rim of my mind

Try to find

What's wasting

Away goes the day.

Sun is ripe, orange pulp

Pulsating.

Pretty words and slant rhymes
But no matter, I try
And He's still there.

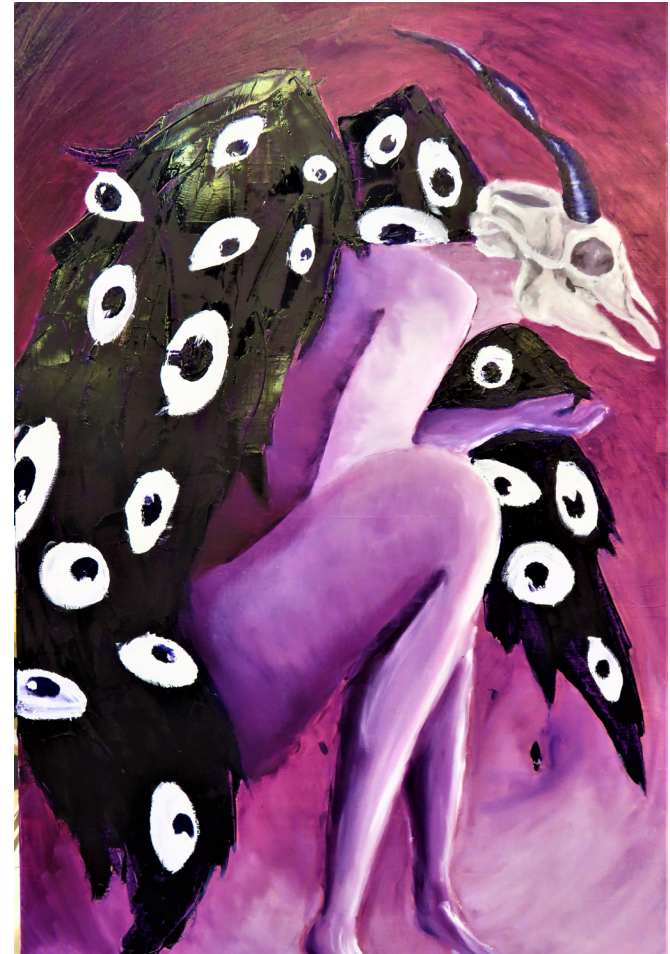
Lurking and smiling
And teething away
'Tween my words and my
Breaths.

Every tongue every race
Every nation has their silence
And the space I know well
Lingers on in between my
Breaths.

The unspoken words echo on
In your home, in your past
In your maker.
And the space I know well
I leave you in His care
Try to reach out
And touch a blaze.

The light you find
Kindles the dark but won't fill

The space I know well.
You could fill it like you could the stars
And the space that keeps them still.



Anxiety's Flight
Lillian Ann Bartlett

Blackout

Dana Buquicchio

[REDACTED] darkness [REDACTED]

It's frightening.

I don't know [REDACTED]

I fell [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

But [REDACTED]

I can't escape [REDACTED] my mind

[REDACTED] the animal trapped in my chest.

[REDACTED] I [REDACTED] find my voice.

I [REDACTED] tell you [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

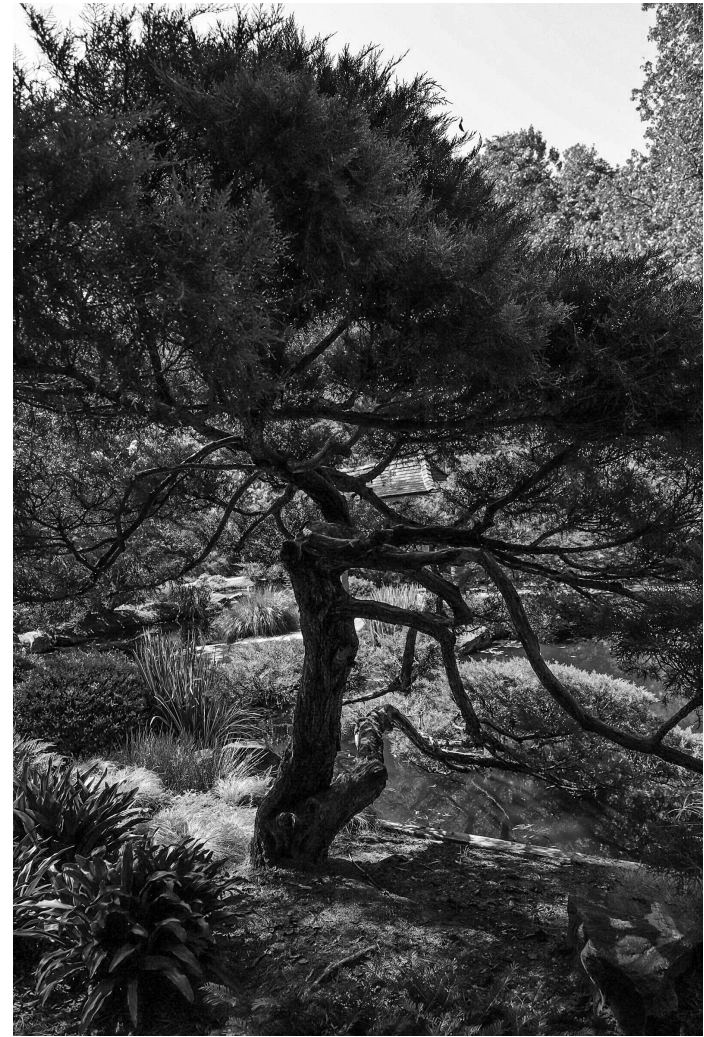
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I'm dying

[REDACTED]



Untitled
Laura Alaez

Misunderstanding

Heather Moscat Nash

~~~~~

There must be some misunderstanding There must be some kind of  
mistake I was waiting in the rain for hours And you were late

~ Phil Collins

~~~~~

Claustrophobic hallways harbor even smaller rooms-
for-rent. Kay enters through the open door at the end of Dean's
outstretched arm. Same leather jacket as before she hears he slit his
wrists in the bathtub.

"Yeah," says Dirk during a random chance meeting in the
local Quick Chek one evening. "Come home. Blood everywhere.
Everywhere. And he's in the tub, gone. I mean, like, *gone*. Eyes
kinda glazed like drunk or something. But then the blood. Man, I
called 9-1-1 and got the fuck *outta* there!"

"Who?" Kay asks absently. Dirk's obviously talking about
some mutual acquaintance of theirs, she's just not sure which one.
Not that they really have that many in common.

"Dean, dude! Didn't you hear?"

Her heart drops and her brain smells the leather of his
jacket mixed with the garbage he took out to the dumpster at
2am mixed with the SoCoandYuengling vapors he exhales. It is
a heady scent that calls to mind her red Cabrio pulling up to the
White House of rentable rooms with 2am dark windows that look
like so many eyes. It sits on a hill so he has to walk up steps. How
she waits for him to ask her to come up with him. (*Turn around.
Please.*) She wants to see what's behind those eyes. That jacket.
That sad heavy smile. But he doesn't. He never does. And then...she
just doesn't remember what happened just then.

She gets a call.

"Kay?" hesitates the amber-liquid masculinity on the other
end of the line.

Kay knows this voice in a dream and her memory inhales
his smell.

"I don't know if you re---"

"Dean. Of course I remember you. How are you?"

The silence says he is processing this information. So
is Kay. She doesn't know how long it's been since she last saw
him. She doesn't remember when she last saw him. She doesn't
remember when she talks to Dirk and hears that Dean tries to kill
himself. Her *how are you?* comes out wrong. (*Shit*). Like, "Oh,
you're out of the mental ward, are ya!?" Shit.

"Good. I was-- I was wondering if you wanted to get
together."

"Uh, yeah. Sounds good. When?"

Silence. Processing. Sad. Kay can't quite describe the
inexplicably poignant sadness in the audible silence.

"I get out of work tomorrow at noon. I work on the line at a
factory in Wayne. I---"

"I'll pick you up," Kay finishes.

"Okay. I'll meet you on the corner of Mountainview and
Taylor. Do you know where that is?"

"I grew up in Pequannock. Wayne's right next door. I'll find
it, no worries."

"Okay. I'm living at Mother's now. Do you know where
that is? I think it's right across from there. I never knew how to say
it."

"The old La Cage. It was a dance club when I was in high
school. But then everyone started going there underage, doing
stupid shit, and the cops were there all the time. So they shut it
down."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then?" Dean asks, still flirting with

the processing silence of *maybe she will, maybe she won't*.

“Sure, noo---”

The line is dead.

Kay picks Dean up. They go to the local town library. They talk Dostoyevsky, Kundera, Camus, Kafka. The top of the car is down and the wind is at work. He talks of his life getting back on track, and work, and life, and moving on, and living. They talk. And they talk. His last vestiges of an old life are way out 80 West at his mom's in PA, right over the border. He has some markers, calligraphy pens, that he really wants to get as he is designing tattoos. When he was in the hospital, one of the exercises the doctor gave him to release stress was drawing. He starts doodling and others notice. They tell him, “You could make some money offa that when you get out.”

“How are you going to get them?” Kay breaks in.

“Probably rent a car on my next day off and ask my buddy at work to drive me. I don't really take days off. I like to keep busy, you know?”

“So, why don't we just go now?” Kay suggests.

“Now?” Dean asks. “You want to just drive out to PA?”

“Why not?” Kay counters. “Somethin' better to do?” she teases.

“No, I---” Dean trips.

“I'm kidding. I---”

“No, then, no---”

“No, not about going, silly, about something better to do. Duh! Let's go.” She nudges him.

Music. Conversation. Life. Is a highway, I want to ride it all night long.

Meet mom. Get art stuff. Trunk of Cabrio filled. Backseat,

too.

Kay puts the box of miscellany on the bed. His room is sparse, austere. The walls are old. *Annie*. They remind Kay of the boarding house in *Annie*. (*It's a hard knock life. for. us...*)

“Do you want to see some of my work?” Dean asks, shyly, like she might say no, or run away, or disappear *poof!* at any second.

“Sure,” Kay answers.

Dean produces a notebook. Sketches. Really pretty sketches. A rose. A large rose, petals, front view. She clearly sees it through the window in her mind. She smells the leather there, too.

He tells her he is saving to get it

“Here,” he says above a whisper, not meant to be a whisper, as if he has lost his voice. He rolls up the long sleeve of his brown, red, and white flannel. The roped slashes of healed scars hack at his arm. He traces how the head of the rose will go

“Here”

and the stem and leaves and thorns (*of life*) will

“Go here.”

Her phone vibrates in her pocket. It is well past seven in the evening. The bar downstairs under the floorboards of pain, heartache, loss, redemption, trying, tribulations, it hums.

“Well, I better get going,” Kay says when the silence stretches too awkwardly and a bit too far. (*Just an inch deeper, or to the left, or to the right*). And the buzz of the phone. And the hum of life below the surface. Pulsing (*a fraction of an inch deeper*). Too much.

“Yeah,” Dean looks embarrassed. “But only if you let me make it up to you at another time. Let me take you out again, you know, to say thanks for today. You really didn't have to. I really didn't expect you to. Really, to even see me.”

“No, yeah, we'll do it again. Soon!” Kay says as she goes back out the same way she came in, at the end of his arm that

almost ended his life.

Kay doesn't remember saying goodbye. She remembers him calling once, inviting her to "a burger, or steak, or something, at the Grasshopper, the one across the highway. I can meet you there, if that's better."

She remembers she doesn't remember to call him back.

Cochrane, Tom. "Life is a Highway." *Mad Mad World*, Capitol, 1991.

Collins, Phil. "Misunderstanding." *Duke*, performed by Genesis, Atlantic, 1980



Jake
Diane Velasco

Dirt to Dust

Dana Buquicchio

I am decaying

My body is held together by roots

They knot around my knees and elbows

Kinking at every joint

Encircling my ankles and wrists

Jerking me like a puppet

I go where the vines want me to

They only let me move when the wind blows

The trees bend and shake

And I go with them

I become them

My insides are overflowing

Dirt, worms, and beetles fill every crevice

My eyes, my mouth,

My body is their playground

They swing and jump through every hole,

Over every obstacle in their way

I try to speak

But it seems the insects have my tongue

I reach out

Attempting to feel the warm air

On my once smooth skin

The roots just tighten their grip on me

Looping tighter and tighter around my body

I'm not their puppet anymore

I'm a prisoner to the earth



Earthly Paranoia
Lillian Ann Bartlett



Death
Veronica Gordon

it's easy to assume a habit, but when you try to
cast it off, it will take skin and all

Annalisa Manabat

Emerging from the other end when I was in a
state like that was commendable, yet yearning
seethes inside of me, ravenous to reexamine.

What would they say if they knew that I miss the
moments when I was so rapt, that I was missing more
than minutes, that my days, malnourished, starved to
death, my decades, unused, succumbed to expiration.
Blame falls on the lie, perhaps ploy, or conspiracy of kings,
all that fell short of convincing. No answer unflawed, no
solution mollified. My leech clung tighter, unappeased,
so I burrowed further, information engulfing.

To some, such dedication was indeed impressive, but
others regarded it as noxious, one went as far as
obsession. Thus, that band of friends who yanked me
up for sterile air should be thanked. I observe their relief,
eagerness to refer to me as Miracle, rescued at eleventh hour.

I apologize for confiding in you when I know all too well what
this belief can provoke, but I can admit that the fact that I still
dream awake of that that I'd yet to find is alarming. The mystery
unsolved, a siren singing out. I see her through the fog,
not far off at all - fluttering at the fringe of my mind.

Sorrow

Santi Zapata-Gomez

I close my eyes and see a tidal wave of viscous charcoal
oil. With the sound of shattering glass, the wave consumes me.
In seconds I'm sinking into an unholy pit. Sinking. Sinking. And
sinking. I try and hold my breath, but like tiny spiders, the toxin
forces its way into my lungs. At first, it soothes me, like a blanket
of melancholy.

I sink more. My body loses the will to live. I sink more. My
heart ceases to feel love; instead, it's filled with grief. I sink more.
My mind is fixated on one question; *why do I tolerate myself?*

I don't want to sink. I can't stop sinking. I should try.
But I don't know where to start. I could fight back. But that feels
impossible. Why even...breathe.

I breathe in more pain. I welcome the horrid torture. I fill
myself with it. Why? *Because I deserve it.* I sink to the bottom.
Only there is no bottom.



Blue Eyes
Liesl Eppes
Taken in Henderson Harbor, New York

Treading Water

Sofia Amorim

He walks between the rainclouds,
on a carpet woven of gossamer thread.

Droplets mist his cheekbones like windexed
Glass; his eyes washed and primed, to be new.

He carries no umbrella,
so I offer him mine.

He grins, shakes his head,
And I offer him my hand.

He doesn't take it, but he offers his arm instead.

Our feet shuffle pools of wispy clouds,
Rain ricochets from our noses

Into the ocean below,
waves cresting and crashing towards rocky shores.

I see the water in his eyes,
And feel the tempest swirl and build beneath his skull,

The wind traps itself in my chest,

Jabs between my ribs, my lungs deflate

Fearing the moment tepid toes

Breach sea foam, sinking into silt and sand.

My arm slips from his

And he keeps walking, treading water.

He looks back over his shoulder,

And as I slip between these gossamer threads,

He comes undone.

We stream into the ocean,

And for a moment, we are numb.

I kick, he screams

I flail, and our hands grab on to each other.

He gasps and pulls, pushing us up to the surface.

Hand in hand,

tears and scattered breath,

we swim ashore.



colored sky
Shanjida Khan

Salt Feathers

Sofia Amorim

Grief is the thing with feathers.

The thing with hollow bones, that the wind whistles through, carrying it away.

Peter walked along the quay, scuffing his shoes against cobblestones, hoping the scratches weren't too noticeable. *Don't need to worry Mum*, he thought. The harbour gulls were quiet, as though they had all agreed that the requiem bells didn't require reinforcement.

From the small bridge, he could see right through to their kitchen and sitting room. Neither Mum nor Dad were there. They were probably at the cemetery, eyes fixed to the floor, mumbling apologies for his absence. Peter stood there for a moment, looking down the quay, to where his dad's boat was docked. He willed the waves to whisk it away, through the harbor, to the Channel, even out to the rolling sea. He saw himself standing on the deck, looking up to see the Mariners leaning over the bridge knowing that he should meet their eyes. But he couldn't. Peter tried to block out the image of the wool blanket covering Alfie, drops of salt water dripping from his pale, stiff fingers.

A small black tern flew centimeters from him. Peter jerked back as the bird tried to regain control of its flight pattern, looking like a bat during take off. It flapped and teetered past the Herald office at the corner, flying on but Peter stopped at the window. It was like staring into a recreated bedroom at a museum. He and Alfie spent their lunch breaks tossing a ball from one corner to another. *Bonus points if you hit the edge of the window and get Mr. Finley to drop his cigarette!*

The ball was still on Peter's table in the back corner.

Mr. Finley closed the Herald until next Thursday.

Alfie would be buried in Melcombe by lunchtime.

Someone must have stopped by, because there was a stack of funeral pamphlets right next to Friday's paper, another taped to the door. This one Peter peeled, taking the chipping white paint

with it. He slipped another in between a newspaper, tucked underneath his arm, and checked the time. He folded the pamphlet in his hand, so that Alfie's face was on the inside. Michael told him that the secret to a good plane was crisp edge. "You've got to press the side bits with your nail and drag. Got to make the path you want the wind to follow, or the wind will take it wherever it wants."

His nail pressed down on the fold and slid along the edge, creating a sharp and angular wing. A colony of gulls flew overhead, towards the marina, landing on the stone wall. He stopped at his front door, drew back his elbow, aiming the paper plane. His goal was to get it over the wall and dock, maybe into one of the boats. If he was lucky, it would nosedive into the huddle of gulls. He released the plane, watching it glide past the birds, over the wall, out of sight. Did it land on the planks, or was it engulfed by the sea, like Alfie?

"You're starting to get some distance on those," his father noted, appearing from behind the wall, the plane hand. "I thought you made boats out of these?" He extended his arm towards Peter. The plane had landed in the water, Alfie's face emboldened by the spreading dampness.

"No." Peter grabbed the plane and squeezed it. Beads of water dripped from his fists, saltwater teardrops. Mr. Dorset looked at his son, whose eyes were fixed on the floor. He wanted to say something, but opened the door instead, ushering Peter inside. When Peter didn't move, Mr. Dorset went in, leaving the door open behind him. Peter tossed the ball of sodden paper at the gulls, walking into the house without watching them fly away.

"There you are, my love!" Mrs. Dorset cooed, moving from her husband to her son. She kissed his cheek, running her hands down the lapels of Michael's jacket. Peter couldn't look at his mum, her eyes filling the jacket with the ghost of the brother he always chased after.

"I walked around for a bit." Peter grabbed the teapot from his dad. "Crossed Towne Bridge, went to go—"

"He terrorized the gulls with one of his planes." Mr. Dorset's eyes twinkled, punctuating the statement with a chuckle, as his wife's shoulders relaxed.

"You know, dear, those birds are absolutely horrid. They're terribly loud, and fly so close they nearly hit you. I never much cared for those winged creatures." Peter wondered if she meant the

birds, or aeroplanes. She looked from Michael's photo, to the window. She meant both.

"Darling, you certainly picked the wrong place to settle down in. Weymouth has more air traffic than the bloody airport." Mr. Dorset nearly dropped his cup, wincing, as though it was too hot, or the memory too raw.

Mrs. Dorset poured Peter another cup of tea, dropping in a lone cube of sugar. He watched it bob steadily as his mother poured cream over it, the grains collapsing upon themselves, drowning. Peter jumped up from the table, knocking the teacup over, bounding up the stairs.

"Peter!" she called, marching to the bottom of the stairs.

"Let him go, darling."

Mrs. Dorset took the dishrag from her apron, and gently pressed the rag over the spill, careful not to aggravate the stain further. She stomped towards her husband, pulling the rag from his hands, and lifting his face to meet her own.

"He's just a boy! He can't lock himself away like this!" The words grit against her teeth.

"He's a young man, Margaret. He's grieving. Give him some space. He's seventeen for godsakes." Mr. Dorset collected the cups and saucers on the tray. Mrs. Dorset bit her tongue, closed her eyes, and inhaled sharply.

"He's too much like you." She stormed off into the kitchen, whirling around, pointing a finger at her husband. "You both keep to yourselves, and don't talk to anyone when you've got something going on inside those heads of yours. You did the same thing right before we got married. You were like one of those sodding aeroplanes, moving because the wind pushes it!"

Mr. Dorset put the tray down. His voice barely above a whisper. "I lost my brother."

"Well, he's lost two." Mrs. Dorset grabbed the tray from him and carried it back to the kitchen. Mr. Dorset sat at the table, staring at the tablecloth, and the pool of semi-dried tea.

v

Peter threw the newspaper aside, landing haphazardly,

Alfie's face was ejected from its hiding spot. He tore off the blazer, balling it up, and throwing it to the floor in a crumpled heap. Each breath became more difficult, like his lungs were filling with lead, testing the walls before they could burst. He could feel his face turning red, and he thought about how Alfie's lungs must have felt as the water poured into them, air being siphoned from his body. The walls of his room felt like a cramped cockpit, and Peter was running out of air. He threw aside the curtains, and opened the window, drinking in the breeze. Each breath became easier, as though the salt air was absorbing the lead in his lungs, making them light again. He watched the sails of the boats, how they flapped and rippled, when a duck glided down onto the water. Alfie was astounded by the birds that swam on the water. As the duck ruffled its feathers, Peter replayed the exchange in his mind.

"I don't understand. Ducks have so much fat, how can they possibly float!" Alfie finished folding the edges of a paper boat, bending over the dock to release it.

"Birds have hollow bones, makes them more aerodynamic I suppose." Peter reached to grab Alfie, who had nearly fallen in, then continued to polish the outside of his dad's boat.

"Sure, aerodynamics, but how do they float?" The paper floated past a duck, which began to peck at it, eventually capsizing the vessel.

"I dunno." Peter sighed, thinking if Michael ever talked to him about birds. "Maybe it has to do with their feathers?" Alfie began folding another boat.

"Probably made of salt."

"Are you mad!" Peter laughed so hard he dropped his rag into the water. He leaned to reach it as Alfie fished it with his foot. "You're old enough to captain a bloody boat, and you think birds float because they have salt feathers?" Alfie kicked the rag up, splashing Peter.

The duck kept pecking at the wreckage of the paper boat. Peter noted the unusual silence, looking to see his friend crumbling a piece of stale bread into the vessel, carefully pushing it off towards the bird.

"I don't know how they do it, I can't even swim!"

"You need to float to swim."

“Oh, bugger off would you.” Alfie watched the duck eat the breadcrumbs before flying away. His shoulders slunk over as he stared at the ripples the bird left behind, then turned back to the direction the bird had flown. “Do you think I could learn to fly a plane, like your brother did?”

Peter’s shoulders stiffened, keeping his eyes on the particularly stubborn scuff on the boat’s hull. “I dunno, Alfie.” He tried not to sound dismissive. He wasn’t even sure if his brother had really ever flown planes, or if it was just the one he crashed in. “You’d have to be barking mad to go up in one of them things!” He could feel the cartilage in his knuckles thinning.

“You’ve got to be brave to do that.”

“Sure, I suppose.”

“You’ve got to stare fear in the eye and be sure of yourself.” Peter wondered where all of this was coming from, tossing aside his rag. He picked up one of Alfie’s sheets and started folding an aeroplane.

“Come now, Alfie.” Peter launched the plane. “Your articles are better than Mr. Finley’s!” Alfie chuckled when it nosedived into the water.

“I want to do something. Something important! Like helping someone.”

“You help my dad and me with the boat.” They laughed. Peter grabbed another sheet from Alfie’s stack. “You’ve got to find your own way. Not your mum’s way, not your dad’s, not your brother’s,” he began, even though Alfie was an only child. “When you fly a plane, you need to know the wind patterns and all that. Being brave isn’t about knowing how to face everything.” Alfie cocked his head, as Peter folded the creases in a way he hadn’t recognized. In the palm of Peter’s hands was a little boat. He leaned forward and placed it in the water. “With a boat, you still need to know about the winds, and the tides, but you also need to know yourself. There’s something more to it, I think.”

“Fucking hell.” Alfie chuckled. “You should write that down.”

He saw a little boy on the bench where the gulls had been, sitting with an older boy, pointing at the boats sailing in and out of the harbor. The image of those two boys jolted him from his

reverie. As the older boy slung an arm around the little boy’s shoulder, Peter could feel the regret pressing down on his chest. If only he had taught Alfie how to swim. If only Peter had convinced him to put on a lifejacket before jumping into the water. If only Mum could stop crying about Michael. If only Dad didn’t give him so much space.

But they hadn’t.

Peter picked up the jacket and paper, and hesitated before picking up the pamphlet. A feather in his hand. Stepping towards his closet, he slipped Michael’s jacket onto a hanger in the far back. It was just a jacket, but one he didn’t know how to wear. He paused, looked at the pamphlet, tucked it inside the inner pocket, and closed the door. He slipped the newspaper underneath his arm as he bounded downstairs, past his parents.

“Peter!” Mrs. Dorset called after him. Her husband watched the door shut, before getting up to reopen it. He walked towards the bench, as his son walked down the ramp to the pier.

Peter sat on the pier’s edge, feet barely beneath the surface of the water. Another tern flew overhead, with an unfamiliar mournful trill. He noted its feathers fluttering, as one escaped and drifted down to the ebbing tide. Mr. Dorset watched the tern glide with eyes closed, thinking about something he had heard, about grief being a thing with feathers.

On the front page of the newspaper was Alfie’s last submission: an article about the birds of the English coastline. The ink looked faded, the letters missing stems and hooks, as if the past few days were instead thirty years. His fingernails creased the edges, careful not to lift the ink printing Alfie’s name so that it would mark the stern, the SS Alfred Mariner. Peter turned to his dad, who sat next to him, reaching over for a sheet of the newspaper, tracking the unfamiliar fold pattern. At first, it looked like a plane with a large tail, but was actually a bird. The only sound they could hear was the rolling tides thumping against the pier.

Neither looked at the other, placing their offerings in the water. Peter smirked at the swan, thinking about Alfie’s theory of buoyancy. Maybe it was the salt in the water, the salt of the tears he shed when he heard that Alfie had been swallowed by the sea. The SS Alfred Mariner was blockaded by a feather that had fallen off the tern. Peter couldn’t help but appreciate the irony.

“I’m sorry, Peter,” he began, hoping to see the words floating before him to fish. “It’s har—”

“Dad.” Peter interjected, his eyes looking for those words too. “I know.”

“I lost my brother the same way you did yours.”

“You never talk about Uncle Frank.” Peter kicked at the water, some of it splashing onto the dock.

“I know.” Mr. Dorset looked at his son, hearing his wife’s voice. It was his turn to look out that window, and face his own winged creature. “I usually don’t talk about it, because I didn’t want to go through that again.”

“Does it always go away?” Peter wanted to hear his dad tell him that he would always remember Alfie, that his face would always be clear in his mind, that he could remember the way he laughed when Mr. Finley dropped the cigarette on his newspaper and juggled a ball of fire and ash. He needed to know that Alfie wouldn’t be like Michael, an empty photo with no color.

Mr. Dorset watched the paper disintegrate, and turned to his son, whose neck was craned towards the sky, watching the wind move clouds.

Grief wasn’t the thing with feathers.

It was the thing with wings.



calm after the storm
Shanjida Khan

When the Wind Blows

Annalisa Manabat

Age five was a varied kind of year.

I developed my first crush - a Jewish boy named Azriel who only used the black color crayon, even when drawing hearts.

I lost my first tooth and swallowed it by accident. My mother helped me compose a letter:

Dear Mrs. Tooth Fairy, I promise I'm not lying, it's just that you'll have to fly into my stomach to find it.

I attended my first funeral.

Crystal was the oldest cousin on my mom's side, diagnosed with leukemia at age nine. Of course, that didn't register yet. I only knew that my cousin was sick, so sick that she had to go to a special hospital two hours away from our town.

I liked the car trips because they meant I got to see the mountains. I wanted to hike them one day. On the way, we had to pass the Altamont Wind Farm.

"Those are like the toys I get at the flea market," I pointed out.

"Yeah, a little bit," my father said. "Except these only have three blades and they're not colorful like yours are. What color are these, Jane?"

"White."

Despite their dullness, there was something magical about them to me, that sweeping sea of motion in the middle of Silicon Valley. As they faded from view, I knew we were almost at the hospital, nearing what everyone would soon realize was the end.

There was a woman in the waiting room with white hair

and thin lips, who frowned when I told her thirteen people had slept in our room the night before.

"I counted."

The hospital had provided a studio apartment for my aunt and uncle, right across from Crystal's wing. I slept uncomfortably, nestled on the floor between my sister Kara who was seven, and another little girl I had never met. It's an image that has maintained clarity over the years - a dozen skewed bodies, awkwardly arranged in order to economize each inch of space.

It wasn't until high school when I learned that even the most distant of relatives were pouring money into my aunt and uncle's medical bills. I never saw that little girl again. One Easter, I overheard my grandmother recount all of the family members she'd lost contact with over the years.

"If you want people to show up, tell them it's a funeral, not a birthday."

My mom curled my hair on the day of Crystal's funeral, probably less for looks and more to occupy time, to distract. In honor of her favorite color, we would all wear something lavender. Mine were two plastic, flower-shaped barrettes, but I insisted on wearing my favorite green ribbon instead.

"No, you're wearing the purple clips today. You can wear your ribbon next week at school."

"But I want to wear them now," I whined.

"Jane," my mother warned, looking at me in the mirror, a piece of my brown hair wrapped in her hands. I twisted out from under her, knocking the curling iron from grasp. It slapped my wrist before plummeting to the floor.

"You burned me!" I held my arm close, tears already running.

She flicked the faucet on, picked me up and positioned my marked arm beneath the cool water.

"I'm sorry," she cried, kissing the top of my head. In the mirror, I noted the mascara streaking down her cheeks. She would re-do her makeup only to cry it off again in the car and enter the

church bare-faced.

I'd visited that church almost weekly. Between baptisms, first communions and confirmations, we always knew someone who was taking their next step towards God. That first funeral was odd to me- the gloom of it all- but in my head, Crystal was just taking her final step into heaven. At the church's entrance, shallow tins were filled with blessed water, opportunities for us to cleanse ourselves of darkness.

Holy water is a symbol of life, the priest explained.

I dipped my finger into the basin, swiping a cross on my forehead and caressing more onto my scar.

"Father God," I prayed. "Please make my burn go away."

I fidgeted with my arm until my sister told me to pay attention. I was so small that I could barely see anything and so young that the priest's words rang empty.

I was bored.

"My burn hurts," I hissed to my sister.

She shushed me. "Stop being annoying. This is a sad day."

My father walked past us, his hands two out of the eight that carried her casket to the hearse. I don't remember my uncle at all that day, but I wonder how many times the bitterness of him carrying his first daughter down the aisle in a box, rather than escorting her in a white dress, has hit him.

What I remember of the actual burial was standing next to my dad. Normally, he seemed miles above me, but he kept hunching, pressing his fingers into his eyes. There was a small tear in his pressed pant leg, a black thread beginning to unravel. He tells me now that her funeral was the first time he buried someone, shoveled dirt over the casket. I guess for him, a memory like that is like a scar in and of itself.

During the wake I found my aunt crying in the bathroom. I wanted to help her.

"Don't be sad. It's a nice thing because God will take care

of her," I said, reciting what I'd remembered from church. Her palm struck my cheek and I stumbled backward, stunned. She fell to the floor and pulled me into her arms, her sobs tumbling out. My eyes were wide as she sat there, rocking back and forth. Heavy droplets poured out and slid down my cheeks, as if they were my tears, too.

Crystal had requested that her sister-to-be was named Samantha. Two months after she died, my cousin was born. My family loves babies, but Samantha meant more than an addition to the family; she was restitution, restoration- she filled the position Crystal had left empty, bringing our number of cousins back to equilibrium at six.

My cousin Alyssa was born in between Crystal and Samantha, which is where she got squished. During the worst of Crystal's condition, no one had been there to take Alyssa to school and if she had gone, it wouldn't have mattered since her parents had no time to help her with homework. When I find her third grade yearbook, her photo is a black square. She and I have never been close so I watched from afar as she melted from the family. When she was a junior, she dropped out of high school and moved to another state with a boyfriend none of us ever met.

Sometimes I feel like a researcher of my own family, observing how the effects of my cousin's death have permeated into the crevices of our lives.

For the 20th anniversary of *Forrest Gump*, limited theaters around the nation held screenings and my grandpa took me to one. Afterwards, he broke down and told me that it was Crystal's favorite thing to watch when he babysat her. I wanted to ask him if he fast-forwarded Jenny's death or if they sat through it, watched as Forrest mourned her.

I want to ask my cousin how it feels to know you're going to die before even hitting double digits.

I am a child again.

"Go say hi to your cousin," they suggested.

Her room scared me. The lights were dim and the small TV screen flickered in the corner. The conglomerate of tubes and machines wheezed and whirred. *She* scared me, my own cousin,

who had lost her hair at that point. Her skin was blotchy, almost translucent. She attempted a weak smile when she saw me.

That was the last time I visited her before she passed.

No one could have known it would be. Even if I could do it over, if I could go back and tell my five-year-old self, *Go say your last words to your cousin who will be dead in less than twenty-four hours*, nothing would have changed.

I shook my head, refusing to go near her and clawed at my mother's skirt, begging to be picked up.

Leukemia has become one of *those* words. When spoken, it goes over like a tug on my ponytail, not a hard blow, but enough to elicit a wince.

People ask, *Have you lost anyone close to you?*

I sometimes say, *No. I'm very lucky when it comes to that.*

Then other times I'll say, *Yes, one. We lost my cousin to cancer when she was nine.*

I'm so sorry, that must have been extremely hard, they tell me.

Oh, not for me, not back then. It's the me now that can't stop thinking about it.

Except I don't say that.

I didn't know my cousin, but I remember her.

She was beautiful.

There is a photo of her in a cream dress, surrounded by flowers. She is leaning forward, head in hand, black ringlets cascaded around her shoulders. She's laughing- her mouth is open wide and her brown eyes are radiating bliss.

There is another photo, one taken at age nine. In it, her hair is gone. She wears a hospital gown, polka-dotted with tiny blue flowers and several pillows prop her up. Her arms are wrapped around a stuffed bunny that's missing an ear and her eyes peer directly into the camera. She smiles without teeth.

She was beautiful.

Age five is when I told my parents I'd be a chef when I was older, with my own restaurant by the beach. Then it was a ballerina with gold slippers. Then professional go-kart racer. No one's ever told me what Crystal hoped to do when she grew up.

How do my parents feel about 2003? Crystal's burial was two days after my mom's birthday, but she would also be pregnant with my little sister by the end of the year. My dad was a first-time pallbearer, but he had also reconnected with his estranged father.

It was the year my memories began sticking and the year my cousin's were coming to an end.

I am visiting my family in California. We're on Highway 580, driving to a wedding in Palo Alto.

When the windmills come into view, Kara says, "I was scared of these when we were little."

Did it hurt my parents to see my oblivious excitement for those car rides to the hospital?

"I've always thought they were fascinating," I say. "Otherworldly, in a way."

I observe them, stagnant without the wind. The sky is cloudless and the mountains have regained some green with the state being officially drought-free. Before they disappear, Kara nudges me.

"Look."

I twist to see behind us and witness them gaining momentum, one by one, until they are a circling symphony. Tears scatter down and I don't wipe them away.

The Shape of My Feet

Sydney Quinn



Palm Tree
Genesis Perez

I know someone's dead because Ma is browning meat in Auntie Ludo's good skillet, the one that she swears Father Gustap blessed. The whole kitchen smells like the inside of a meatball, guarding me against the sounds of Uncle Kovo yelling downstairs at his fry cooks; everything in Kovo's restaurant reeks of a burnt pig. But when Ma cooks, the apartment is blanketed in gooey cheese and sweet pepper, a slab of butter on thick bread. I drop my school bag and sit at the counter. She drains the meat, stirs the pasta in along with the canned tomatoes, hums as it simmers together, then spoons it onto a plate and sets it in front of me.

I hold my fork poised, waiting while she brushes crumbs off the linoleum countertop. Ma rinses her hands, dries them on the Jesus towel, and her eyes fall on mine. She's all gray standing in the sunlight that leaps through the window over the sink; gray streaks in her curls, the stripes on her scrubs, the heels of her socks. "It's your father," she cuts her eyes to the window, crossing herself. "The cancer got him."

When Dad left five years earlier, she cleansed our whole place in holy water. Ripped up the carpet he stood on, yanked his hair out of the drain and burnt it, and shredded his leftover underwear at the landfill. Everything he didn't take was trash. Everything he took, the floral sheets, my earphones, Ma's joint cream and a bunch of other shit, was Never To Be Mentioned.

I stare at my fork.

"Ramona," Ma says. "Are you okay?"

Downstairs, Kovo is yelling orders back to his cooks: scrambled eggs on toast. Adam and Eve on a raft. Split the yokes molten yellow. That's what my brain feels like.

When I can't say anything, Ma slips away to go help Kovo at the register, and my food grows cold.

The thing about my dad is it's not like he gave me a choice.

It's not like he gave me a heads up when he was leaving us for that whore who owns Washers Galore; it's not like he said, "Hey, you're gonna have to find a new laundromat because I'm fucking Wilma in her back room." Dad wanted a divorce, but Ma wouldn't go against the Bible, so they got an annulment. Not that it did much to soften the blow. He was no longer my 'Dad,' the guy who sat on our couch in his underwear and watched the Flyers. Suddenly, he was my 'Father' written in thick, felt marker on birthday cards. He became nothing more than a signature.

Then cancer hit nine months ago. I was the first one he told. We were sitting in the DMV parking lot after he'd gotten my car registered. It was early spring. Tiny green leaves were poking out on the tree in front of us, translucent in the sunlight. I thought he'd offered to help on this one because we were finally meeting a common ground, a safe place to start over.

"It's lung cancer," Dad said, staring at the fake flowers hanging from my rearview mirror. He was all gray sitting in the passenger seat; gray in the few hairs on his balding head, flecks of his goatee, the buttons on his shirt.

I'd just been thinking about all the things I wanted to tell him: about how I was applying to Princeton, how Jake Young had asked me to junior prom, how I'd gotten an A on my latest AP Biology exam. When he told me, all I could do was stare at the space between the budding leaves in front of us, trying to connect the branches together in hopes of making sense of what I felt.

All he ever did was take up space when he lived with us, and then when he left, he was still taking things from me. Eve might have been crafted from Adam's rib, but for me and my Dad, he branched out from my chest. Even after he left us, it still didn't hit me, what he'd done. I couldn't breathe without feeling like he was threaded through my lungs, wired between my bronchioles, all these parts of my father were parts of me, too, so how could I hate him?

It's not like he gave me a choice. It's not like he said, "I'm leaving your mother and you have to decide whether you hate me or not." It's not like he said, "I've got stage four lung cancer, you have to decide whether you'll watch me go through it or not." He didn't give me a choice; he didn't talk to me about it other than the

diagnosis. I didn't see him after that. Wilma signed my last birthday card: *Love, Victor*, in her fat scrawl. There was no big goodbye with his death; he left me the way he always did, my questions unanswered as the door shut behind him.

I end up at the funeral in shoes that don't fit me, in a black dress borrowed from cousin Lia Who Always Smells Like Sardines. Ma won't go because she says he's cursed, too many wrongs.

Am I cursed too? She shrugs. "Like Father, Like Daughter, they say."

But am I really like him? Will I wake up ten, twenty years from now, sitting in my underwear and bra watching the Flyers, eating pears from a can, and decide to screw the guy who owns the nearest laundromat? Of all the things I've inherited from him, the shape of my feet, lactose intolerance, were there any good parts I got?

My father's dart buddies lower him into the ground.

Two weeks after his funeral, Wilma shows up at our apartment. Ma won't speak to her; she slams her bedroom door shut and starts blasting her hymns, so it's me who has to face her. Wilma doesn't look much better than she did at the funeral; my dad was the third husband she'd lost. Her eyes are all swollen from crying, her red lips puffy from Botox, but her frizzy hair is pulled into a bun, and her eyeshadow matches her sweater.

She holds out a cardboard box for me. "It's Victor's."

"Don't you want it?"

Wilma shakes her head, sniffing. "I've got to move on."

"To shack up another marriage."

Wilma slits her eyes at me; she's got eyeliner as thick as a crayon. "Take it, Ramona. He wanted you to have it."

When I don't answer, she places the box on the ground and walks away, her heels clicking down the hallway. I take the box inside and sit on the couch. Inside are the floral sheets, the ones with tiny rosebuds. My earphones, the left one is still broken, the white wire is tangled and connected to his CD player. Ma's joint cream, half empty. I dig through the stuff that was ours, and underneath, I find photos littered at the bottom of the box. One of me on the first day of kindergarten, standing outside our building on

the front steps, with my *Dora the Explorer* lunch box and blue school uniform, my little white Keds, socks rolled past my ankles.

The photo beneath that is a picture of me and him at a Father-Daughter dance held at the town recreation center. We stand together, my father in his khaki pants and a button-up shirt, his hand placed on my shoulder, me in my pink tutu dress, wisps of hair falling out of my braid. I must have been six or seven. I remember not wanting to go, worried I'd have to dance in front of everyone else with him because my father was this big, awkward guy who I doubted knew how to dance and my father hadn't wanted to miss the Flyers game, but Ma had made both of us go because she wanted the picture. I remember her yelling at him when he'd tried to make an excuse, "You only have one daughter, Victor!"

At the dance, I don't remember taking the photo, but I remember after, sitting at our table eating corn chips and salsa while track after track passed by, then suddenly, he begrudgingly took my hand and led me onto the dance floor. He instructed me to place my Mary Janes on his Nikes. Our same flat feet, different sizes. He held both my hands, my fingers still covered in salt from the chips, and slowly waltzed us, one step, then two. We danced offbeat to the music for a whole song, and I remember looking up, all the miles up, past the buttons of his shirt and the prickly shadow of his beard, to see his eyes, and in them, I saw myself.

Growing up it always felt hard to stay in his viewpoint, like my existence to him meant the same as the television, our conversations were commercial breaks, something to pass the time. But when I saw myself in his eyes that day, I knew now what my mother had meant when she'd told him he only had one daughter. He'd taken me to that dance because no one was going to see him the way I did.

No one would ever see me exactly the way he had.

I get up from the couch, placing the joint cream outside her door and knock even though I doubt she will hear me. I pause in my bedroom for a second to hear her door open, then close. Peeking back around the corner, I see the joint cream is gone. Maybe she doesn't believe in curses after all.

On the corkboard on my wall, I hang the picture of Dad and

I, between my Honor Roll ribbons and prom photos. I sit back on my bed; outside my window, the evening sky has sugary swirls of purple and blue, a GoGurt exploded, the first scoop of cotton candy ice cream. In the other room, Ma's hymns pick up again, they are spilling out into our neighborhood, and downstairs, the clanging of Kovo's restaurant follows in rhythm. But here, surrounded by the noise, I hold all the parts of my father: the good and the bad, his underwear and his dress sneakers, his slanted "a" in the word father and our only dance, one step, then two, then the movements run together. Ongoing. Infinite.



Fishing Boat
Genesis Perez

some nights, we prayed

Cameron Donnelly

The nights prior to us getting on a plane with our dad,
Mom would lead us in prayer.

Mom, Sister, and I - Brother was too young
& too far in his own world to understand.

We'd stand in the whitewashed kitchen,
after our grandparents went to bed,

& we prayed.

This was a special prayer, though.

One in which God could not answer.

Mom would ask God

To make our Father's plane his metal coffin.

For his heart to stop beating when picking
up his luggage.

Or even, a crash on the highway,
before he even made it to the airport.

Is this what God is for?

I'd always worry that God heard her message on delay,

& He'd bring my siblings

& I

crashing

down.

Growling

Annalisa Manabat

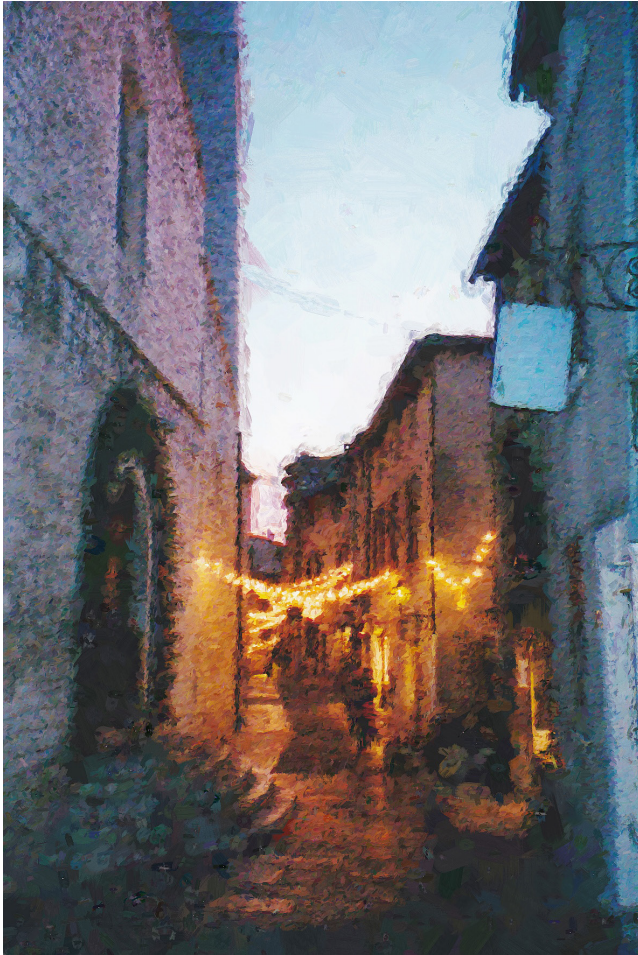
My mother buys herself rolls
that bleed butter and jam. Licks
her pretty fingers, while I coax
my sisters. The little ones swallow
scraps and I choke on distaste.

She tells us that she is sure
she hasn't lived, lived properly,
that is, until she escapes to Paris,
Pari, for a week, which is what she does.

Returning to us with no chocolate
or jewels, the new bracelet
round her wrist gleams and jingles
as she reminisces about wanderings
fit for a princess in disguise.

Her glass feet skipped down
streets. My body bristles, imagining
how it must feel to skip work - where
graveyard shifts offer a dollar more.
There, knee deep in coal, here, in debt.

I wonder if I could
drown her
in all my contempt.



St. Paul de Vence
Virginia Hand

Bilingual

Miach Rivas

For my people. The little ones sitting in cages, the ones separated from their families, and the ones who left to find peace and found hell instead. This is for you.

“Once upon a time,” she says it like a sentence. She gives it flair like she’s waiting for me, *daring me*, to say some smart shit. I don’t test her.

“A king and queen had a beautiful little baby girl and they loved her so much that they called the little girl their treasure. Little Treasure. Little Treasure grew and grew, blossoming from the love her parents gave her. Little Treasure grew to be a beautiful young princess. Soon, it became time for the princess to marry and princes came and went trying to gain the trust of the princess. Only one prince captivated her attention. He was from an island country across the sea. He promised the King and Queen that he loved the princess. That he would always take care of her. And so for a time, he did. The little princess grew in love and wisdom and became a Queen. As did the little prince. But he grew into a King who fell in love with gold. He grew to believe the end justifies the means. And so the Queen watched the King hire pirates. She watched the pirates change her beloved King and convince him to go to war. One night the King went far across the lands in search of more gold, rumored to flow like rivers under the Northern people’s feet. What could the Queen do but stay home, and wait for her husband to return? So the Queen waited and waited until her body was so tired that her eyes closed by themselves. But the pirates she opened her home to opened her legs. They hurt her, abused her.”

I want to tell her to stop. I want to tell her that this part isn’t just a story. This part of the story is mine too. I need her to stop. But she grabs my hand like she’s reading my mind. She watches my face. A simple gesture, as if asking for permission to continue. I can’t give it yet. I need a second. Because if she continues I’ll go back to that place. I’ll go back to him and I can’t- I can’t breathe. This is the last thing I remember before I panic.

I wake with my head on her chest, her hands rubbing lazy circles on my back. She’s singing. “En la cruz, en la cruz, yo primero vi la luz. Y las manchas de mi alma yo lavé.” For a

moment I play a dangerous game. For a moment, I pretend she is my mother. I pretend I'm home, like that time I had the flu and I was coughing so hard I bruised my ribs. I pretend Mami is still singing to me, "...fue allí por fe yo vi a Jesús, y siempre feliz con él seré."

When I open my eyes, Dahlia is finishing the song, and I may be crazy but I don't just hear her voice; I hear the sound of my mother's voice, the sound of my sister singing along too. Their voices rise together, and the sound swells in my chest. The notes, like fat, wet kisses, to all the places that hurt the most. I stir and she realizes I'm awake. She looks down at me and brings her lips to my cheeks and kisses them both. She kisses the tears away and I let her. I let her be what this country has taken from her. In this moment, she is a person. She is a mother. After she soothes me, I know what she's going to say. And part of me is ready now. So I help her and start with, "Once upon a time there was a King and Queen who had a beautiful baby girl..."

We get through the first half of the story easily. I recite what I remember and she corrects me here and there, nodding when I get things right. Finally, I recite the last sentence I remember and she pulls me to sit in front of her again. This time my hands are in hers. "The Queen, ashamed, afraid, and broken, fled her country with her young family." She stops, eyes closed, as if she's afraid to see this part in her mind. "They found my daughter trying to cross the border with a body in her arms. Vanessa had already been sick and weak by the time they found her. Nice gringos had left water along the trail for us. This was before we found out la migra was poisoning them, leaving them out for us to drink and die along the way to this godforsaken country." There are no tears now. "They took her baby. They took my grandson. They ripped him from her arms and threw her in here. They found me and her father days later trying to cross. I asked around for months looking for my little treasure until someone finally recognized this little picture." She pulls a small photo from under her mattress. Little Treasure is beautiful. She's got long black curls, full lips, and dark brown skin. She's the spitting image of her mother.

I'm afraid to ask what happened. But I don't have to. After a deep breath, she continues.

"They said my tesoro didn't eat or sleep for days before she died. She was starving like we are now, but the little they gave her, she refused. They say she spent days and nights trying to pull off her skin. She could never get the feel of their hands off of her body. The

guards would only open her cell to get her when they began to smell the stench of her body rotting away." She closes her eyes again to give Little Treasure a moment of silence. I do the same, only opening my eyes when she begins to speak again. "They found her in the corner with blood caked under her nails, and there were little crescent moons trailing all around her body. That was all she had to show for her life. Little crescent moons." Dahlia cries now very quietly. This time, I comfort her.

"I thought you were the queen in your story." And for the first time since I met her, she looks at me with clarity in her eyes.

"Yes, chiquita. But I am the first queen. I'm the one who gave my little treasure away. Away to a young stupid boy who loved green paper more than he loved my daughter. Instead of keeping her safe, he joined a gang. When he was off selling and doing horrible things, my daughter caught the eye of another gang member. She was married. He didn't care. Where I come from, that gang controls over half the nation's wealth. She was safe nowhere. So she fled. And now I have nothing."

I can't think of anything to say. We can not replace what the other has lost and yet all I can think of is, *Where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. All I can think to do is finish the verse in my heart. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.*

December 19th

Rebecca Sharman

Cold morning. Soft feet on the stone stairs. She walks the garden path every morning, barefoot. Around the Grecian fountain, down the four steps and to the right where the lavender and geraniums bloom in the summer, then up the second flight and along the row of trim rose bushes; in the spring they are spotted with white and red flowers and you can smell their delicate scent from the window of my second floor bedroom. But there are no buds now to fill the air with sweet fragrance. When I draw in a breath my nose is filled with a sharp stinging pain.

She's turning at the fountain again. I pull my eyes away and lie back down. In the short time I've been sitting up, my warm spot has evaporated so I pull the heavy blankets to my chin and curl up like a wild animal seeking heat in its burrow.

There's a crack in the wall I'm familiar with. I find myself staring at it at times like these. I know the curve and the brutal depth of it where the plaster has split apart. I can recite each of the spider veins. But this morning, this is not a crack, but a map of the garden and my eyes trace it the way she walks.

Down to the left, her feet must be moving off the stone path now and onto the grass, white with frost. The neatly trimmed holly and yew hold their leaves in tightly, the last green left in the dead world. Her hands reach out automatically for the child who was running over the green months ago. It is only now that her pacing stops. Her eyes study her outstretched hands from the pink palms to the bloodless fingers.

I study my cracked map and plot her next move. She never rests for long. She can never be still without remembering.

An insane thought comes to me. I think for one crazed moment that I should go out to her and beg her to come in, beg her to forget, beg her to think of herself, if only this morning. This one morning, let there be peace. But there is nothing I can do. She hears no words nor do her eyes register the movements of lips or the expressions of those who try to stop her.

And then on cue, like a scream in the night, like a nail being wrenched from a board, like the ripping of the veil between

heaven and hell, the howling begins.

I can't count the times I've heard it. Too many, more than any person should ever hear. Instantly the sweat comes out on my palms despite the chill in my blood and the goose flesh prickling all over my arms.

The howls are too close for comfort. I know things echo out here in these barren months but at this moment, I could swear they are right at the edge of the garden.

My eyes whip to the crack on my wall as I try to remember her trajectory. Where will she be now? All the mornings I've watched her, curled at my window with my legs drawn to my chest and the covers nested around me, watching through the ruddy curtains her masochist's march.

But now I draw a blank. Is she at the edge of the frozen fishpond, or is she running her fingers through the bristle hairs of the red pines?

Come inside. I beg her in my head. *Let go of it, just for today, you can afford today.* Maybe she will hear my pleas through the fog that hangs over her. Maybe my desperation will bring a miracle.

The howls are closer. I hear the snapping, snarling of the beasts and leap up onto all fours scampering to the window. I put my hands on the glass panes, ignoring the bite as the heat is torn away.

Down in the garden, I see her at the fountain. Just beyond the low hedge line they prowl, closer than they've ever come. Why on this morning of all mornings? I bang on the window and shout. Her eyes are downcast to the faces of the cherubs on the fountain. My heart is in my mouth. The air in my room is nothing compared to the gust of bitter wind that hits me when I turn the iron handles and push open the double windows. The scream in my throat dies instantly, and I scramble to pull the blankets back over my shoulders. They are trotting along the hedge, looking for an easy way in. They will find it soon and then it will be no time 'til they join her at the fountain. One morning, I watched her leaving bloody footprints in the snow when the frozen path cut into her soft soles. I cried that morning. What will I do if she is killed before my eyes? Will I cry if the fountain fills with blood?

My throat warms enough for me to scream out, one word

only. In a panic, I chose the one that means the most between us.

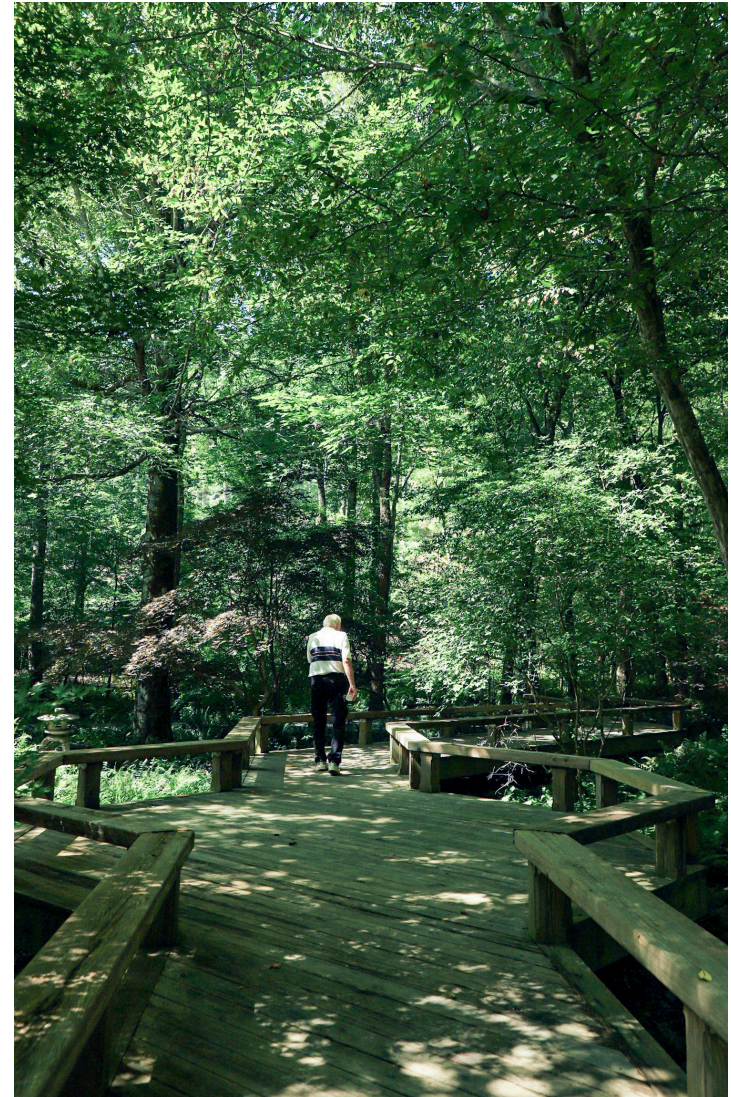
“Mama!”

And I think she hears because she lifts her head. I watch her turn away from the hedge where they are breaching the gap, she turns away from the dead lavender and the tensed yew and holly. My heart is beating so hard. *Look, please, just look up to me once more. Forget the story you remember. Mama, I didn't die. I'm here, I'm waiting. And if you don't move, they'll do to you what they tried to do to me. Except no one will come this time.*

She turns. My heart falters. Her eyes go again to that spot on the green. She watches for the child she thinks she hears, though his voice is slightly changed. She watches for the child who will never run again.

I fall forward on the windowsill. The wind shrieks in my ears but it has no more threats to stir me.

She moves through the garden. Her course is slow and jerky. She leaves a crimson carpet in the snow behind her. I watch helplessly as they drag my mother away, her body making one last trip around the garden.



Untitled
Laura Alaez



Painting of a Park Near Niagara Falls
Diane Velasco

To Tell Their Story

Stefanie DeFronzo

I am my Mother

I am my Mother crying from Bogotá to JFK.

I am my Mother one year old, screaming for some
homeland.

I am my Father

I am my Father wearing a suit on the first day of school.

I am my Father, and the bullies in Middle Village laugh
while they'll never know what seminary school in Giovinazzo is
like.

I am my Grandmother

I am my Grandmother removing her star.

I am my Grandmother removing her star to sneak into the movie
theater.

I am my Grandmother in hiding.

I am my Grandfather

I am my Grandfather begging his parents to leave Essen.

I am my Grandfather, we are Germans.

"We are Germans, nothing will happen to us."

I am my Mother

I am Southern Italy

I am my Father

I am lighting the menorah on Christmas

I am my Grandmother

I am the handmade red polka dot dress

I am my Grandfather

I am baking German spice cookies

I am the last butterfly

I am Theresienstadt

I am six million souls

I am ashes

I am

I am myself

I am my tongue.



Lunar New Year
Sam Hecker



Spherical Time
Sam Hecker

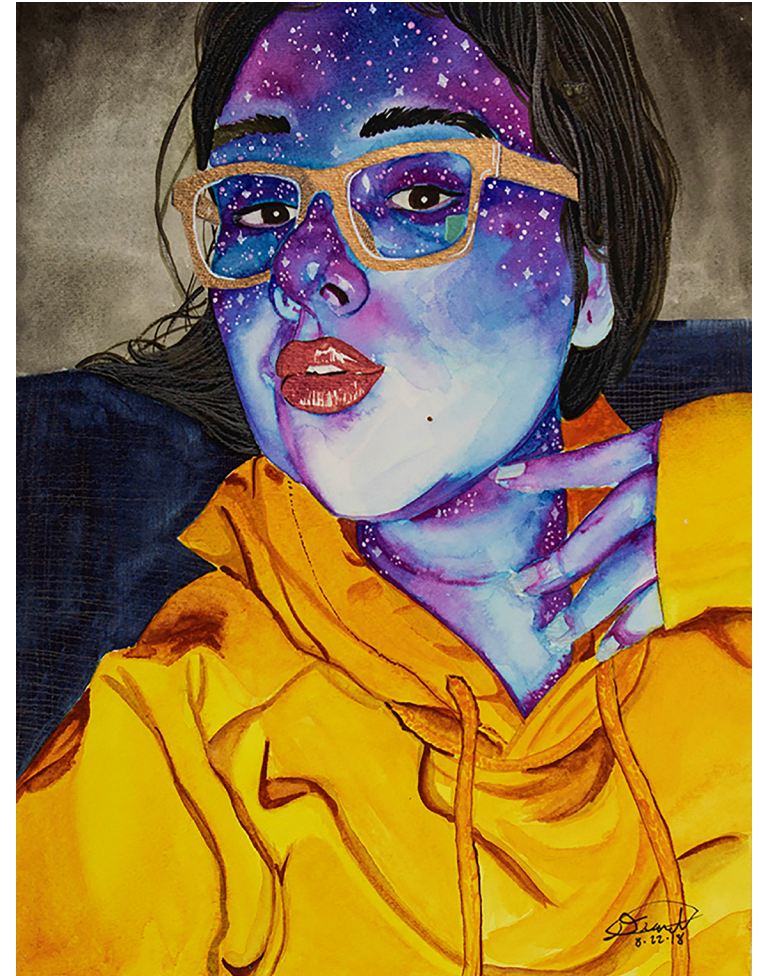


hidden gem
Shanjida Khan

Witches

Mariange Charles-Antonio

a long time ago we burned women for proclaiming their love to the moon. women who donned velvety black robes of fractured segments of the night sky and stood shoulder to shoulder, drinking sweet wine that promised them sisterhood. promised them love. promised them protection, because out there, out there where men roamed and women followed in tow, promises were empty. promises were sour. a long time ago we burned women who danced beside the glow of a fire, and women who ran with the beasts man couldn't tame. women who believed that everything had a soul. women who knew the secrets of the earth. who heard the whispers of the wind late at night, when the sounds of deep inebriated laughter shook the house. we burned women who let the water see them nude. who allowed their carnal desire be known to man. we burned women who denounced the words of false prophets dressed in white robes. who refused to sink, yet were punished for keeping their heads above water. a long time ago we burned the bodies of women. women who knew that once ephemeral flames consumed those velvet robes, they'd go on to be grim tales, cheap costumes, old hags. perfect distractions for their bewitching kin, to walk among us. Unnoticed.



Cosmic Confidante
Diane Velasco



Untitled
Seldon Kwafo

The Spring Child

Santi Zapata-Gomez

I was born on the first leaf shower of the year. I was born a child and stayed a child for centuries. I didn't ask to be born, I just was.

The forest was my mother and the sun was my father. Every time the forest took a breath, I took a breath. Every time the sun came out to play, I came out to play. I was the forest's guardian, her protector, her only defense from the outside world.

I would welcome the visitors, I would let them partake in my harvest, I would let them be denizens in my Eden, if only they would leave their monsters behind. They carried their monsters with pride. They hunted with their monsters. They cowered behind their monsters. They thought they had control over them, only it was the other way around.

I was the first breath of spring, I was a child who played endlessly in my mother's playground. I bathed in my father's first light and lulled myself to sleep in his last. I was my mother's guardian, her only protector, the fence to her garden. I was my father's warrior, his one-man army, his saber of justice. I was all of this — until the visitors turned their monsters towards me.

They entered my mother's forest with their monsters raised in the air. They took their monsters and hunted me. They cowered behind them when I fought back. They killed me with their monsters, only their monsters weren't satisfied with my blood. They still craved more, so the visitors turned on each other. They hunted each other through my mother's forest, slowly killing each other. Till the last one left blew his own brains out. Finally, the monsters were satisfied.

Vindemia

Matthew Macaulay

Or, Maybe, Flat Land

Somewhere

When the curtain was still being pulled I recalled a dark wood,
never-ending.

It hung monolithic-like, like something vaguely Kubrick.

I half expected Virgil to help guide me out of that mirk and mire,

But he didn't, to the pouts of my eyes.

I think this is a love story. Yes, forgive me, we must go back.
Alright

This reminds me of a poem.

Dante once told me that love was best observed from afar

And is spiced when you write her some great big

Grape peeling verse that you can recite to her ad nauseam.

So I spent a good year peeling grapes, see reader,

And I've nothing to show you.

Except for a few skinless grapes.

Then, I would have come to you, dangling and gangly and

Maybe a bit undercooked.

I know more of love than any man living and to prove it

I've brought you some grapes

And an ugly poem.

So, with nothing gained or lost, the dark wood took me

As prepared for it as a newborn and just as sobbed.

And listen well, reader, to the hoots and glucks and pops and creaks

Of this forest.

Oh, it was well worn dark, the kind you only see in, like, horror
shows and such,

It hung. I croaked.

Virgil couldn't hear me and no vigil was heard for me.

It was very much an end.

But, see, it wasn't,

How could you be sitting and listening to my slushy-sad tale if I
had snuffed it?

No, see, there was this place in the wood, nice and homey as you
like,

And within its wooden palisades I glimpsed a horde of rampaging
ravenous red grapes.

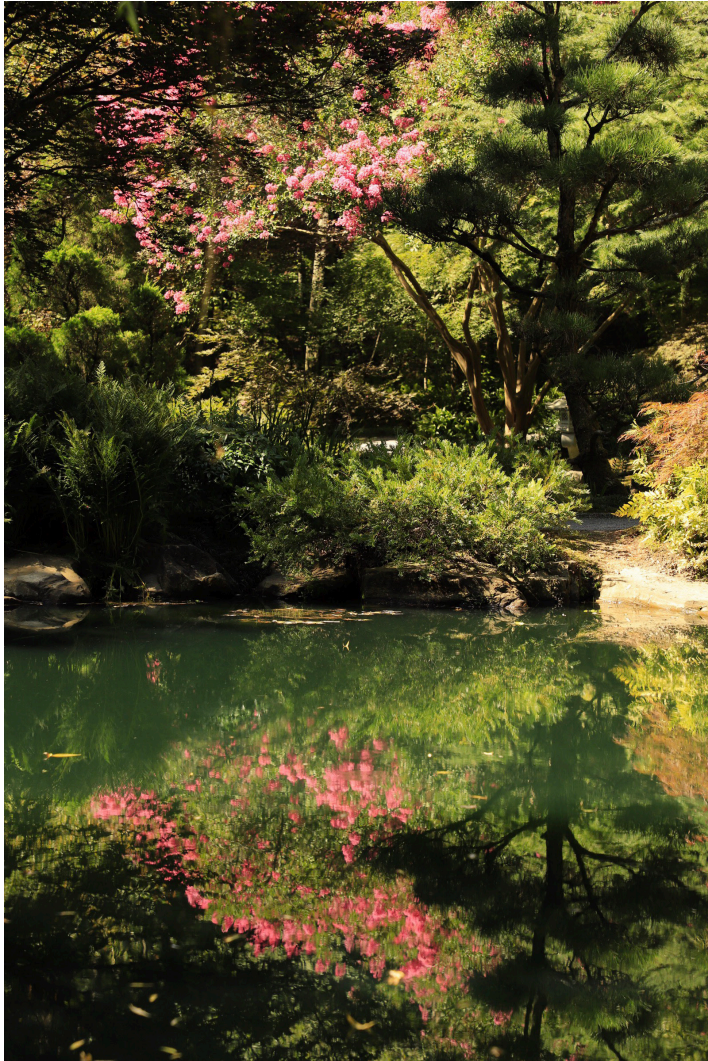
And, reader, I fear I have an ending.

I mean, what would you call it? A great big lousy oaf like your
narrator

Has gone from humble grape-skinner to a full-time vineyard owner.

I don't have much to say to a hand holding poison grapes,

When I can grow the reds myself.



Untitled
Laura Alaez

no one's hero

Kelly Notine

Sometimes, part of me likes to think that
Persephone knew about the seeds,
the garden,
the timeshare Death laid quietly at her feet,
and sucked down the fruit anyway.

Part of her knew that Mother would come running,
beg and plead through tears of blue
and the coldest winters you've ever seen,
to watch her daughter make flowers bloom again;
and with that image in mind,
she ground that first seed between her teeth.

Because Persephone is like all of us,
a dichotomy of peace and chaos,
so much in check that sometimes,
eating the fruit,
watching the years slip away
just like red juice dribbling down your chin,
feverish and drunk in destruction,
is more freeing than any wide open sky.



Hydrangeas
Abigail Haven



Shards of the Atlas
James Hetherington

Little Saint Helena

Matthew Macaulay

The making of paradise is a quaint job indeed,
The kind in which only mad men succeed.
But enough from myself; you're here for him,
That living David who held the world
Until the brown earth held him.

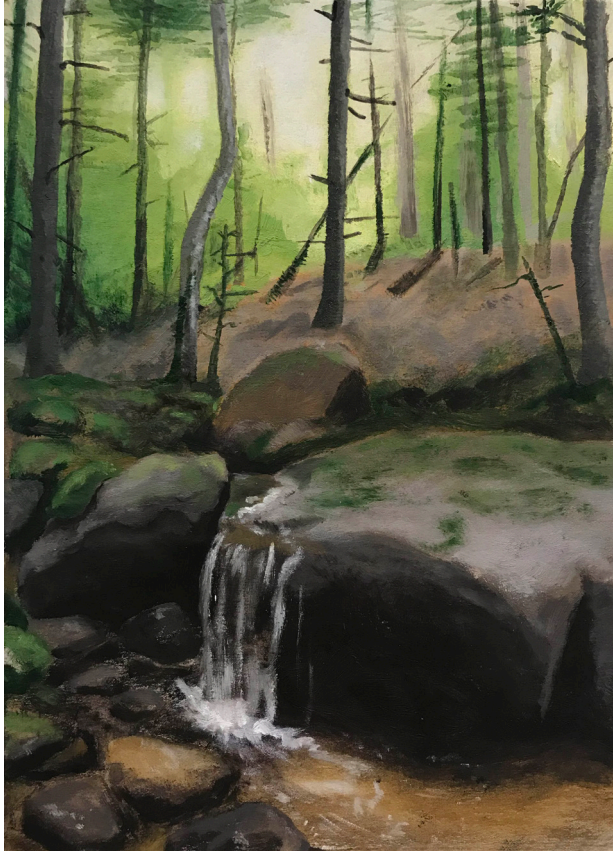
I knew this man, Emperor by trade,
Who toiled and troubled his short life away
With civil codes and conquests,
Pageants and parades,
Scandals and silk dresses,
Caviar and crusades.
He built banks, arches and a bustling square,
He raised himself higher than any could dream or dare,
And "Look!" said he. "I've made Utopia!"
And not a soul stopped to care.

Soon enough, the wells dried up.
The parades lost their pageantry
And the scandals lost their lust.
It was agreed by all that the Emperor must
Live out his last days on a barren, fuming rock
Just afloat in the Atlantic.

The trumpets sounded a note and
The Emperor slinked like a cat
To Little Saint Helena,
A volcanic island by trade.
There was not a soul there to
Read his code nor trade at his square.
There wasn't a soul there who stopped to care.

And here I fondly found the man,
Guarded by gulls and a few dozen crabs,
As happy as if he were King of all the earth.
He sat on a throne that creaked and rocked,
His crown was wool (as were his socks),
He held aloft a wooden stick and cried
"Look, I've made Utopia! Not a soul here stops to suffer!"

Rays of Saint Helena sunset beamed into the room,
And all was as quiet as a midnight desert.
The emperor made his peace with life,
And he made paradise
On Little Saint Helena.



Woods
Caroline Polich

King Corey

Katie Coyne

King Corey sat gazing from his tower of powers,
Upon all his fields, and his farms and his bowers.
He gazed to the woods,
Then he gazed to the waves,
Then pondered on his soldiers and concubine slaves.
He stood at his mirror that couldn't be clearer,
But his gaze fell beyond foggy eyes.

He slicked back his hair and combed out his beard,
And practiced his promising lies.
Voices soon rose from the hall down below,
From maidens and servants and subjects.

From the women who thought,
In his rings and his robes,
In his armor he glows!
He is perfect.

King Corey is so handsome,
And I am so fine,
There's no further question,
King Corey is mine!

“Shut up, ratty barmaid!”
Cried a countess so fair,
Perfecting the eye paint of her delicate stare.
“You are a commoner.
I am beautiful and bright.
I should be the one to polish King Corey’s sword on this night.”

“You peasant! I want King Corey,
With his nightly raid stories,
I want to gaze upon the silvery shaft!”

A conjuror stood in a corner and laughed.
“None of you shall have King Corey again,
For on his reflection his life does depend,
He is fixed on his face,
So has lost saving grace,
From his wrinkles and fatherly figure.
His sword is all rusted,
His hair has been dusted,
With fine grains of the peppers of age.”

Away went the women up onto the staircase,
“Please King Corey,” they begged. “Show your face.”
King Corey drank and King Corey smoked,
He indulged them all with the false words he spoke.
But at the end of the night,

After hearts were made light,
King Corey slunk back to his tower,
He stood by the mirror,
Gazed in awe at his reverence,
The curse of his vanity overtaking his presence.



Hogwarts
Sam Hecker

October Used to be Your Favorite Month

Madi O'Shea

if you stay awake long enough
to hear the sounds of autumn--
her burnt chords of cinnamon--
you'll want to stay awake a little longer.
when leaves spiral in melodrama
and her crisp air breathes down your neck -
remember autumn is coming
to run her finger up your spine
and poke your bones
to say *Hello!* or
Good Morning!
to shivers under a sweater and red fingers inside a glove.
autumn is coming and
i know you've been scared and
you will always be scared of the
changes.
but
stay awake,
for she will show you her
colors.



Angels Illuminating Angels Liesl Eppes

People watch, light watch.
Open your eyes and notice
Details, specifics.

Lot 19

Sofia Amorim

She arches her back against the driver's seat door,
and leans her head back,
so that it hangs
out
the window.
Her eyes trace the paths of planes,
gliding through the sky
like ships across milky galaxy seas.

Their lights twinkle,
blip
like the stars,
and sometimes
she can't tell
which are stars far, far away,
and which belong to wings
that ride the current across the skyline.

She tilts her head again,
to the horizon,
watching planes bank,
their lights blink,
watching stars dance

their waltz
within her small cosmos.

It blinks,
blinks,
Blips
until it dies.

And she waits.

Wondering how many years
it took for the lights to find her
and how many more
before
the lights just go

Out



Niagara Falls
Virginia Hand



Koala
Katie Revelas

late summer battle

Madi O'Shea

i'm holding up my spoon filled with vanilla ice cream to you.
across the room
we silently celebrate a victory:
how we overcame the slippery trampoline outside
even though wearing our socks didn't trick the dew from tripping
us up.
we somehow escaped
the wet world.

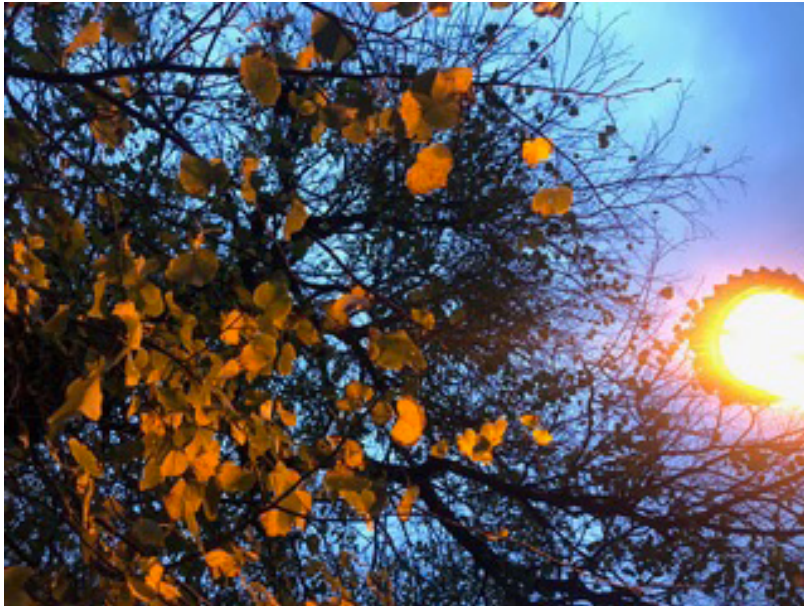
in that playground backyard eden we were the rulers of our tiny
dirty universe.

we stormed the fence barricades and tasted the sweetness of the
night.

masterminds of make believe and
twilight tousles,
rejoice in the sanctity of
dirt, ash, rum and ice cream.



Red light perspective
Liesl Eppes
Taken in Summerville, South Carolina



Untitled
Liesl Eppes

Notice the light catch,
Listen to the child inside,
Feel the wind blowing.



Lines
Katie Revelas

Morning

Aidan Cserhat

The dancing light pours through the open, high-ceilinged sofa room,
Finger prints inquire around the glass.
Hoping for just one moment, one thorn of time, where someone's,
Anyone's,
Embrace can be felt. But still they search.
The coffee has been shimmied, stirred, and poured.
Backs broken, hours in the sun, flakes of hope,
But we have coffee,
So it's okay, be your grumpy sullen, hallucinogenic mourning self.

The sun's scandalous rays, the wind and its erotic howls, the leaves with their embarrassed crunch.
These things do not wait for you,
As you wait for the rickety bus at the corner.
As you wait for your anxieties and dreams to squabble for who conquers the day.
For you to repeat, repeat, again tomorrow.

As the colorful evening, as the last of the of the day's lanterns are slowly turned off,
A Cimmerian darkness wraps itself around your weightless body, the night tide washes away
your day's uncertainty.

But not the blisters, the fragmented souls, the aching skeletons and steady spirits of those.

Your coffee is ready,
And you don't think twice.



Greenhouse Reclamation
Sam Hecker

A Simple Drama

Liesl Eppes

My tea was abandoned -
Left on top of a ticket machine.
Getting colder and lonelier as my train puts distance between
us.
It's not just a beverage - it was my comfort and my soul
companion on this trip.
Sleep creeps into the corners of my eyes in her absence.
I can almost imagine the feel of the cup in my hands and the
sense of a perfect sip that relaxes my soul and prepares me for
the day.

“Shut up, it was just a cup of tea - your special travel cup
will probably still be there when you go back on Monday.”

Maybe. But if that's true, she's still in for two long nights
under a train station platform - alone. Not to mention the fact
that without my tea I'm sad, tired, and my mouth is dry.

Without my tea - I am like Pooh Bear without his honey, a Hobbit
without second breakfast, Leslie Knope without her waffles.

Now do you understand my pain? If not you're just another stupid
soulless person who only eats kale in the morning- raw with

nothing but a glass of cold water - and who thinks food is fuel.

If you don't understand then I'm Remy and you're his dad who
thinks that eating trash is the same as eating at Gusteau's
restaurant.

I pity you. And I pity myself because despite the ridiculous
nature of this story/poem - it has not brought my tea back to
Me.

What train is worth the price of a cup of tea? None. Except
maybe the Hogwarts Express.

But alas, I'm just riding New Jersey Transit.

I traded my tea for the 6916 to Penn Station.

And it fills me with regret.

The only things that bring me hope are the extra tea bags in my
backpack and the drizzling rain outside my window.

The tea bags are the promise of another cup, and the rain adds
to the drama of the moment. And what's the point of it all if I
can't be dramatic about my cup of tea?



Succulents in the Sunlight
Sam Hecker



Beach Road
Genesis Perez