

APPLAUSE

ISSUE 36



MYTHOPOESIS

Becoming
Through The
Telling

MSTHEAD

Zac Mathias, Managing Editor

Ari Long, Poetry Editor

Annabella Tedder, Prose Editor

Applause Staff Readers

Eden Dean

Jacia Hayes

Madison Reedy

Molly Self

Abigail Slape

Jocelyn Soriano

Layout & Design

Eden Dean

Madison Reedy

Molly Self

Social Media & Promotion

Jacia Hayes

Abigail Slape

Jocelyn Soriano

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Zack Medlin



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for spending time with this issue of *Applause*.

Every issue begins with a collection of individual voices, images, instincts; over time, through reading, arguing, revising, and choosing, those scattered pieces lean toward one another, forming something that feels, however briefly, whole. This semester, I kept noticing how easily things slip past us, how much pressure we carry, and how often we are too overwhelmed to appreciate the experience. It was humbling.

Mythopoesis is the making of myth: the creation of worlds, symbols, and narratives that give form to human experience. Though the word may sound lofty, the instinct behind it is familiar. Meaning. We read not only for escape, but to encounter something that feels deeper, sharper, or more enduring than the noise of everyday life. In a culture flooded with distractions, content, and performances; we seek truth and authenticity.

As writers, we hope our words can draw readers into a world that feels whole enough to inhabit. As readers, we hope to enter such worlds and return from them altered, even slightly, with clearer vision, renewed feeling, or a stronger sense of what is worth carrying back into ordinary life. Fiction and poetry help us recover our attention and remind us that beauty, truth, and meaning are still possible.

That is what I hope you will find in these pages.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to our readers, to the team who worked hard to bring this issue together, and to the writers and poets whose submissions gave us the difficult privilege of choosing from so many powerful pieces. We are grateful for your trust, your labor, and your imagination.

We hope that as you move through this issue, you find something that lingers with you: a line, an image, a feeling, a question. Something that follows you back into the world and makes it feel, however briefly, a little larger.

Zac Mathias
Applause Managing Editor
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Welcome Home, Rollo</i> by David Butler	1
<i>Los Cempasúchiles</i> by M.S. Blues	11
<i>Late Nights in Cow Town</i> by Kaja Pedersen	18
<i>El Jax</i> by Marie Anne Arreola	25
<i>The Supreme Law of Tory Martin</i> by Danielle Ellis	33
<i>The Precedent Law of Tory Martin</i> by Danielle Ellis	36
<i>From Here to There</i> by P.M. Alexander	38
<i>Rule of Threes</i> by Samantha Fujimoto	47
<i>Perennials</i> by Dana Leung	55
<i>Return to the Hunter</i> by Stephanie Peterson	59
<i>One-in-Six</i> by Eliza Nester	64
<i>The Diner</i> by P.A. Henley	73
<i>New Blood</i> by Drew Clements	77
<i>Fruit of the Dead</i> by Finn Bradshaw	78
<i>Eden 2047</i> by Anthony Ikeh	80
<i>A Metamorphosis</i> by Zee Timko	81
<i>Arabic Tea is Made of Water</i> by Beatrix Fauth	82
<i>The Moon Never Asked for a Name</i> by Beatrix Fauth	83
<i>Beauty and the Blue Footed Booby</i> by Alexander Dyga	84
<i>Asphalt Escapism</i> by Valen Castonguay	86
<i>On the Front Stoop</i> by Valen Castonguay	88
<i>Daffodils</i> by Reilly Kendrick	90
<i>Changes</i> by Reilly Kendrick	91
<i>Rapture</i> by Brock Wolverine	92
<i>Self-Deceived</i> by Khedaren Perumal	94
<i>My Mom's Crockpot Cooking</i> by Natalie Bridgnell	95
<i>Avian Thing</i> by Elizabeth Radgowski	96
<i>Sleepwalker</i> by Jolene Reed	97
<i>Father Mark's Funeral</i> by Jolene Reed	99

<i>Reverie of the Aloof</i> by M.S. Blues	100
<i>Blur</i> by Marie Anne Arreola	102
<i>Ripeness Past Ripe</i> by Marie Anne Arreola	107
<i>Song of Ordinary People</i> by Abdulmueed Balogun	110
<i>Past Lives Are At The Door With Knives In Their Hands</i> by Abdulmueed Balogun	112
<i>What Other Name Befits Mayhem</i> by Abdulmueed Balogun	114
<i>Carbon</i> by Mahalia Collingsworth	115
<i>Early Morning</i> by Mahalia Collingsworth	117
<i>The New Age Yiddish-English Dictionary</i> by Sarah Baskin	119
<i>this is what moves me</i> by Greta Oswald	121
<i>Never Have I Ever</i> by Hannah Guo	123
<i>Calm Storm</i> by Nathan Conti	124
<i>Urban Forest</i> by Nathan Conti	125
<i>Elegy From the Guest Room Bed</i> by Jaya Basu	126
<i>Without Pity To Anarchy</i> by Josie Fournier	128
<i>Valse Triste</i> by Chastalynn Martin	130
<i>Finlandia</i> by Chastalynn Martin	131
<i>autism diagnosis as an acquittal</i> by Everix Machan	132
<i>testosterone has numbed the edges of my anxiety to a blunt point</i> by Everix Machan	133
<i>F-Painting, 1973</i> by Selen Frantz	134
<i>Force of Nature</i> by M. Shahid	135
<i>To Endure</i> by Nate Murphy	136
Contributors	137



Welcome Home, Rollo

Two disembodied balls of light float in space near the eternally busy central sun of the universe. One, an angel, the other, Rollo Wood.

“Not yet, buster,” said the angel with a formless, contented smile.

Rollo was captivated by the celestial fireworks of trillions of lights going to-and-fro in the vastness of space. He saw pinks, reds, blues, greens, and every other color of the spectrum, including colors he had never seen before; he saw stellar nurseries, red supergiants, galaxies and star clusters, and the sights inspired a quiet awe in him. He was in bliss, besides what he saw. Of his getting into Heaven, to which the angel was referring, he wasn’t concerned. He had already been promised, by the same angel, *“Everyone goes to Heaven.”*

Still, he raised the temerity to answer the angel’s prohibition. “Why?”

At this, it seemed as if the attention of the central sun turned to him, and only him.

“You and I need to have a chat, Mr. Wood.”

“But why doesn’t everybody know this stuff, God? Why am I alone?”

“You’d be surprised, Rollo. Many people do.”

“How’s that?” Rollo’s spirit arched an eyebrow. “I’ve never met anybody who knew. ‘Cept maybe the angel.”

“Buddha knew,” God said. “Lao Tzu knew.”

“Lao-who?” Rollo interrupted.

“Jesus knew, too,” God continued. “Lots more people this century will know. Even more in the next. By the one after that, it’ll be so common you’ll hardly find a-one that doesn’t know, or isn’t engaged in the act of finding out.”

At this, Rollo fell silent. He had no doubt that God was right; the realization was so simple, so obvious, everyone must see it eventually. Yet, his spirit was not settled. He wanted, somehow, to help.

“I know how you feel, Rollo. There’s a plan for you.”

The angel made a squeak in excitement.

A bell rings raucously. Quittin’ time.

“Wood!”

“Yeah, Williams?”

“No drinks tonight. The boss wants me home for dinner. Roast beef.”

The year was 1956. Rollo worked at an auto plant in the good ol’ USA. He welded one weld, all day, till quittin’ time or kingdom come. Nothing much bothered him; only, these days, he got to wondering more about things. Who he was, what he was, and the like.

“Well, enjoy dinner. We’ll do it next Friday,” said Rollo.

Williams nodded. "Say, got a lot on your mind, huh? Caught you standin' there, just thinkin'." He huffed. "Thought it must've been some dame." He gave a smile, then laughed. "Oh, to be young..."

The bustle of the work day's end surrounded Rollo. He felt a tinge of embarrassment. He didn't want to be looked on as careless.

"No dame, just me. Wonderin'," Rollo said.

"Well if you find one don't lose her," replied Williams. "Man like you is liable. Wonderin' so much."

"He figures it out tonight? That's just fantastical!" exclaimed the angel.

"He will," said God. ***"You just wait and see."***

God nudged the angel.

"Watch what happens next."

Rollo stood outside the plant's exit to the parking lot. He saw Williams entering his car. A thought occurred to him.

"What in the world does Williams get up to when he gets home, anyway?"

He cast his eyes downward, "He has his wife and kids I 'spose..."

He looked up. He'd spoken to Williams often at break-time. Rollo had his opinions about the fellow. It begged a question. "What does his family think of him?"

That question brought another. "What does he think of him?"

His head dipped in concentration, "Who is he, really? What is he?"

He thought in consternation for a long while, lines of workmen passing beside him. He wondered briefly about each man as he passed by.

Finally, a thought made his eyes go wide. "Who am I?"

“He thinks he’s just a man. He’ll realize that he’s a soul soon.”

“And that he’s everything, too?” intoned the angel, curiously.

“That’s right,” God said.

Rollo started his car. The plan for tonight was still MacMillan’s, with or without Williams. After weeks of wondering, he’d finally happened upon his own beingness, and the novelty of that put a stop to all thoughts in his mind. He sat silently before putting his car into gear. He was awaiting some kind of answer, something that would put his spirit at ease as to what, or who, he actually was; that answer didn’t come.

“He’s not going to get off-track, is he?”

“Far from it. Watch.”

After a while, he turned the radio on.

“-there’s a special place in many a-heart for this love song; Louis Satchmo Armstrong plays one of the great all-timers, La Vie en Rose!”

Rollo put the car into gear. He’d heard this song before and was a fan of old Satchel Mouth. He started to pull out onto the street when he heard the trumpet. Despite not having an answer to his question, the music gave him a certain sense of appreciation; nameless, formless gratitude. A sense that, despite any material condition, he’d be alright.

“I never thought I’d see the day...”

“Synchronicity is coming.”

“Hold me close and hold me fast, the magic spell you cast, this is la vie en rose...”

“Right place, right time?”

“Yes.”

Rollo, upon hearing this lyric, felt that the song had special meaning for him. He was under the spell of a life-in-pink. A life of immense gratitude to nothing in particular; gratitude for being alive. He felt he wasn't in an empty, lifeless cosmos. He was under constant watch. Who the watchmen were, however, and how they affected his life remained a mystery.

"Wow. He's really getting it."

"Give your heart and soul to me, and life will always be... la vie en rose!"

The swell of the music catapulted him emotionally. He wanted to give his life to the formless, nameless thing that inspired his gratitude. Only, he still had questions. Who was he? What was he?

"Nice job, Louis," Rollo thought as the song ended. He arrived at MacMillan's.

"Nothin' strong tonight, hon?"

The barmaid, Pollyanne, gave Rollo a concerned look. "Feelin' the B-L-U-Z?"

"You just watch where this goes."

The angel made a noise in excitement.

"Maybe you could call it that," he gave her a nod, "just wonderin' about things."

"About what?"

"Well," Rollo scratched his face, pausing a moment. "I suppose who I am."

"Uh huh," she said dotingly, "and what's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh boy. How's grace going to knock this one out?"

“Gracefully.”

“I mean who exactly am I? What exactly am I?” Rollo put a hand to his chest. “Am I this body? My name? A reputation attached to it that people deal with?” He pointed his index finger at his heart.

“A soul that moves this body, sees out my eyes, and goes to Heaven once it’s all over?”

“You’ll like this.”

She looked to the glass she was shining in her hand. She presented it to him. “Are you this glass?”

He laughed.

“Not as far as I know.”

“Are you looking at the glass?”

“I am.”

“Then you’re what’s looking at the glass.”

He considered that.

“Graceful, huh?”

“I’m the soul?”

She gave him a kind smile. “That’s what I think.”

Rollo stood next to an oak tree, looking at it. He had stopped in a neighborhood park on his way home. He pondered if the tree, too, thought.

“Fireworks, soon.”

He ran his hands over the huge tree’s bark. “Are you a soul too?”

He looked up into the tree’s vast network of branches and leaves.

He thought about how many tree rings it must have had, all that it must have seen.

“The things you’d tell me if you could speak...” he whispered. He turned his back to the tree and sat against it.

He wondered what exactly he was, as a soul. What made him up and what the point of his being was.

He couldn’t articulate why, but he had the feeling that the tree wanted him to figure it out. That it was watching him, supporting him.

He turned around. “Anything to say, big fella?”

He put a hand against the tree.

He felt a feeling, at first fleeting, then overwhelming.

“What is this?” he thought.

“He’s never felt it before.”

He struggled to categorize it.

“Hope, optimism, joy?” he muttered.

“Love.”

He relaxed into it. The feeling seemed to answer every question he had, save for one.

“Almost there.”

“Who am I?” he wondered.

Suddenly, all pretense, belief, thought, action left Rollo’s spirit. There was no unknown to him as to his nature.

“I’m me!”

The simplicity struck him. He just was. Not a name, a body, a reputation. He laughed, hard. A moment passed.

“But,” he asked, wordlessly searching for the next question.

“Will he get it?” the angel asked excitedly.

“Yes.”

He happened upon himself. He laughed.

All distinctions left him completely.

He saw that he was the tree, and the grass that he sat upon. He was the wind. He was Pollyanne, and Williams. He was everything, and everything was him. All of existence was simply made of unconditional love, there was no separation in it; it was absolutely empty, yet full of this stardust-like quality.

All he could do was laugh. It was so simple. He wondered how anybody could ever miss this realization.

Rollo grew to be immediately enamored with everything he saw. With the tree, he loved it, but was detached from it. With this detachment, his love grew.

“There’s more,” God said.

“How can that possibly be?” asked the angel.

His heart swelled with an uncontrollable joy that expressed itself as roaring laughter. The detachment grew, and his joy with it. His body was becoming less dense, lighter, happier. His exhilaration was without end.

“Remember how happy you were when you found out?”

Light began pouring forth from his body, and within seconds, he was a ball of light, floating in space. He was near the central sun of the universe.

“We’ve been expecting you.”

Rollo was in bliss, though some questions still burned. “Why in the world is there so much suffering, God?”

“You’ll see once you come home.”

“Why doesn’t everybody know the truth, God?”

“You’ll see once you come home.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, you’ll see once you come home.”

Rollo, still in awe of the celestial light show, motioned toward the grand central sun of the universe.

“That’s Heaven, right?”

The angel laughed.

“Yes. Though, you know, Heaven’s really inside you.”

Rollo’s experience bore that out. He’d found that Heaven, eternal bliss, was inside of him before he became a ball of light.

“Then, upon entering that sun,” Rollo said, “I’ll come home?”

“Yes.”

“And I’ll know everything?”

“Along with everyone else, yes.”

Rollo’s spirit grinned broadly. “And all I’ve got to do is say yes?”

“That’s right.”

Rollo floated in space leisurely. He watched the lightshow continue for a minute or two. Of entering Heaven he felt no great rush. He’d found that Heaven was inside him all along. Yet, he wondered, wordlessly—

“If this is how I feel outside of Heaven, how much better is

Heaven?”

He faced the grand central sun.

“God,” he said, with tremendous happiness, “I ask for entrance into Heaven!”

At this, his soul zoomed toward the sun. He merged into it.

He became the light; not part of it, or greater or lesser than it, but the light itself. Rollo’s joy was infinite.

“Welcome home, Rollo.”



Los Cempasúchiles

*the ancestors always pass down
gifts—just open your hand
and trust the natural world.*

“You’re here... *again?*”

“If you ain’t realized by now, we don’t always get what we want.” remarks Esa, the self-proclaimed leader. “Has Momma taught you anything, *chica?*”

Yeah, they have. The real question is—

“What do you want now?”

“Your acknowledgement would be a great start.”

I roll my eyes. *I can’t acknowledge you... you are a goddamn—*

“People already judge me for *what* I am, I don’t need them thinking that I’m some looney too.” I hiss through a whisper, my eyes narrowing at the translucent vase of marigolds sitting idly on Nana’s *chisme* table—the

headquarters of gossip between the women of my family. Ironic setting for a thing so beautiful.

Esa rolls her eyes right back at me. She's the abrasive one of the marigolds, along with the tallest. I would also like to tell you that she's the most vivid, although Lunita may be offended by that. "You still find yourself caring what people think?"

"Why wouldn't she?" Lunita says, her leaves crossing themselves.

"Es importante que intentemos comprenderla. Mierda, Esa, no es como si no fueras un complaciente de la gente en su día." Marisol says. She's normally bashful when it comes to Esa starting in on me, but maybe the sun got to her today.

Or maybe you have just lost your damn mind.

I offer her a thin smile. She reminds me of a few ancestors that still blossom in my memory, despite their entrance in the Spirit World long ago. Vivid manifestation, Spanish tongue—a reincarnation of the past, cultivation of everything that came before and created me.

Lunita grins. She thinks she's slick.

Esa never likes being challenged by the other marigolds, but this time she concedes with an eye roll.

A few moments pass by under the Valley sunset. The three marigolds talk among themselves while I stare off into the abyss of summer. Mosquito hawks begin peopling the front lawn, while the trees groove to the rhythm of the breeze. These are the kind of evenings that have sustained me, even during the most daunting periods when everything felt like one big shitshow.

Mami emerges from our *casita*, Mijo, in pursuit behind her. His small, chunky lugs move with haste, his *pucheros* painting his lips. "*¡Mami, no me dejes! ¡No me dejes!*"

"Ay Mijo, necesito ir a la tienda. Mete tu culito en la ducha," she waves him off, before turning to me. "*Mija, asegúrate de que se bañe. Voy a la tienda a comprar ingredientes para la cena. Estaré en casa en un rato. Cierra la puerta, ¿vale?*"

I nod.

Mijo continues to whine, but relents once Mami raises her voice. I'm zoned out when that happens—I *tend to disconnect when voices raise. It reminds me of things I'd rather not dwell on.* Once I hear the ignition start, I look up at Mijo. His lips are still pouty and the rims of his eyes are moist. “*¡Mami nos deja! ¡Mami nos deja!*”

“No she ain’t,” I stand up. “*Mami va a la tienda. Ahora ve a ducharte, cochino.*”

Mijo is reluctant to listen, yet he does anyway. *Gracias, Dios.*

When he's back inside, I glance at the marigolds. Observant eyes, they have, just as advanced as their manifestation. The sun sets upon them now, radiating them like candles we pray to every Sunday. *La luz para guiar a nuestros antepasados.*

Lunita is too busy enthralled by her Secret, Marisol is whispering her evening prayers, and Esa is staring off into oblivion. I shake my head and proceed to our *casita*, shutting the door behind me. *I AM NOT CRAZY, I SWEAR TO GOD!*

After I close the door behind me, I hear the shower turning on. I sigh in relief, grateful that I don't have to be the typical big sister and give my brother hell. Mami does enough of that. Good reason or not, I know what it's like to be nagged at—and I wish that I had someone growing up who could've reduced the nagging for me. *Oh, don't I wish for many things.*

While my brother showers, I head into the room Mami and I share. I take my phone from my back pocket and set it on the charger. My initial intention is to then lay down for a few moments, put my brain on a well-deserved pause. But rather, I find myself entering a vortex.

A DON'T YOU DENY, YOU LITTLE GODDAMN-

“*¿Cuánto tiempo planeas vivir una mentira?*”

You're just hearing things, you big fool. You're already on edge, what the hell do you REALLY expect at this point, chica?

“*Ay chavalla, sé que puedes escucharme.*”

I gingerly raise my head and see nothing. *Delusions, delusions, delusions.*
I take a seat on my bed and rest my hands in my lap.

“What do you want?”

You always ask questions, even when answers seem far, far away.

“*El secreto, Chiquita. ¿Qué pasa con eso?*”

“*También puedes hablar conmigo en inglés, ¿sabes?*”

“*¿Por qué? ¿Eres una chica de No Sabo?*”

“*Soy Chicana.*” I’m prouder than I intend to be. “I was raised Chicana, not on some traditional shit.”

The voice chortles, “There’s been some dysfunction since I left, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it’s a shame that I’m not interested in the Dysfunction—my *chicas* already have me up to decent speed-”

I look around the room again, this time with even more scrutiny. *I will find the culprit of this voice. I will find the—*

“What are you?”

“Hm?”

I stare into the empty hallway, my eyes vigorous with a brewing apprehension. I hope it isn’t as apparent as I anticipate, but Mami has always said I’m strong with emotional projection, especially in my face.

I sigh and repeat, “What. *Are*. You.”

I come off strong, which I suppose surprises The Voice.

It releases a nervous laugh, then states, “I am only what you wish to be.”

SHEISFREE. SHEISFREE. SHEISFREE.

I'm trippin' out, I'm trippin' out, I'M TRIPPIN-

“What are you talking about?”

“Look outside.”

I can't explain the movement I'm doing now—it's a contrast between a leap and sprint. In a matter of moments I'm before those marigolds again. I don't even remember pulling myself from the bed, but I'm here. There's no time for questions or concerns. I need to find out what this is and what is happening.

I grab fistfuls of my abundant hair and look down at the marigolds.

Esa is still eyeing the sunset. Lunita is looking at Her still, with pensive eyes of admiration and desire. Marisol acknowledges me.

“Estás de vuelta rápidamente.”

This gathers the attention of the other two.

“I just got Mijo settled, that's all.”

Esa glances at me, raises her observing eye, and winks. “Did you hear It?”

My jaw clenches. “Hear what?”

Marisol suddenly looks uneasy. “Esa-”

“¡Cállate!” She shakes. “Marisol, I will handle this.”

As if talking marigolds ain't the craziest shit I've seen...

Lunita is still remaining silent, but the glint in her eye is vacant. She looks at the ground, gulping. *This can't be good.*

I feel the vortex thickening—so many things spinning fast, coherence diminishing. I can't articulate the exact feeling. I am...

“The truth,” Esa stands tall among the three marigolds, confident. She looks like a *jefa*. “Or did you not get there yet?”

“I-”

“It takes one crazy thing to know another, *chavalla*.”

A tear rolls down my cheek.

“What is going on?”

“You are what you fear...”

“E-Esa-”

“Take hold of me, please.”

“E-Esa, *p-por favor*.”

“Marisol!”

My hand obeys and I take that marigold in my trembling hand.

-

Many years later

“And that’s how I knew I was... Well, *different*.”

My granddaughter holds the dried marigolds and offers me a sympathetic look.

Maritzga must’ve told her already that I’m looney. Shit.

“Do you think they’ll do the same for me?”

Oh?

“The same?”

“Tell me the truth, that is,” my *mija* wonders, twirling her curly brown hair. “Do you think it’ll tell me if I’m different, too?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

She grabs ahold of the marigolds.

Then, the ancestors deliberate in the Spirit World.

Kaja Pedersen



Late Nights in Cow Town

Slim white moths flap around the porch light. Their bodies flit in and out against the light and against each other as if they are all searching for something very important that does not exist. Occasionally, one hits the bulb. Some bounce off, but most fry on impact and fall to the peeling paint. One drops on Gail's armrest, and I know she will say something about Icarus before the words cut the silence. If you count the moths as silent. Greek classics live under her teeth like spinach, childhood leftovers she still can't shake.

When we were in the eighth grade, she wielded Homer and Herodotus with reckless abandon and carried a paperback copy of the Illiad in the back pocket of her jeans. She only read when she knew someone was looking, and for good reason - she was beautiful doing it, her dark eyebrows screwed up, her eraser perpetually between her teeth, one tendril of dark hair hanging over the page. I was drawn to her because I believed we were both outsiders, if for different reasons. She was too cool for the brand of pickup truck Bible kids our town produced, and I was not nearly cool enough. Our first real conversation was that November, when she found me sitting outside alone, picking at a damp sandwich. She walked up as if it was normal, leaned against the brick wall and slid down in one easy movement, right leg out straight, left bent, elbow rested up against her knee. She sighed through her teeth. "God I

can't wait to get out of this shit hole," she said. It caught me by surprise how easily she swore.

"Me too," I said, although I had never thought about leaving. She offered me carrot sticks, and we watched our classmates argue over the rules of football, ankle-deep in brown snow.

I nod along to her Icarus comment. I think I read somewhere that moths go to light because they mistake it for the moon. Or maybe that was turtles. I want to mention it, but think better of it. I press my back into the chair, letting the white plastic ribs dent my skin. I ask about work at the gas station. She shrugs and says it's alright.

The air is heavy with smoke, typical of August grass fire season. On the west coast, it's easy to forget how that kind of fire sticks to you, the way it roars across the prairie and consumes the dry field in an instant. The smoke tangles with her vape, blue raspberry, which she holds poised between two fingers like a Parisian woman with a cigarette. She's had the same one since we were fourteen.

We were lying on our stomachs in her living room, running our fingers through her carpet and watching a bootleg DVD of Maleficent, the one with Angelina Jolie. We were obsessed with her, sucking our cheeks in and pushing up our baby fat as if we had high-cut cheekbones. Gail announced she wanted to learn how to blow smoke through her nose.

"It'll be good for my aesthetic," she said. I asked her about lung cancer and addiction, but she laughed and explained vaping isn't like cigarettes. That was the same year she started wearing leather jackets and a black lace choker.

She bought hers off a boy from the high school. We met him behind the bleachers, where he peered down at us from his skinny chicken neck and flashed the chewing tobacco tucked in his bottom lip. He slipped the vape into Gail's hand, resting his fingers a moment too long on the inside of her wrist, before slipping the cash into the brim of

his snap-back.

Gail and I sat together afterwards, sunning ourselves on her driveway. She was right; she looked like a dragon with the smoke streaming through the gap in her front teeth. She still does now, tipping her chin up and sending vapour out into the moth cloud.

"So, is anything new with you?" I ask.

"Same old," she says. "I'm going on a trip in September."

"Where to?"

"Maybe Mexico, or New Zealand. I haven't bought the ticket yet."

"September starts next week."

"I'll figure it out. I've already asked for the time off work."

"For how long?"

"Who knows."

It's a long way to get from here to anywhere. Our town is stranded at the nexus of canola farming and oil rigging Alberta. The main street is a grey strip mall, a gas station and an ugly church. By the time we got to high school we knew every kid in every grade by name, first and last. The boys all wore cowboy boots and belt buckles to school, and the pretty girls were all platinum blonde. When I got my driver's license, we gassed up the car and drove as far out as we could go without hitting another town. She directed me down gravel roads through grids of agriculture and played tinny 90s grunge from her phone. Eventually, we pulled over beside a canola field. She stomped down hard on the barbed wire so I could step over. We sat together amid the yellow flowers, the pollen dusting our hair, and watched an oil drill in the distance plunging in and out of the soil.

"We're rough fucking the earth," she said. All the men we knew were rig hands, including both of our fathers, and we got into the habit of hating them for it. When we talked about moving away, we imagined living together in a high-rise apartment with big windows and solar panels

on the roof. "Right next to a train line, and grocery stores all within walking distance. Nice ones, that sell shit like organic protein powder and vegan cheese," she said, wrapping her hand around a canola stem and pulling so hard even the scraggly root came out.

Tonight is a new moon, so the fields behind her house seem to stretch on in an endless black. A deer breaks the monochrome, staring at us from across the yard, its eyes glowing in the dark. Gail always said she was in love with the moon, imagining it a voluptuous woman with soft arms and a sly smile, or otherwise a tall, sickly man in all black. She'd take it either way. I wish the moon were out tonight, if only to hear her say something depraved about it. Her porch light isn't really a replacement. It casts a dingy flicker over her profile, drawing dark shadows under her hooded features. It makes her septum piercing look dirty, or maybe it really is coated in that filmy yellow.

She got the piercing at Claire's when we were sixteen. I didn't know they pierced septums, but I drove her there anyway and came in when she asked me to, even though I hate needles. I asked her how she would keep it clean. She shrugged and spun a display of rhinestone headbands and cheap press-on nails while the piercer smacked bubblegum and ushered out a screaming child. Everything in the store felt sticky.

I worried it would get infected, and her nose, its tantalizing hook, would blow up yellow and green, and the tip would have to be surgically removed. I'd seen something like that on *Botched*. She didn't seem to care, and it never did get infected. The next piercing was a few weeks later, from a guy in a basement with stained teeth and a clothespin. Apparently, they had sex afterwards. She told me about it offhand, like she'd had sex before, like she had it all the time. That one didn't get infected, either.

"How's the boyfriend?" she asks.

"He's good," I say. "He got a research grant for the summer, so he's working up in Medicine Hat."

"In what, oil?"

"Only temporarily, for the work experience." There's a long pause. She taps her foot on the ground, her flip-flop slapping against the peeling patio slats. "Are you seeing anyone?" I ask. She laughs.

"There isn't anyone left to see."

In the summer after we graduated, she started going to the strip mall parking lot on Friday nights, where all of the bored kids went to drink and smoke weed and spray paint obscenities. She invited me incessantly, and eventually I gave in. I sat on the curb and nursed the only beer I could get my hands on, while two hockey boys pushed her around in a shopping cart, the wheels rattling hard against the cracked pavement.

"Never look a hockey player directly in the eyes," she told me once. "They'll take it as a challenge, like bears or gorillas." When the boys got tired, they all lined up in front of the wall and threw glass bottles at the disabled parking sign.

She kissed my cheek at the end of the night, her tequila breath burning against my skin. I told her I was afraid for her, but she just kissed me again and said that Brad was pretty much sober and his truck had airbags. The other one walked me home, his hands tucked flat in his skinny jeans, his mullet flipping out from his backward cap. He was shorter than me, so I slumped and took small steps until we got to the doorstep, where he casually groped my chest and told me Gail said I might be game for a good time.

"I think I have alcohol poisoning," I said, and ran inside. I called her three times with no answer. She showed up on my porch the next morning and handed me iced tea and ketchup chips, stolen from the gas station. I didn't bring it up, and she never asked me out again.

A large brown moth flies straight over our heads into the porch light. It hits it hard, sizzles loud and twitches, before falling with a heavy thud between us. It lies with its wings splayed out, thick furry thorax on full display and legs bent and twisted over the husk of its body.

"When do you go back then?" she asks.

"Two days, class starts on the 4th."

"Are you still living in residence?"

"No, me and some of the girls you met have a place in town. You should visit. We have a pull-out couch."

"Maybe. Depends when I get back."

"I'll be there all year, you just have to let me know."

She has visited me at school once. I showed her the city, took her around campus and downtown. I was excited to show her the skyscrapers, shiny and taller than anything either of us had ever seen. She nodded with pursed lips when we saw them. "Very cool," she said. I introduced her to some of my friends and professors at a wine and cheese event the department was throwing. She didn't say much then, only chewed and chewed her inner cheek. When we drove back afterwards, she stared straight out the windshield and said she was glad I made friends.

She only called me once after that, in January. I asked if she'd been drinking. "Some," she said. "Everyone's here." She held out the phone so I could hear the garbled voices. "Everyone's here," she said again.

"I should probably get going," I say. "It's getting late." She stands and walks me back through her house, past her father asleep on the couch and the dogs with saliva swinging from their mouths. "I hope you have a great time on your trip," I say. She looks at me for a long moment, then fingers the lace-trimmed hem of my cardigan.

"This is nice Sarah. It suits you," she says. "The glasses too."

"Thank you." I look for something to complement on her body. Her long dark hair. Her lace choker. Her dad's slouchy leather jacket. The silence rolls on. We stand and shuffle a little. Behind her is a picture of us, fourteen years old, framed and hanging over the fireplace. Our young arms are wrapped around each other, our heads tucked together as if touching was our natural state of being.

"So," she says.

"Alright."

"I'll see you around then."

"See you around." The door squeaks on my way out. I walk home the old way, down small gravel streets. Past the gas station, the oil refinery, a couple cows still out in the field.



El Jax

I

Late at night, we all drift toward bed. Something sweet always waits for morning.

April promising its small resurrections.

The room glows the way rooms do when everyone is half-asleep, suspended in that soft drift where the day loosens its grip and the future steps forward quietly, like a cat slipping into the hallway. The kids whisper *nighty night* in those soft, high voices, as if the day itself were listening in for its cue. And maybe it is. Maybe the day is always eavesdropping on the ways we leave it, taking notes for how it might greet us again.

I stay awake a little longer, letting the hush settle. The mind at this hour feels like the shallow edge of the sea—light still reaches it, but reshaped, bent, made strange. Clarity arrives the way it does underwater: not as certainty, but as an outline you're compelled to follow.

Outside, the wind presses against the balcony rails.

For a moment I imagine it carrying a scatter of seagulls, the way a current bears driftwood; then I recognize it for what it is—air moving across distance, gathering whatever stories it can lift. In San Carlos, even the wind feels conscripted into narrative. It arrives wearing voices from

the coast, rumors of tides and travelers, as if it expects you to listen and decide what belongs to you.

And that, I realize, is the bargain here: the world speaks, but it expects you to answer back, to sort the borrowed from the true.

On the nightstand, a post-it curls at the edges: *Let's get burgers!*

You wrote it earlier, half-joking, but the kids treat it like prophecy.

In the morning they point to it with reverence, as if a neon sign had flickered to life above their pillows sometime in the night. It's nothing (ink on a yellow square) yet it brightens their whole bodies, a joy so quick and clean it feels like the kind of data ethnographers never quite know how to record. The kind that matters but disappears the moment you try to measure it. We slide into our flip-flops and drift through the rising heat toward the lobby.

You hold the smallest one's hand; his fingers, always sticky with something sweet, anchor you to the morning. The day shimmers as if it's just now being invented.

The sun comes up with that newborn softness, unarguing, almost tender, and for a moment it's hard to know whether we're simply a family on vacation or extras in the long, slow drama the coastline puts on for whoever shows up to watch.

This is what I mean when I think about how places communicate. Not in the neat circuitry of signs, but in the felt things: the warmth on your arms, the color the sky chooses for the day, the way a certain slant of light persuades you, briefly, that the world means well.

A coastline has its own grammar. Small cues, inflections. The pause before a wave breaks. The hush after. A syntax made of invitation and restraint. And we half-awake, sun-drowsy, soft-footed, are living on time borrowed from someone kinder than we deserve, held for a moment inside that grammar, believing (because the air tells us to), that morning always comes with sweetness.

Yet even then, under the brightness, something flickers: a sense of being observed, of moving through a place that has learned to perform itself. I notice it first in how the palm trees seem too perfect, too willing; how the pool tiles gleam like an advertisement for themselves.

San Carlos has a way of offering beauty that knows its value, and expects you to know it too. You don't resent it. You recognize it. You understand that landscapes can be mirrors when they want to be.

We get the burgers. They're nothing special. But the kids devour them like sacrament, grease and laughter forming their own dialect across the table. And I think: Even this is data; a way a place tells you what it thinks you came for.

What it hopes you'll see.

II

Driving out later, the motels slump in the rear-view-dusty, sunburnt signage peeling like old scabs, as if trying to remember who they were built for.

The ghosts of vacationers float behind the curtains: retirees from Saskatchewan, middle-aged couples from Hermosillo, surfers who arrived with too much hope or too little cash.

Some buildings look abandoned but aren't. Some look open but feel empty. You can't always tell the difference in desert towns; the light plays tricks, or the economy does.

Double trailers rumble down the Sonoran highway, those long, silver beasts tracing the old ditches the way memory follows its own grooves quietly, faithfully, with no need to announce itself. Truckers know the stretch so well they could drive it blindfolded, though they never would.

The road is a bloodstream here, connecting inland harvests to coastal appetites, hauling citrus north and shrimp south, tugging histories across the asphalt one axle at a time.

El Jax flashes past with its shrimp platters and its line of Canadians waiting for noon.

Their faces have that particular northern softness—the look of people who survived another winter and have temporarily outsourced their happiness to the desert. Sunlight tattoos itself on everything it touches: steering wheels, signposts, the backs of your knuckles resting on your thigh. And once you notice the way light claims things here, you can't unsee it.

It's like the sun is overeager, marking territory.

We pass a restaurant with swings and Yaqui art—a small museum disguised as a place to buy lunch. A wall hangs heavy with deer dancers painted mid-stride, their hooves lifted as if they're deciding whether to land in this century or the next.

The past sits at every table, patient before conquest, uninterested in whether the tourists take notice. It doesn't need their affirmation to be real.

"Look," you say, pointing at a hand-carved mask in the window. "You think that's original?"

What you mean is, *Which parts of culture are being sold and which are being preserved? Which gestures are invitations and which are compromises?*

Even paradise has a backstory, and it gleams like a buffet table: translated menus under gold-framed saints, fibers woven with pilgrimage and salt.

A cheeseburger beside a deer dancer.

A margarita resting next to a poem carved into mesquite.

Tourism theory would call this *semiotic layering*, but it feels more like a palimpsest of wanting economies constructed from someone's idea of elsewhere, or someone else's idea of home. The sun keeps burning overhead—no breeze, just the thin veil of history stretched tight across the city, humming like power lines before a storm.

Global South meets global leisure; migration routes intersect with rental-car itineraries. Here, the road is both infrastructure and story, carrying truckers, tourists, and workers through the same corridor of dust-shaped time.

I watch a family on the roadside. Their sedan is packed so full the trunk won't close. A mother adjusts a child's backpack; a boy stacks rocks by the tire. They aren't here for the beach. They aren't here for the sunset. Their story is moving north, toward a border that shifts shape depending on who approaches it.

“Do you think they'll make it?” you ask quietly.

You don't say to where. You don't have to.

The sky, endless, pitiless, says nothing back.

III

We were dancing then somewhere between revival and memory, moving with the music of a place that knows how to begin again whenever you ask it to.

There's something about coastal towns: they refuse to stay still. They're always opening, closing, reinventing, breaking, blooming.

A tide is a storyteller; a coastline is a stagehand quietly rearranging the set.

San Carlos rises out of its volcanic bones, spilling into the turquoise gulf like an overture rehearsed for centuries. Everything here feels deliberate and effortless at once. Fishing tournaments. Sailboats mapping their slow procession across the bay, as if marking time for something older than tourism, older than leisure, older than the world we keep trying to narrate into neat categories.

And beneath the postcard surface, the quiet truths: this town is a media zone, a site where global and local narratives lie over each other like semi-transparent film.

People arrive carrying interpretations the way others carry

luggage-quietly, without noticing the weight. Long-haul drivers dropping south from Hermosillo with radios tuned to border reports. Retirees steering golf carts toward the marina, following sun patterns like migratory instinct. Charter crews from Mazatlán lingering just long enough to rinse salt from the decks.

Line cooks on break, texting home in quick bursts of voice and breath.

A fisherman's widow scanning the horizon as if the sea might offer an afterthought.

The cast keeps rotating, and the town adjusts its posture-sometimes subtly, sometimes all at once, like a stagehand shifting the light without announcing the change.

Maybe that's why bilingualism feels less like skill and more like gear I strap on.

Two languages friction against each other, not as tectonics this time, but as weather, pressure systems meeting, redirecting, deciding what storms to make and what to spare.

You ask, "Which language are you in right now?"

And the honest answer is, whichever one is watching the other. Not exhaustion-attention.

Because here, meaning drifts. It shifts like currents along the bay. And if I let my guard down, even for a minute, the story snaps shut around me, written in a voice that isn't mine.

There's a sacredness to all of it; not loud, not ceremonial, just the daily ritual of people returning with their own reasons.

Each artesanía a small hymn made visible.

Stories passed from hand to hand.

The economy lifting, the spirit humming behind it.

And then there's us.

We built Sonora from sand and yearning, from the mysteries we never found the words to hold. Somewhere in that making, this brick-built life turned into a scatter of birds-nests emptied by time, rooms left painted in some wistful shade of blue.

An architecture of almos^ts.

Yet among all that fades, bright flickers remain: early echoes of our past growing inside the present, light scattering forward into whatever future is willing to gather it.

That's the thing about memory—it migrates too.

It lifts off, circles, returns in new plumage.

But tonight I don't want to talk about the far-off, the hypothetical, the academic frame.

I want the small house we loved; its green marble countertop, the way you measured out the juice for mimosas, the splash of sunlight that hit the floor just right around 10:15 a.m.

Your sister's kids splashing in the pool until their lips blurred slightly blue.

The days stretched long back then, and joy rose through them like bubbles in a glass someone forgot to finish. I kept trying to bottle the sunsets—as if that would save us somehow. As if preservation were the same as devotion.

And you always outside by the telescope, a small child folded into your lap, showing him the thin crescent moon, calling it a toenail.

"Look," you'd tell him, "the sky left a clipping behind."

Overhead, some distant star was breaking and remaking itself in its private theatre of light, but your nephew didn't care—he was too enamored with your silver nail polish, the way it winked when you moved your hand.

Kids see the universe, but they choose their constellations.

His attention, loyal and wandering, always found its way back to you.

I think that's where something finally came into focus-something about communication that had nothing to do with talk. It lived instead in the quiet arrangements we make with the world: where we stand in relation to one another, what we choose to look at, the small devotions we don't name.

A coastline can press its point without a single word; a gesture can hold its own logic, if you're patient enough to watch it unfold. And a child, entranced by the quick flash of silver on a fingernail, can reveal more about the need to locate oneself here, now, beside someone who feels like safety, than any theory on belonging ever manages.

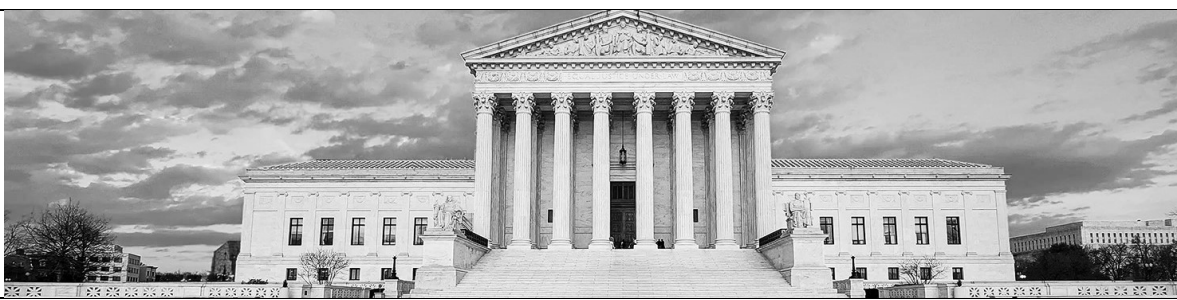
The world offers these disclosures briefly, like minnows skimming the surface.

You notice them only if you're still enough, or lucky enough, before they flick into the deeper water. Bright flickers.

Coastline grammar.

The day listening.

Everything communicating, whether we hear it or not.



The Supreme Law of Tory Martin

Preamble

We, the Faculties of Tory Martin, in order to form a more perfect person, establish boundaries, ensure sound decisions, provide for our basic wellness, and secure the blessings of inner peace to ourselves, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the whole soul of Tory Martin.

Article I – The Legislative Branch

Section 1. All observatory and evaluatory powers herein granted shall be vested in the combined Senses of Tory Martin, consisting of a sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, all established upon birth.

Section 2. The Sight shall be composed of the eyes. They should never blindly believe what is shown and stay ever ready to perceive illusions.

Section 3. The Hearing shall be composed of the ears. Discernment will be their most pertinent responsibility. To distinguish between truth and lies, beneficial and detrimental, hopeful and mournful, is crucial for the wholeness of the body.

Section 4. The Smell shall be composed of the nose. Their benefit is the most subtle but perhaps the most important. Taste and the Head depend on it for perception.

Section 5. The Taste shall be composed of the tongue. They should remain mindful of the taste of words as this sense is the most vulnerable

of all. Everything that seems good, isn't. They must always maintain control of proportion.

Section 6. The Touch shall be composed of the skin. Should the eyes ever falter, touch will show the way. From the warmth of a friend, to the coldness of an enemy, their main function is perception. They must be mindful to never get too close to danger.

Article II – The Executive Branch

Section 1. The Head shall contain and protect the brain. Through decisions to provide proper exercise, avoid harmful substances, and engage the Fight or Flight response as appropriate in the face of danger, the brain, and the Head protecting it, promise to serve a lifelong term.

Section 2. The Head shall, secondmost, command the body; foremost, think clearly in all situations despite fear, anger, stress, and anxiety. It should never act promptly. Instead, when a decision is to be made, it should set aside, at least, an entire minute to consider all options before issuing a relevant command to the appropriate areas of the body.

Article III – The Judicial Branch

Section 1. The Heart shall hold the judicial power of the body. Through compassion and empathy, past experiences and intuition, and above all, morality, the Heart will share decision making with the Head.

Section 2. When faced with a decision, the Head will operate first, evaluating the relevant facts. When the Head reaches a decision, the Heart will compare it with personal history, hold it beside right and wrong, if necessary, find wisdom in external sources, then approve or veto the decision based on the weight of morality. However, such decisions aren't always in the best interest of the whole body, so the Head can override the veto with a more levelheaded resolution; herein called a "better decision".

Article IV – The Bodily System

The Bodily System comprises organs and limbs. Upon injury, The Head shall secure wellness for the Bodily System as quickly and sufficiently as possible. Upon times of high stress and anxiety, the senses shall seek comforts and pleasantries as necessary; however, the Head and the Heart will restrict this power as necessary for the good of the whole soul.

Done as a result of continual poor decisions, heartbreak, and a steady spiral of losing the soul to trying to be someone it isn't, on the first day of a new life, Tory Martin signs her name in promise and remembrance to never become lost again.

Article V – Amendments

Amendment I - Senses and Seeking Comfort

To prevent the Heart from allowing the sense to excess in comfort, the Heart will decide only in the matters of distinguishing when comfort is desired and necessary. The Head will monitor the Sense's activity in seeking and securing comfort.

Amendment II - Grudges

When someone has committed a past transgression, The Head will no longer be the sole governor of grudges, resentment, and any related emotion. The Head will simply remember the transgression, while the Heart will weigh actions to morality alone, then send the decision to the Head which will only evaluate it in accordance with self-preservation. These decisions come with no power of veto of either branch, or else the body will fall into the error of overthinking.



The Precedent Law of Tory Martin

The Decision of Donte Mickleson, *Head and Heart Reporter* #1, 2018

Facts

Donte Mickleson is a divorcee, aged 27, with three children to two different mothers, neither of which is his ex-wife despite the last child being born during their marriage. Despite this, he maintains a positive yet distanced friendship with his ex-wife. He hasn't physically visited his children in a few years because they live out of state, but he calls often. However, Donte is a final year architecture student with plans of starting a firm after gaining some career experience in strategic companies.

Mickleson is extremely ambitious having taken extra classes to aid his career and joined various organizations for networking. He also works part-time as an assistant for a small architecture firm, a competitive position he managed to secure.

Mickleson is also extremely attractive.

Head's Opinion

Ambitions are a good sign; however, Mickelson has significantly more to say about himself rather than his children, or any of those closely related to him.

All Mickelson's claims should be, frankly, disregarded as he has already proven that he isn't loyal and will certainly prove this should a relationship continue.

Therefore, as the Head of the Tory Martin, with the power vested therein, Donte Mickleson should be given a final goodbye.

Heart's Opinion

Previous personal experience has proven that those who are ambitious but do little to maintain relationships, especially familial relationships, are particularly selfish. Claims of loose relationships with exes are typically shorthand for unfinished relationships. Finally, college breaks provide ample time for Mickelson to visit his children, thus there is no excuse for having not done so in years.

Therefore, as the Heart of the Tory Martin, with the power vested therein, Head's decision is approved.



From Here to There

The train station always draws a throng of people, especially around the holidays. The most wonderful time of year, and nobody's hip-checks or unconstrained B.O. will let you forget it. I'll have you know: I'm not a grinch, at least in the Jim Carrey-sense of the word. In fact, Christmas has historically been my favorite holiday. Sure, when you're little, it's about toys, never-ending chocolate, and a jolly fat man beyond easy explanation. Then, you get old and the world gets real; suddenly it's just coming out of the cold for a minute, and finding something bigger than yourself to take comfort in. I don't know about this year, though.

I bring my aching wrist to my cheek, a feline gesture that makes it hurt less for some reason. My knuckles turned out fine, shockingly, but the inside of my hand snapped, crackled, and popped in a few places upon impact. And I just know the asshole is going to comment on it, make some big spectacle about it like his input matters, instead of apologizing for forcing us to take the goddamned train—

“Bertie!” My brother, the only person left I can count on in my life, pulls me into a bear hug from behind. I pretend to wriggle out of it before turning to him and reciprocating, playing my part in the same comedy routine since we were six. “How are ya? What happened to the hand?”

Called it. “All good, all good. Slipped on some ice outside my place, took an awkward fall. How are you?”

I should’ve had a better lie in the chamber, but he takes it down just fine. “Sublime. Another day of listening to bitchy customers and whatever Courtney Love’s calling music these days,” he says with a grimace. The GI bill helped him become a curatorial assistant at the Chicago Institute of Art, then budget cuts made him a barista next door. Still, not bad for a guy who spent most of middle school in detention for fighting. “They say I’m a good foamer, whatever that’s supposed to mean. I just like filling the cup all the way to the brim and taking bets on who’ll spill all over themselves.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a little evil?”

“Eh. Just Mrs. Demarco in the third grade.” He shrugs and scratches the back of his neck, as if my inquisition was much more serious. “I’m making their coffee, I’m allowed to have a little fun. That’s not evil, that’s just fair. And I’m sure whoever’s working the dining car today has the same philosophy.”

“That could be.” Living in the same city as your brother comes with its perks. Travel’s a lot easier, someone’s there to drive you home when you’re too drunk, and you’ll never have to go to a movie alone, even for the weird ones no one else will see. We try to hang out when we both have free time, which is probably less than we should. But that particular problem can be crossed off my list for now, a side effect of my social calendar being blown open in an instant. Silver linings and all. “Y’know, I doubt they’re gonna have any foamers on board. Bush probably had them repo’d for the extra two cents. It’s just black coffee that tastes like char now.”

“And we’ll drink it all the same.” We head over to some seats by our platform, close enough to watch the steady stream of route delays and cancellations that surely await. “So, what’s new with you? How are... things?”

And then there are the downsides of sharing a city as your brother, namely that he’ll hear about your life imploding before you get

the chance to tell him yourself. Somebody talked to somebody else, who overheard it and repeated it to him, with what they'll claim are only the very best of intentions. "It's... been a change, that's for sure."

"A change?"

"Yeah."

"A change."

"That's what I said, Jake."

"Well of course it's a change, Bertie!" He moves to smack the back of my head, but I can dodge in the nick of time. "You went from wedding bells to divorced in three months, that's not nothing."

To hear the timetable from somebody else, somebody (hypothetically) on my side, knocks the wind out of me. Living day-to-day is a great way to get out of a crisis, but I didn't know just how much time I'd put behind me. "Not divorced," I whisper, trying to get the scope of it all firmly between my hands. "Bad source, wherever you got it from."

"Well, you're not together, that's for sure." Thanks, asshole. I forgot.

"Annulled. Papers cleared a week ago. It's faster. Certainly easier for former newlyweds."

He sits up and lets his hand rest on mine. "I'm sorry about that, man. She was really..." His voice trails off, trying to find the right adjective. He can insult the woman a diseased part of me still loves, or compliment the demon who decided to blow up my life for no good reason; he instead settles for silence and empathetic eyes.

"Yeah, she really was." I'll fill in that blank later tonight, sleepless in bed, staring into nothing in particular above me. It's been that same insomniac routine since the day we made it official, a courthouse date that ended with a handshake and well-hidden tears.

We sit for a moment, addressing the ghost of a person we both

know is alive and well. The poltergeist presents itself all around the house, in the little things we did for each other that will never occur again. Making coffee for one, missing the familiar toothbrush on the other side of the sink, not making a bed for two warm bodies to muss up. We can remember and relitigate the facts of our dissolution, human memories contorting themselves into whatever narrative we want to believe. But routine kept the long score of our relationship, and that's far more durable.

“Why the train, man?” I ask, desperately trying to keep her after-image out of my thoughts. “The flight to Milwaukee isn't bad, and we can both afford it at this point.”

“You're not getting out of this conversation, y'know.”

“I know, oh brother of mine. But, more importantly, you're not getting out of explaining why sitting for five hours in a shaky train car is better than one on a plane.”

It's a clumsy reason, his face is spelling concern, and I know I look like shit in so many ways. Somehow, despite or because of all those reasons, he accepts the topic change with a sigh.

“There's certain a moral virtue to taking the train,” he begins, “that no other form of transportation can claim. You have to wait longer to get where you're going, longer than the rest of the world deems necessary. Your route is precisely locked into the earth, up-close and personal with the terrain instead of miles above it.”

“So inconvenience is moral virtue? Then why allow yourself the luxury of travelling at all?” A flash of dandelion yellow sticks out from the crowd. Someone's jacket, maybe, that my eyes can't help but stick to.

“Well you have to go places, and heading home to see your family is the right thing to do.” I can't argue with that. I'm more focused on the way the jacket ripples in the cold, how some errant wind makes it shudder. “But to be in the land while you do it — not above it like a plane, or on some sterile road — that's special. You're firmly ingrained, moving with whatever mountains or rivers show up in your path.”

The jacket starts to tug on some faint string of memory. I almost can't look at the face it's attached to; I have a feeling, something in the shape of old dread and a new type of fear, but nothing certain. Yet. "But what's the actual point?" I whisper. "You don't find any secrets of the universe along the way, beyond what the dining car can charge to a captive audience. Your third eye is trained right on the seat ahead of you, nowhere else."

It's her. It's Nat. It's my ex-wife/not-really-wife/first-love/last-chance, standing in the distance with a yellow parka I got her some years ago. She's in the station, a dream and a nightmare, with a blurry figure but long, unmistakable shadow. Jake goes on about effort and devotion to the natural space, some hippie bullshit I know he didn't come up with, but I'm only half paying attention. I throw my bag over my shoulder, ignoring the scream of my busted hand, and start walking.

"Bertie? Where are you — shit, hold on." Jake gets his things and starts following me to no place in particular, some place that's not here. "What are you doing? Our train's that way!"

It is, but so is Nat's specter, so I retreat from our train's platform, in hope that another route will present itself, but every little beam of light is the light refracted in her tears, every cutting voice above the station's speakers is hers, the same one that screamed at me about my wants and her needs and our life, because I know somebody and somebody knows me, all my shit and how I look without a shirt and how I take my eggs, and they're out there, haunting me, waiting for me, and I'm running through those echoes now, across Christmas decorated-vomit and fake plastic trees up and down the station's halls, and I'm running, and I'm running, and I don't see that yellow jacket anywhere else but my mind, which is everywhere I can possibly comprehend, because there's no exit to this feeling no matter how hard I try, no exit to the knowledge that I hurt somebody and somebody hurt me, even in love and life and years of being known I cannot escape that primal fact that I hurt somebody and somebody hurt me, I take a left around a row of stores, then up some stairs to the station's lounge, because I am still running and I can't stop, I can hear Jake behind me, apologizing to the people I rush into and trying to keep up with my nerves, you don't grow out of some things, it seems, I

scan for a precious moment, trying to find the coat and my breath—

“What the hell was that?” Jake’s hands shake my shoulders, hard but not violent. “We board in two minutes, dumbass, we don’t have time for whatever this is.”

“Shut up.” I’m still looking for that face, trying to map out an escape from—

“I’m sorry?”

“I said shut the hell up.”

Jake looks down at me, as always. He lets one of my shoulders go, before squeezing my busted hand. Hard. White-hot pain jumps up my wrist, purging my brain of any thoughts not about my imminent animalistic condition. I try to swing back with my free arm, but he only catches it and pulls me closer; a stranger would think we’re hugging, and maybe we are, in our own fucked up way.

“You wanna scrap, we can scrap. We both know how that ends,” Jake whispers into my ear, rolling his thumb over each of my sore knuckles. “Or you can spare yourself the trouble and tell me what’s actually going on. All of it.”

I take another look at the staircase, but he senses my hesitation and pulls me in tighter. Eventually, I vomit up something I can register as words. “Nat’s down there. By the train. Saw her, had to go.”

“Shit. Actually?” I nod, and he takes a quick glance at the station below him. I know he can’t see her, but that doesn’t stop him from dragging his hand across his mouth like he’s stumbled into a much larger problem. “Alright. Alright. Don’t... don’t try to run again.” He lets me go and reaches into his bag, procuring a Cubs hat. “I left my Brewers hat at home, I know this is difficult for you, but—” The station’s loudspeakers chime in, letting us know our train is about to pull away. “—but we have to go now. Can you make it there?”

He pulls the hat firm over my head as I nod. “Y-yeah.” It threatens to cover my eyes, eyes she always claimed to love, but I get just

enough of a window to see his worried smile.

“Alright, let’s move.” He guides me down the stairs, as safely and slowly as the situation will let him. I’m torn between watching my footfalls and the way ahead of me, seas of people in a holiday rush for the exit. We start slow, but I gradually let Jake speed us up over the station tile en route to our escape. I swallow down my earlier panic, retracing the steps of my flight from the other side now. Any shame I feel, and I can’t help but feel some, is drowned out by that familiar fear of anything approaching yellow. It all looks familiar; it all looks strange. But Jake’s whispering some quiet guidance, maybe even affirmation, that my panic turns into warbled distortions of air and tone. We never needed the dignities of precise speech, anyway. We’re brothers. Pain and comfort will always be intertwined with us.

“Two for Milwaukee, just in time,” my brother declares to the station worker. Have we made it that far already? He shoves our tickets into someone’s face before moving us out to the platform. It’s somewhat scarcely populated, us being as late as we are, giving me the confidence to hold my head high in this new world. The outdoor chill snakes up any length of exposed skin, the snow is beginning to fall, but my mind is too concerned with the light above me. I am free. I am free. I am free.

It’s a simple matter from there. So simple, my previous fright feels almost comical. We board the train car, with a jolly attendant imparting us with season’s greetings and seat numbers. Ten and eleven: the perfect base digit and the lagging prime behind it. We both throw our bags down, but Jake doesn’t want to let me go just yet. “You alright?” he says, taking a final scan of our train car.

“Yeah,” I mumble. “Yeah, I, uh, I’m okay. Thank you for all of that.”

“Of course.” Jake finally releases me with a shoulder tap, before we take our seats. “You could’ve told me, you know,” he says. “I don’t like hearing about stuff like this second-hand, especially if it looks like this.”

“I know. I’m... I’m not sorry. I’m allowed my privacy.” He does

me the service of choking back his scoff, but I know that isn't what he wants to hear. "It's just been a hard week for me, and sharing just how much it sucked isn't what I felt like doing."

"Well, I believe that at least." He eyes up my hand despite my futile attempts at concealing it. "A lot more than you slipping and falling on some ice, that's for sure. They salted the sidewalks awhile ago, you know just as well as I do."

"Yeah." I could always just stick to the lie, tell him the sidewalk could've refroze and to go screw. "I did fall. In my apartment. Went hand-first into the drywall. Multiple times, actually." He cocks an eyebrow. "I'm, uh, pretty clumsy like that."

He leans forward and inspects my hand, now that the truth is more or less out in the open. "We can get this looked at when we're home. I'll cover for you in front of the folks, but you'll have to do better than a slip-and-fall." He looks up at me now, with the same crooked smirk I've been prying out of him since forever. "I've seen cats that hit harder, by the way."

I laugh, then he joins in, and it's all not quite as heavy anymore. It's one thing to know you're safe with somebody; but to know that they see you, that they took a look into the inner workings of you and decided that it's all okay, or even a bit funny, can make you feel like an actual person instead of a bundle of nerves and memories. It goes on for a bit, just us letting the air out a bit, until I spot the train carriage door open.

It's the yellow jacket.

The same one as before.

As always.

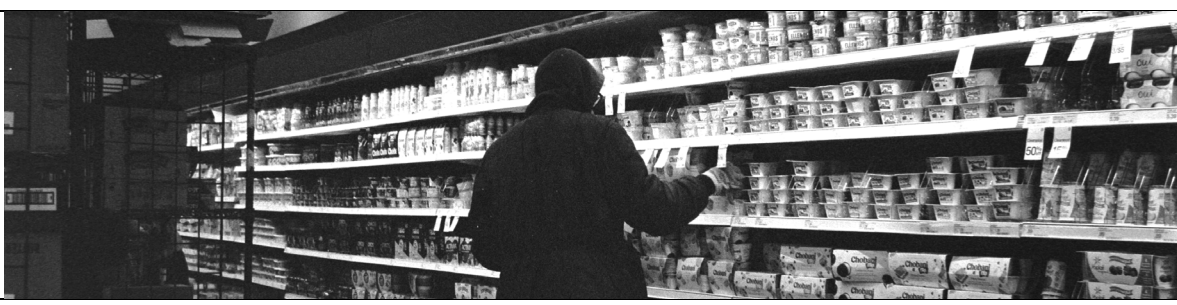
Moving down the aisle.

Attached to a body that scarred mine.

Attached to a face—

Attached to a completely different face.

It's not Nat. It's her jacket, the same jacket that had tormenting me across the station, but it's not her. It never was, just someone that happened to shop at the same store as I did. We make that passive eye contact strangers do, the one we all pretend is accidental, before she moves on down the train car. I cast my gaze out the window then, anywhere that's not Nat's lying memory. Jake's eyes follow mine, saying silent farewells to the noise of the station and all that it witnessed from us. I take one more look at the yellow jacket, with the lights of Chicago trickling in from the train's window. Both seem to get smaller as the journey actually begins, pulling away from the city and any sense of surety I had in myself. But I have company for the ride, and that will have to be enough.



Rule of Threes

Jacqueline was at the grocery store when it happened.

Head stuck through an open freezer door, arm fully jammed into the farthest shadowed crevice to reach the last box of pizza pockets, she had long kissed her pride goodbye. In the span of a single minute, Jacqueline had smacked her head on the frozen shelf at least two times, dropped her car keys into that strange crevice between the door and the bottom rack, and knocked at least five other packaged bags of tater tots onto the floor. Throughout it all, that discordant song about monsters and ghouls warbled relentlessly through the overhead speakers, and she was quickly tiring of it.

Truthfully, Jacqueline had never *hated* Halloween, per se. There was a time in her life when she found the spirit of it all endearing—a time when she and Luke would take her little brothers trick-or-treating in matching handmade costumes that always inevitably fell apart by the end of the night. After the twins were tucked in and asleep, they would curl up on the couch together to watch cheesy horror movies and complain about the corny special effects. Really, it was just that Jacqueline found the tacky costumes and perpetual marathons of slasher movies promptly lost their charm after living through the real thing.

But there was no food in the house, her father's shift wouldn't

end until the evening, and Jeremy had asked for pizza pockets. Jacqueline would be damned if she ever denied either of her brothers anything they asked of her.

It took another two minutes of straining to wrench that cursed box out of the freezer. Just for good measure, Jacqueline made sure to hit her head one more time on the way out as well, swearing as ice flaked off and into her hair. She flung the pizza pockets into her basket with a huff. It bounced off the oversized box of sugary cereal and smushed the browning bananas at the bottom.

Luke had liked bananas. Banana milkshakes from that diner a few blocks away from his house, in particular.

Shaking her head, Jacqueline swung the basket onto her arm and headed for the cashiers. It wasn't lost on her that the horrid song on the speakers had just looped all over again, but she'd simply attributed that to some poor middle-aged worker's idea of a festive Halloween spirit.

Luke used to claim Jacqueline had a habit of spotting signs where there were none—flickering street lamps, sudden silences in crowded spaces, car radios playing the very songs she had been humming seconds earlier, hooded strangers lurking in empty alleyways—but she always laughed it off back then.

Vigilance, she had called it.

Paranoia, he would counter with a twinkle in his eye.

Whether vigilance or paranoia, in the end, neither was enough to tip her off to the only sign that ever mattered. And now Luke was dead.

The speakers were probably just broken anyway. This wouldn't be the first time.

Jacqueline's family shopped at the corner store because prices were cheap, not because of the calming ambiance. If the consequences of affordable prices were bad music and shoddy speakers, Jacqueline could live with that.

Striding through the aisle of novelty chocolates and assorted candy packs, she forced her eyes away from the gaggle of teenagers huddling in the walkway. Their mouths fell open like inarticulate trouts as she passed.

A lot of the kids she went to school with had taken to doing that lately—just staring. No one knew how to talk to the girl plagued by an unshakeable cloud of death.

Their sympathy was well-intentioned, maybe, but nonetheless an undisguised attempt to assuage their own guilt. They had liked Luke, not Jacqueline. They mourned his loss, not hers. The fact of the matter was, before she had ever begun dating him, these kids were the very same ones who left foul-mouthed letters in her locker about her mother's death five years prior being nothing more than a last-ditch attempt to get away from her. Their sympathy could never erase their actions, and Jacqueline would never forget that.

Still, she held her breath until they were out of sight. She sensed they did the same.

After stepping over the black stain leaking from beneath the wilting flower display and hearing that horrid monster song loop for the tenth time, she finally settled into a checkout line. Conveniently, it was only then that she also noticed the distinct lack of any key-sized weight in her left jacket pocket.

Jacqueline patted both sides just in case. Then she dug through her pants pockets. When that was futile, she pulled out the pouch she kept tucked along the inner seam of her jacket.

Nothing turned up. She'd left her keys somewhere else—they were probably still sitting in that crack between the shelves and the freezer door.

Heaving a sigh, Jacqueline spun around. She could survive passing the teenagers one more time if it meant she'd actually have a vehicle to leave in. Better yet, maybe she'd take the long way around just to avoid them. She could even sneak by the snack aisle and grab herself a bag of

cookies to eat on the way home, just for the trouble.

She made it three steps forward before stopping in her tracks.

The teenagers were still frozen in place, brows furrowed, mouths agape. Jacqueline was used to people gawking, but they never usually stared for this long, and they never stayed entirely still. The group wasn't even looking at her anymore, either. All eyes were transfixed on something completely invisible, mere inches away from her. Even for a group as despicable as them, holding that pose for so long seemed excessive. If this was a prank—something they hadn't dared attempt ever since she and Luke got together—it was the strangest one Jacqueline had ever seen.

Oddly enough, everything around her had gone abnormally quiet as well. All noise had dulled except for that wretched song still dragging on through the crackling speakers.

She spared a forlorn glance toward the exit before tightening her grip on the grocery basket. Her car keys were in the freezer. The pizza pockets were melting. Jeremy was waiting.

Jacqueline made it another astonishing three steps around the corner before startling backward. Every single person in the produce department was frozen. The married couple arguing in the corner; the child standing in a shopping cart and the mother scolding him; the elderly man inspecting a bag of oranges; the two little girls on their tiptoes reaching for a box of strawberries—the entire room was stocked to the brim with uncannily lifelike mannequins. None of them were moving.

A horrid kind of dread flooded Jacqueline's chest as she hesitantly turned back. Her eyes swiveled faster than her head could follow.

The worker bagging groceries.

The cashier counting fives in the register.

The mother holding a wailing child on her hip. The lady sorting through a bouquet of roses.

They were stuck just like the teenagers in the candy aisle. Every conversation had come to a halt. The cracked light panel near the door had stopped flickering. The sounds of traffic, normally obnoxious even from inside the store, were completely absent. Even a fly drifting in Jacqueline's periphery had frozen midair.

All motion in the store had completely ceased aside from the distorted, crackling song over the speakers and Jacqueline's own ragged breathing.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

That night, five months ago, when Luke and Jacqueline had been a few paces short of reaching the door of that dingy diner for a stupid banana milkshake, a man had shouted. They'd turned to find him standing still beneath a streetlamp. He wore a black hoodie and a pair of muddied jeans. He had a beard and brown eyes and would have looked utterly and unbelievably average if it hadn't been for the glistening blade of the knife in his hand.

He demanded Luke's wallet and Jacqueline's purse and everything in their pockets. They handed it all over without complaint. When the man didn't run away, Luke begged him to let them leave. *You have everything we own*, he'd pleaded, *just let us go. We don't want any trouble.* But the man didn't leave. He smiled instead.

With the rest of his face plunged into darkness by the shadows of his hood, his grin was almost glowing. When his lips parted—slowly, languidly—they revealed two perfectly even rows of teeth, all on display at the exact same time. His smile was too wide, like an invisible string had punctured the edges of his mouth and was yanking them farther apart than humanly possible. His cracked lips were straining. His eyes were twitching.

I've been following you for a while, he replied, knife glinting in his hand.

This is the debt you owe for your ignorance.

Jacqueline didn't care any longer to stand around and decipher if this freezing act was some kind of sick joke. She didn't care about the Halloween spirit or playful pranks or good-natured scares. When things came down to it, whenever her pounding heart threatened to rip past her ribcage and out of her chest, Jacqueline would always choose to run. She ran when she found the bullies' letters in her locker. She ran after Luke pushed her out of the way and took the man's knife into his chest at the diner.

Unflinchingly, she ran again now, abandoning her car keys and basket of old fruit, expired cereal, and thawing pizza pockets. Empty figurines of flesh and bone tumbled downward as soon as she pushed past them. Carts of groceries and neat candy displays joined in a cascading downward descent. She slipped on something slick while passing the registers, but quickly scrambled back to her feet.

Her left foot had just breached the metal barrier of the store's front door when a sharp, icy sensation shot through her right calf and ricocheted through her entire leg. She fell hard.

Thump.

The fluorescent lights overhead began flickering rapidly. Back against the dirt-covered concrete, not quite out of the store, Jacqueline's gaze fluttered between the lifeless statues skewed across the floor to her own frozen legs to the solitary clock above the glass doors that had begun to bleed downward as if it had never even been solid to begin with. When Jacqueline tried to scream, her voice caught in her throat, and she choked on the force of it.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Elsewhere, the pounding noise grew and distorted. Whatever she had initially mistaken for drum beats in the song or her own rabbiting

heartbeat was becoming glaringly real, and it was growing closer. Eyes stuck staring at the melting clock, Jacqueline's dread only grew upon noticing its thin hands, still hopelessly clinging to the numbers on its rim. 3:33.

Luke had not believed in signs. But Jacqueline did. Bad things happened in threes. Death came in triplets. *First, forgetting her keys. Then running into the bullies. First, her mother. Then Luke.*

Now—

Out of the corner of her eye, Jacqueline caught a silhouette snaking toward her from behind the cash register. It was all thin, elongated limbs and pitch-black drapery like a shadow that had come to life and severed itself from its owner. The thing had no face, but its smile—it was too wide and perfectly aligned and white-as-snow, like a monster with a knife who was hellbent on using it.

It moved slowly, tilting its head. It was a predator toying with its prey. It wanted to study what it had caught before devouring it whole. It saw no point in rushing when it had already secured its victim. Closer and closer it crept, a low groaning noise ripping through the store each time it moved.

Jacqueline dug her fingers into the concrete until her nailbeds began to bleed. She scraped and clawed and kicked and pushed, but her useless body would not move. Tears seeped from her eyes. She begged. She pleaded.

“Please, just let me go,” she whispered, breath knocked out of her lungs. “I don’t want any trouble.”

Her cries fell on deaf ears—if the creature even had ears to begin with. This *thing* could not possibly understand mercy. It sought to consume. To destroy.

It inched forward, maw opening impossibly wide. *This is the debt you owe. This is the rule of threes.*

Once upon a time, years ago, Luke had scared her in an absurdly

fake monster mask.

He'd screamed an isolated, fleeting kind of yelp, laughed, and wrapped her in a hug so tight that Jacqueline promptly forgot she'd ever been scared in the first place. She wished now more than anything, against all odds, for the monster to pull back its non-face and reveal Luke's misty blue eyes. She longed to hear something other than ragged breaths torn from a pair of lungs that had run out of time—to hear a laugh from a smile that was comfortingly imperfect and lopsided.

But Jacqueline knew in an instant, just as she had known in that sterile hospital room holding her mother's hand and at that diner, cradling Luke's head as his blood permeated the cracks in the sidewalk, that there was no point in hoping. When she opened her eyes once more, with cerulean eyes and handmade costumes and banana milkshakes still ringing in her memory, she found the void inches away from her.

When it unhinged its jaw and pounced, she let it.



Perennials

Ring ring

The front door swings open, another customer walking in. He's tall, leering over the aisles with his dark shadow following after him, step by step. He observes my flowers, petals quivering under his gaze. Roses, daffodils, daisies. "How much?" He grunts, fingers toying with the stem of a sunflower. Its golden yellow glow looks sickly against his skin.

"Fifteen dollars," I say because I have to. "But it's really better to just buy seeds to grow them yourself, I can-" dirt and fertilizer spill onto my counter as he plops the flower down next to the register, hand still gripping the stem.

"I'll just take the seeds from the plant," he grumbles, tossing a crumpled twenty at me. I ring up and he snatches the change from my hand, leaving without another word. My sunflower's weeping face bobs in a sorrowful wave over his shoulder as he leaves.

Ring ring

The man is shorter this time, wrinkled fingers clasped as he looks around, a sluggish smile smeared across his face. It's the third week he's come by and I know he has no plans on stopping anytime soon. "Would you like to purchase anything?" My voice has become scratched and dull, no longer the cheery greeting I used to offer when I'd first started.

"No thanks," his whispered voice sends spiders down my spine. "I just like to look."

His eyes don't pull away from me for the remainder of his stay.

Ring ring

He wears a mask over his mouth, long coat pulled up to his neck. "Welcome," I greet, "are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Like you would know what to do," his voice is muffled by the fabric.

"Pardon?"

The man looks my flowers up and down. "This place is a dump. These need to be on display more, and they should have been trimmed weeks ago, you can barely see the petals behind all the green." My plants, my happy, healthy plants are poked and prodded, stems forced out of line as he pulls on their petals.

"These plants are young, they aren't expected to be colourful for another few-" He's snipping through my flowers before I can finish, a flash of silver snipping through the stems, my flowers cut down without care. "Stop!" I long to leap over the counter, tear the shears from his hands or perhaps use my own against him. But my feet remain chained to the ground, only unlocked by the store owner once my shift is over.

To keep any trouble from happening, he'd muttered, pulling the chains tighter until they'd dug into my skin.

"Leave them alone! What do you think you're doing?"

Snip snip snip. He works carelessly, jagged cuts and bruised petals drifting to the floor.

"There," he lifts the box of my brutalized flowers, thunking them in the front window. "You're welcome." A sheared flower head is crushed into the frame as the door swings shut behind him.

Ring ring

The shop owner rarely comes down to the storefront, let alone while I'm on shift. His wiry frame drifts between shelves, evaluating each plant. "What's this?" He carefully strokes a poinsettia, frowning at its full, green leaves.

"Pardon?" I'm not allowed to say much else in the shop, especially not to the owner.

"Why isn't it red?" He puckers his lips after each word, gazing at me expectantly.

"They're not ready. I need to put them in the dark for the leaves to die and turn red, they wouldn't survive for long enough after." This is obviously not the answer he wanted, glancing between me and the poor, little poinsettias.

"I'll take them to the closet now. They look so ugly like this."

"But-" the chains on my ankles clank as I reach out. "It's too-"

He glares at me over his shoulder as he carts my flowers away. "No one wants to see these ugly things in the store anyway. They'll look so much better once I've fixed them."

A stray green leaf peeks desperately out at me from under the closet door as I hang my apron. A week later, the owner bares his teeth in the semblance of a grin, my darling poinsettias red and wilted, flimsy flowers hanging on for life. "Beautiful," he murmurs. I don't say anything.

I'm not allowed to anyway.

Ring ring

The shop is getting empty. I used to love growing new flowers, gently tucking them in under moist dirt, the first few tendrils of green shyly reaching their way up into the light. I can't bring myself to grow more. As much as I hate the lack of company, I hate seeing them taken away more. Snatched, torn, ripped from me to be used as just another pretty object, starved of light and water in a fanciful prison before composted like rotten leftovers.

The man - they've all become The Man now, I haven't the care in me to differentiate them - frowns as I wordlessly give him the receipt. My last iris exits the door. I only have tulips left.

Ring ring

Ring ring

Ring ring

There are no flowers left. The shop is empty and I stand alone, a pink slip of paper in my hand. {Thank you for your service, but we no longer have any use for you in this establishment.}

That's it then. Hired as another pretty employee, locked inside all those years, and now tossed aside like yesterday's trash. I'm free. So why do I still feel the circle of the chains on my ankles?

Ring ring

The girl at the counter smiles cheerfully, greeting me with a wave. I don't listen, I already know the words. She's pretty. Prettier than I was. Certainly prettier than me now.

I don't remember what happened to the girl before me. Perhaps she came by too, with loathing in her heart, emptiness in her head. Perhaps she watched her replacement as I do now, the vengeful jealousy fading away as the swathe of men pour in and out of the door. Perhaps this girl will watch her successor in the same way. Watching once, only once, before walking away forever, the chains clinking round our ankles. We are all one in the same, a hundred lifetimes repeated over and over.

Just another pretty flower to be sold.

Stephanie Peterson



Return to the Hunter

At 21, I was about to watch a murder. Even if the motion light attached to the back of the two-car garage, or in Dad's case, a clunky, red Jeep and two Harleys-garage, bathed only a slice of the backyard in white gold, the yard's widest patch of grass unobstructed by flower beds or a swing set stayed purely lit like an arena. Waiting.

According to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, rabbit hunting has been on the decline since the decade where the world gripped with its second global war and Christian Dior debuted the New Look in France. Still, a quick online search and hunters—novices or experts—can find rabbit hunting guides to keep their curious minds full and their triggers on their shotguns warm. Start at dusk, the guides say. Scare them out of the thickets by stomping on timber slash. Stick to areas covered by tall weeds and shrubs. Shoot fast.

Unarmed and shivering, I hopped into the middle of the arena, where the grass sat half dormant as October matured into mid-month. Chicago Bears' blue pajama bottoms and a grey coat covered my body. A black claw clip kept my recently shampooed hair out of my face. My eyes still itched from the mascara I scrubbed off in the shower. The chilled air that once smelled of Nefty's cigarettes whispered against my exposed cheeks. If I screamed, Greta wouldn't listen; if I cried, Greta wouldn't listen. Not when her German Shepherd ears picked up the pounding heart of the Eastern cottontail rabbit she chased around the yard with the dark

sky overhead, pimpled with twinkles and airplanes. Growing too close to me, the rabbit circled my Fila gym shoes on a bum back leg that only meant my four-legged partner in crime could overtake it sooner. I shut my eyes.

Tonight failed to be the first time I had been so close to that rabbit. The same rabbit Joy, Greta's predecessor, used to chase around the backyard herself before a cancerous tumor robbed the light from her, we'd joke that they had a special agreement—Joy could chase the rabbit as long as the rabbit remain unharmed during his routine visits. And Joy had always held up her end of the agreement, for she'd often simply stare at the rabbit, who, rather than duck for cover in Mom's rosebush or make a hasty exit out one of the gaps beneath the fence, would eye her back with black marble eyes. Funnily enough, we gendered him but never named him. He was only Joy's rabbit friend.

#

My own encounter with Joy's rabbit friend occurred a little while after Joy took her last breath on a foreign blanket in the emergency vet clinic on Ridge Road. Her death in winter ushered in a warm spring perfumed by dirt and rain. I took advantage of one of the pale sunny days in probably March or April, when, after a morning of researching the Summer 2025 Olympic Games for an assignment, I wanted the last half hour before noon to myself. Grabbing the boombox Dad had ordered on Amazon, the one whose phantom tuning slider had us listening to classic rock on 97.1 FM the Drive one minute and a R&B song on 95.1 FM the next, I went out back to the swing set. After I plugged in the radio's cord, its tail, into the outlet on the back of the garage, staticky music hummed from the radio speakers and my arms rattled the swing's chains before I sat down. My legs pumped underneath me to a song I probably liked, and I soared above the aged gray privacy fence that held too many memories—chasing Joy around the pool, hitting the birdie with a racket for her to chase—and saw the in-ground pool in the yard behind ours. It laid closed with a black or blue cover, and the pasty slide near it watched over the pool like a warden did an inmate. No one hung outside.

When I glanced back into our yard, I spotted movement

underneath one of the white plastic chairs propped against the fence (Dad used it as a foot stool so he could peep over the fence, and I never sat in it because gnats liked its chipped paint). With the chair as its shade, Joy's rabbit friend moved his brown cheeks with whiskers as fine as the rolls of thread Mom kept in the cabinet above the refrigerator. We hadn't seen him much since Joy passed, and Mom always worried a hawk might've gotten to him because of his leg. Yet, here he sat, chewing on the crabgrass Mom couldn't get rid of with a screwdriver and garden gloves. I could confirm it was him as soon as he took a timid hop towards a thicker patch of crabgrass and his bum leg, angled outward, dragged his tan Thumper foot behind him. At a distance, his fur still looked thick from winter—he did not have any of those awkward, thin patches we'd seen on other rabbits as they shed their winter coats clump by clump. The rabbit even stuck around when I abandoned the swing to change the radio station—he was over the Penny Mustard Furnishings commercials like me—and for the rest of the morning, we enjoyed the music. Just like Joy did.

#

A concept first popularized by Ruth Montgomery's *Stranger Among Us* (1979), many people believe in walk-in souls, or souls that swap places with other souls and assume their bodies as their own. Some New Age thinkers even recognize “guest walk-ins,” or types of walk-ins in which the visiting and the original soul agree to reside in the same body for a short period of time. That day in the backyard, I had felt like I had not only been listening to the radio with Joy's rabbit friend: the air had crackled with Joy's soul too.

#

During Greta and the rabbit's chase, I ended up letting out a scream. Although my eyes stayed closed, my own voice pried them open, and I snapped my neck towards the back door. Wearing a faded nightgown with narrow purple and blue stripes, Mom's tired eyes met mine worriedly as the kitchen's bright light illuminated her silhouette. I dared another glance at Greta and Joy's rabbit friend, whose bodies still moved so quickly, so lively, that the hunt refused to die.

#

My senior year of high school, I talked to two girls, Ava and Josephine, in my environmental science class. We'd known each other from our past classes but never became more. Yet maybe it had been the excitement of the finish line, of graduating, that had us talking and blabbering with each other like we could be more than convenient company. Ava told us about her dreams of becoming a veterinarian and the results of her track meets; Josephine told us about how much she had admired her sister and her bout with antidepressants during the pandemic. We swapped answers for our tree-killing science packets and reminisced about life before 2020. Once, we threaded a piece of my hair into a ring and hung it over a piece of paper to see the number of children we'd have based on the direction it swung. Supposedly, I would have two children. Ava would have 7. Josephine ended up somewhere in between.

On our May graduation day, where a dull commencement address was read through a black microphone, I never saw Ava and Josephine. Through LinkedIn, I found out Josephine went to St. Mary's like she said. Ava wound up at a college in Wisconsin, according to Facebook. We never exchanged numbers. Josephine never sent that graduation invite she said she would. I couldn't grieve what never was anything. We were only friends once.

#

In the last second, the rabbit's back scraped against the bottom of the wood fence and disappeared into the green belt, bum leg and all. Greta's snout followed it out, and I did not say a word until Mom opened the storm door.

"Greta was just chasing the bunny!" My voice met Mom's ears like I had told her a suspect had been cleared, and I grabbed Greta's red leash that had been flailing behind her like a ribbon. Between her pants and my unsettled heartbeat, I led Greta gently away from the almost crime scene, the arena now devoid of any competitors. My adrenaline from before became fogged over by a startling indifference, and when Greta and I made it to the back door, I realized my not being happier that Joy's rabbit

friend had survived rested in that we had only been close once, bonded by the soul of another. Just once were we more than prey and hunter, more than classmates and LinkedIn searches. Relationships, sometimes as quietly as the patter of a furry rabbit's foot, are killed off too.

Eliza Nester



One in Six

(CW: Sexual Assault)

There are seven of them: six to make a verdict, an extra in case one of them can't make it to deliberations. Their cold and calculating eyes are fixed directly on me. I can feel it, and I shrink back into my navy sweater under the massive weight of their judgement. My hands, never anything but freezing, sweat against my nicest, most innocent-looking dress pants. I tried to play my part well: the quiet, inexperienced virgin who waltzed wide-eyed into a sleepover that had intentions I wasn't aware of. A crisp black headband presses painfully into my ears, leaving red indents, but I don't move it. It says, "How could I have known? I'm just a high school sophomore, I've never even heard of kissing!"

I am the Virgin Mary, my only job is to make the jury believe that, too. An impossible task because I don't believe it myself. Because it isn't true. I deserved it, didn't I? Did I ask for it somehow, in my words or my body language? Did I say yes at some point and forget? I stare pointedly at the tissue box and wish I were anywhere else. I memorize the aquamarine swirls covering the four sides I can see. I admire the white fluffy napkins sprouting from the top and wonder who was here last that needed to reach for one. I promise myself that I will not. The emotions are there, jumbled and tied up in a knot, but the tears never come. Maybe that makes me a bad victim, maybe it makes me cold and heartless.

I shift myself in the spinning office chair that they have lugged up onto the heightened witness stand. This is nothing like what I've seen on Law and Order. The room is freezing and goosebumps have already spread up my shoulders. Every sound echoes in here: the shuffling of court documents, the muffled coughs of the jurors. This is the calmest my mind has been this entire time. I am circling one thought like a carousel. One in six.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one in six women are victims of completed or attempted rape. I learned this when I was nine, after my father had to explain what rape was and why I had seen it on Oprah. I grew up with it as my biggest fear, a seemingly inevitable truth of life. I am now a statistic. I am one in six. There are three women on the jury, one female prosecutor, and a female judge. I am number six. I am the one.

Emma said she is a victim too, that is why she prosecutes. As if that erases my victimhood with a quick smooth-over. She is dressed in a tight-fit matching skirt suit. I imagine her laying it out on her bed the night before, steaming it in the bathroom. She is calm, intelligent, and completely absolved of any part in what happened to me. She asks me her questions kindly, always leaving room for my own interpretations. Emma nods to me, assuring me I can remember. I cannot. "Can you tell us what happened that night?"

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan. Stop. It's okay, you'll like it.

This is what I tell the jury, respectfully, neatly, turning the violence into a PG teaser of what happened. But I feel something else inside. I feel small, insignificant, one in six. There is a brown leather belt around my wrists, sweaty hands are holding them down. There is long hair sweeping between my thighs. I shut my eyes.

I do not look at the jury while I tell them. I allow my horrible, violent words to bloom into their consciousness. I am scared, shaking. My

hair fans the side of my face, shielding the jurors from view. If I look at them, will they see the truth?

.....

A loud, angry man is in front of me, he is her defense attorney. He paces in his cheap brown court suit, back and forth between me and his wooden podium. “Do you remember what you told the forensic interviewer,” he demands, violent eyes daring me to refuse his question.

I want Emma back, a woman who looks at me and sees me as more than this court room, than this steam-pressed outfit. She knows my goals: the half-filled out college application I worked on during jury selection, the therapist waiting for me upstairs, who I really am. This man looks at me like I am sub-human, something he does not understand, does not want to. And therefore, I am useless. I provide nothing for him and so I am audacious to be in his presence at all. I do not let my gaze waver; I stare in his eyes and show him I am not scared of him.

I move my shivering body towards the black microphone. It is positioned too high for me, but my voice echoes all the same. “I don’t remember.”

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan. Stop. Maybe she needs more.

He marches up to me, slaps a yellow paper down onto the witness stand and looks at me with a fiery hatred in his eye. I am not a young girl who has been hurt. I am a body of holes who has dared to defy the laws of nature. The ones that say, “You must stay silent, this is what you were made for.”

The paper is marked with text, two names volleying words between each other in what I wrongly assumed was confidence. These are my words, back when I could remember. I look at the pages in front of me, the print that quotes what I told the forensic interviewer only a month after that night. I had asked to read this before testifying, I was denied. I can see

through the words. I can see the fear behind them, the guilt and shame. This story feels so distant from me now. These words are from two years ago. I do not have these words anymore. He knows that, and yet he requests, “Will you read the highlighted lines for the jury?”

I hang my head in defeat as I press my lips into syllables and consonants that sound somewhat like cheater, liar, fraud. The spotlight shines through my words and the jury can see everything, even the parts I do not let myself remember. I am nauseous now; shame causes my hands to shake. I should have known better, I should have been louder, I should have tried harder. She is innocent until proven guilty, so what am I? A liar until proven honest?

The story has been twisted; I cannot remember. I start to feel clammy hands grip my thighs through my innocent dress pants. A vibrator is pressed to me where I do not want it. I told them, I told them, I told them.

.....

Emma declares something that sounds like protection. She dares the man to ask another question. I cannot hear anymore, I am in a bed that is not mine. A room with no lock on it. An adult is just outside; I am so close to freedom. Nobody can see me, nobody hears me. There is white noise now. It is not my imagination this time, it is the court documenter. It covers the hushed voices of the defense attorney and the prosecutor debating my rights with the judge.

I can't hear what they say, my brain reads off his lips, “But Judge, she is just a thing, I can ask of her what I want. She cannot say no.”

I look across the wooden dollhouse furniture. The brown benches of the courtroom almost look like pews. Nobody is allowed to observe since we are minors, this is a sealed case. Seamus is here, nodding at me the way only a DA's assistant can do when they still have faith in humanity. He has not seen pain yet; he is twenty-six and in law school. He has been the one to call us with every update, we never hear from Emma. He tells us all the news, good and bad. He explained everything to me, the whole process. He gave me the pep talk before I walked into the courtroom. He is here to

watch. I am a spectacle for him to observe. His ginger beard folds between his fingers as he stressfully threads through it. The suit he wears is too small, the pale white of his ankles peeking out from his pants. He nods at me, keep going, I can do this. I shut my eyes and breathe.

It is twenty long minutes of them maliciously yet lawfully dictating what I can say. Twenty minutes. One in twenty. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one in twenty victims will take their perpetrators to court. I am rarer now, more courageous.

Emma sits down and her chair creaks in defeat. The defense attorney stomps back to his podium, he has won, I have lost another right. I am not my voice anymore; I am a wind-up music box. I cannot remember, so I repeat the song they have written in my script. A small scream comes from the ballerina with tape over her mouth, "I said no!"

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan. Stop. She might want some porn.

.....

He looks at me wickedly; he seems to enjoy this. It is just his job, but I see through him. He defends criminals because he thinks their constitutional rights are more important than the harm they cause others. I have met men like him before, men that think legislature is more important than a woman's rights. Men that think false allegations run rampant in our justice system. Men who think I am a liar.

I will answer his questions only because if I don't, the jury will read into it. She has an attitude; she must be looking for attention. I should not be here; my words only matter now that they have taken us this far. They should have mattered when I said no. There is pressure in between my thighs, pinching me. There is moaning in my ear from a cheap video.

He has one final question, and I know what is coming. I have been readying myself for it all week. I fold myself inward, as if making myself smaller will make it all disappear. I do not want the jury to see me, to look at me.

“Is it possible that you could have cheated on your boyfriend, regretted it, and decided to call it rape?”

My lungs shrink; there are flashes of that night in my mind. A Snapchat photo I posted to my private story that reads: “Guilt.”, a glass of chocolate milk drank with wet tears, a red-hot shower, a silent car ride home. I lean my violated head towards the microphone, “No.”

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan. Stop. Pressure. Pinch. Moan. Belt. Push.

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan. Stop. Ari, she said stop!

Belt. Push. Roll. Moan

BeltPushRollMoan

Beltpushrollmoan

.....

I sit on the hard bench next to my mother; her hand is tightly wrapped in mine. My head is on her shoulder, and I let my eyes fall shut. Emma’s voice trails off in the background as she delivers a closing statement. My mother’s forehead is slick with tears, and she places it against mine. She is a victim too. She was told to keep quiet, and in rural Oklahoma, she did. He told her to shut up, that if she didn’t, he would tell everyone. She was so close to freedom, just behind a door. She could have turned the knob; I could have reached for the door. I wonder if she has hands on her thighs too, if there is a hot hand clamped over her mouth as she tries to protest the intrusion. We do not talk anymore.

.....

“The jury is back,” Emma says to us. This is trial number one, the harder one. This girl is being charged with rape even though all she did was hold my belted hands down to the bed. I do not expect to win this case, but I hope for it all the same. We sit on the bench as a man opens a piece of paper. He is the jury foreman, a bald man in his early forties. Maybe he has a daughter my age, a sister who was once one in six. He hands it to the

Judge. The judge nods solemnly and passes it back. The girl is found not guilty. My mother cries, I do not. We are quickly escorted out of the room. I cannot look at the jurors, at Emma, at Seamus. I can only look at the girl hugging her mom. She will go home, and nobody will ever know what she did.

“The jury is back”, my mother says. Trial number two is easier, this girl pushed and rolled and pinched even when I said no, when I said stop. If this had been the first trial, I would have been more hopeful. But after the first not guilty verdict, I prepare for the worst. My heart is pounding the entire walk back to the courthouse, there is a pit in my stomach. We sit on the bench as an older woman opens a piece of paper. She is the jury forewoman, a gray-haired woman in her late fifties, she is wearing pearls and looks as if she feels sorry for me. I wonder if that is because she knows what I have been through, or she is sorry about the verdict, sorry that I wasn’t enough. She hands it to the judge. The judge nods solemnly and passes it back. The girl is found guilty. My mother cries, and finally so do I. My head falls against hers as we sob together, the jury watches but this time I do not care what they see. I let my shoulders drop, and with it, the fake girl I have built up for them. Let them see who I am, it’s too late. I am allowed to be imperfect now, to be human.

For a moment, the hands disappear, the moaning in my ear quiets, the pinching between my thighs is dulled. We are escorted out of the room. There is no belt, there is no pushing or rolling, there is only a quiet understanding that I have done it. My body has been violated, and I have told the world about it. That is enough.

.....

I am still one in six. I am still one in twenty. But she is one in forty. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one in forty perpetrators will receive a sentence. It took two years for my case to reach a trial, for me to receive a verdict. By the time we reached the courtroom, my memory was foggy, and my story was blurred. The lines had been read over and over, highlighted and underlined. By the time I reached the

witness stand, I had already chosen to move on, to write a new story, a new girl that they would never know, could never hurt.

The judge received a note from me two months after trial, a Victim Impact Statement to be used at sentencing. My tear-stained words beg her to recommend Ari to the Sex Offenders Registry. I tell her what my life is like now, the fear that rushes through me when I catch a glimpse of brightly dyed hair or a sunflower print backpack. I tell her that all I want is for Ari to be on the registry, no jail time, no community service, no parole. I just want her on the registry. The judge does not listen, and she gets to go home. The hands are back, mocking me as they spread my thighs open once again. I now know the old girl still lives inside me, and she will never know justice.

The University of Arkansas Fort Smith Creative Writing Contest

Mythopoesis!

Mythopoesis is myth-making: the creation of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of reality, stories that reveal something timeless underneath. From the classics like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, or *Metamorphoses*, to modern myths like *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Avengers*, we understand ourselves through stories, so we asked the students of the University of Arkansas Fort Smith to tell us their stories.

What are the modern myths, the creation stories, the ancient ways of knowing? The editors of *Applause* are pleased to announce the winners of our contest and share their answers with you!



Fiction Prized Winner
“The Diner” by P.A. Henley

Poetry Prize Winner
“New Blood” by Drew Clements

Poetry Prize Runner-Up
“Fruit of the Dead” by Finn Bradshaw



Winner of the UAFS Prize in Fiction



P.A. Henley

The Diner

I had just refilled the sugar caddies when the bell over the diner door rang, and the cold came in with it.

It was late February, the kind of night when the wind creeps through every crack and seam of a building and settles in your bones. We were closing in twenty minutes. The regulars had already come and gone, and one pot of coffee sat on the burner. I remember thinking I might dump it out early. It was starting to smell too strong.

The young man who stepped inside did not look like someone who meant to eat.

He stood just beyond the doorway, letting it click shut behind him. Snow dusted his shoulders. His hair had gone damp in the warmth of the diner. He scanned the room like he was debating whether to leave again.

“You still open?” he asked.

“For a few more minutes,” I replied. “Kitchen’s closing, but I can do pie or coffee.”

He nodded and chose the booth by the window, though there was nothing to see outside but the parking lot light and the long smear of snow beneath it that had not yet covered the ground thoroughly enough to obscure its fading features. You could still see the black-top, smooth and shining under the flicker of the light.

When I brought him some of the coffee from the aging pot, he wrapped both hands around the mug before taking a sip. To warm his fingers, I suppose.

“You want pie?” I asked.

“What kind?” he replied.

He glanced at the rotating stand by the counter as if the choice mattered more than it should have.

“Apple, I guess,” he said after a moment.

I cut him a slice and set it down. He did not touch it. The fork lay across the plate, untouched, while he stared at it.

I have been waiting tables long enough to recognize the look of someone trying not to think. That is exactly what he looked like.

My son used to look that way after the incident.

I did not tell the young man that. You don't tell strangers about family matters before they have even tasted the pie you brought them. Still, I watched him the way I used to watch my son when he came home from school with that tightness in his jaw.

After a few minutes, I topped off his coffee.

“You just passing through?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

That is the kind of answer people give when they don't want to lie but cannot quite tell the truth.

He finally took a bite. Chewed slowly. Swallowed. Outside, the snow thickened into a quiet curtain. The parking lot light flickered over it.

“I used to come here with my dad,” he said suddenly, still looking at the pie.

“Oh?”

“After basketball games. Win or lose.” He let out a breath that might have been a laugh. “He always ordered apple.”

I tried to remember him. I had worked at this diner for a long time. Nothing came to me. But that happens. Boys become men. Faces change. Grief rearranges features in ways no one anticipates.

“You in town visiting him?” I asked gently.

He nodded. His fingers tightened around the fork. “Funeral was this afternoon.”

There it was.

I have heard all kinds of news across that counter. Engagements. Divorces. Pregnancies whispered over milkshakes and pancakes. The good, the bad, the ugly. But death sits differently. It quiets the room, even when there is no one else in it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He gave another shrug. “Didn’t know where else to go. Figured I’d stop in before leaving town.”

That feeling of not knowing where to go is something I understand perfectly.

When my son left for the Army, he came in here the night before he shipped out. Sat in that same booth. I did not notice at the time. He tried to tell me something wasn’t right. I did not listen. He rolled his eyes and told me I never listened. I argued, but he was right. I did not know it was the last conversation we would have.

I remember that feeling of not knowing where to go when that damned letter came in the mail. I also remember this Diner was where I ended up.

You think there will be more time. People always think that.

The young man was eating now, slowly but steadily. The pie seemed to anchor him. He kept glancing toward the window as if someone might appear.

“He used to say this place never changed,” he said. “Same booth. Same coffee.”

“I guess that’s the idea,” I replied.

He cracked a small, tired smile.

“Thank you,” he said finally, standing up and laying some cash down on the table.

I nodded. “Drive careful.”

The snow had begun to pile up along the curb, and it had now covered the yellow lines of the parking lot.

After he left, the diner felt smaller. I can’t really explain why. It just did.

I cleared his plate and carried the coffee pot back to the counter. I was about to dump it out, but instead I poured myself a cup and sat in the booth by the window.

I tried to picture him as a boy, legs swinging beneath the table while his father talked about referees and free throws. I tried to picture my own son at that age. Before the uniform. Before the desert. Before the funeral.

The snow kept falling. Millions of flakes piling on top of one another.

I left the light on longer than I needed to. The Diner was closed, so it wasn’t for business. It was not even for him.

I suppose I just wanted it on in case someone else stepped in from the cold, looking for a place that hadn’t changed. A place where apple pie still tasted like it did before everything else happened.

Nobody came.

Winner of the UAFS Prize in Poetry

Drew Clements

New Blood

The sunshine was so bright these days, shimmering
the blue oceans of my eyes, diamonds for the
world to see

My sword, my mind, my pen, sharp and clear, like rivers
of sapphire and silver All kinds of creatures
I would befriend

The most magnificent unicorn whose vivid colors
enrapture me

An elf who glittered with precious, fragile, gold, her soul
as strong as a warrior

Oh, the princess, how her elegance and grace moved
me to pursue the same

Amongst the studies, there was never a dull moment
Little did I know my life had not yet begun

Until these creatures led me to accept the true king
God had rescued me, the human, who had nothing
but a simple beating heart

My blood, a once wilted rose became new, budding
into fruitful petals as life colored my veins

A truth that forever grounded me, became my world,
uplifted my soul

And I was home



UAFS Prize in Poetry Runner-Up

Finn Bradshaw

Fruit of the Dead



Golden
curves like sun rays
Heat blooming within
the heart of the dead

Beauty too bright
splits the soil
Capture in plain sight
a king's desire

Falling
through caverns of hell
Chambers of heart
the underworld's prize

Rings lustrous
an impossible pair
Shadow changes shape
a goddess's resolution

Power like a passionate kiss
cultivating endearment
Newfound royalty
fertilizing adoration

Petals stripped
flora desolated
Trees uprooted
a mother's rage

Sickly sweet temptation
perfectly ripened flesh
Trails of crimson
embracing sinful invitation

Six infinitesimal seeds
planted in her stomach
Fate destined seasons
a lover's compromise

Anthony Ikeh



Eden 2047

After Annihilation 2018 / After Ifeoluwa Deborah

your name remains bulleted in the journal you got me for my birthday. there's extra bullets in all the places you marked ghosts for haunting. think, obiajulu. see terracotta streets through which we walk into infinity and never stop. where the atom, first split once, looked God down and sneered. see whispered promises parrotted into sheaf of dawn. see palm trees swaying like murderous titans. i still rub my palms over exit wounds bodiced by your teeth on my body. color me selfish or mad but i knew you were saving me even though you were dead yourself: to be honest i liked you a little pale, within heaven's door and something short of a nebulizing star.

all your shrieking thunders held me upright for the inevitability of loss. of vacancy. of nakedness of grief. all the things you knew how to do except walking out of the bathroom in my nightmarish house. dream where we exit God's garden in flamboyant fashion: heads held high and drunken and in love with our antler-alligator-bear-flowerbed bodies. i remain in awe of how he adorned you in his image. God. this God. you, god, you forsaken ribcage left cracked up and bare — where forget-me-nots sprout wildly. think: who wrestles angels knowing the body's weakness is getting besieged by mercy. who can tell us what to do with our bodies. let us be like okigbo, unbothered, if our antler-angel bodies are made of wax. come, let us dance in the sun. let us reinvent mankind in our own image. we are beautiful. now and before sunrise.

A Metamorphosis

Eve

The grief of growing older and wiser,
a pervasive epiphany;
he whispered to me,
my flesh twisted and expanded—
something entirely new;
within the cave of my skin
something made itself known,
an itching feeling with hunched shoulders
and a desire to be something new;
if I was born from dust,
why must I be confined to a body—
a cage that does not fit;
why can I not bite the apple—
and allow the snake to make me anew

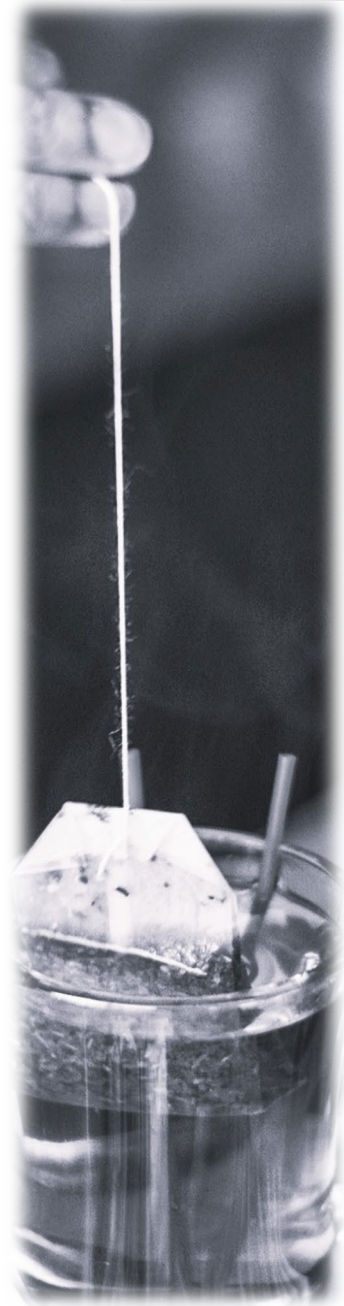
Adam

a strangler fig climbing towards the sky;
the snake is long gone, but once
my world revolved around him,
I became less branches and more fruit;
I tasted my own tongue in my mouth;
my sweat tasted sweet, and
I felt as though I began to grow wings;
a metamorphosis, emergent
from the first bite of the apple,
made from fig leaves,
stitched gently together with twigs—
broken and battered, I was left to die, so
when I consume that juicy, sweet flesh
I feel as though everything falls into place.



Beatrix Fauth

Arabic Tea is Made of Water



Mosaics dance in her eyes,
splinters of all the colors she has seen and will see.
*Be who you are' always sounds different to me,
as it does to her.*

She offers me Arabic tea,
not in a mug but in an estikan.
We work differently to God
and to what we achieve,
but I believe
we share the same beliefs.

And when we grieve,
we cry the same tears,
but hers boil the heart and soul,
my tears only fall.

We sit on the floor on embroidered fields
Of carpet leaves.
She speaks
of her neighbors pouring water in her
shoes. The same water to use for Arabic tea.
I wish 'Be who you are' wouldn't sound different to me.

The Moon Never Asked for a Name

The children meet at the playground at night,
when the moon dances bright.

They name their stuffed pets.

My children don't want your names.

Their scraped knees bleed.

They name tears celestine seeds,
and won't recall in some years.

My children don't want your names.

They name rocks and trees,
in the dark cloaked breeze.

They name not to be called.

My children don't want your names.

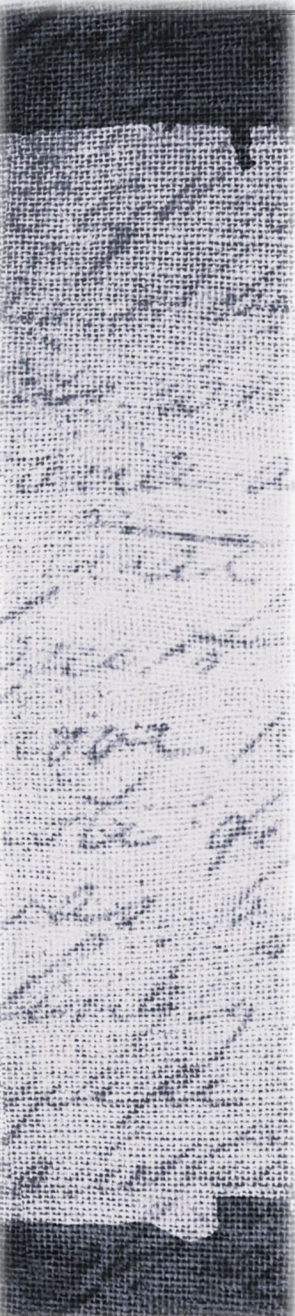
They call the moon a silver
balloon. The stars, shattered hearts.

They call autumn leaves, winding honey
seas. *My children don't want your names.*



Alexander Dyga

Beauty and Blue Footed Boobies



You baffle me, you
you poets who throttle your words.
Crinkling and cracking and lacking
they scream on the page
throttled into a sparkling plastic.

You baffle me, you
you poets who say, *the rhymes are
what make it sublime.*

You waste my time with your sublime.
your rhymes, your nonsense time
the lies of your
delime, ribozyme, paradigm.

See?
I can do rhymes too.

Your song, your rhythm, your heathen beat.
Yes it's sublime, your gilded little hearse
Culled for the sake of your finite beauty
all to rhyme it with some stupid words
some blue footed booby.

I don't like to rhyme, for why
break my thoughts upon these damn
rocks, these jagged
locks, these ankle-worn anchors
that the greats say
will help


this little blue booby fly?

My thoughts are untamed.
Wild, shattered, rough.
Who needs your rhymes?
Built only to make my words
palatable for your eyes?

You baffle me, you.
Whatever happened to the song
of a simple man
to break us free?

Valen Castonguay

Asphalt Escapism



Watching the sun sink into the asphalt,
glistening tar exhaling
the last lingering heat of the day.
Transforming the fading sky
into a watery reflection
of oranges and pinks

Black canvas of the asphalt walkway,
sunken and consumed by grassy edges
A straightened path now vague

Does the sidewalk ever wonder -
Whatever is outside of it?

Outside this old town that it circuits,
Running 'round ruddy brick boxes
Circling new concrete facades.
Cutting through the soccer field -
filled with geese in the summer
and snow in the winter

Inhale the scent of diesel
As your old man's truck rumbles down the road;
The one with the potholes
that he always complains about -
Past the lamppost
With the strange graffiti
You notice, but don't speak of.

Winding around the package store
off of Jerome,
with faded red siding and
Curling around the small, hidden pond
Where the railroad disappears under the bridge.

Do you ever wonder -
How far you could follow those tracks
before you end up right back here,
again?

Valen Castonguay

On the Front Stoop

I had never been one for meditation;
I thought it all too vague, too rigid,
too still.
How could I be asked to sit so calmly when
everything inside of me roiled?

I tried, a handful of times:
crossing my legs, closing my eyes
back like a pillar, hands towards the sky.
breathing,
breathing...

But I stopped breathing.
I started thinking:
Thinking...
about breathing.

Am I doing this right?
Remember square breaths.
Am I inhaling too deeply?
I exhaled too long.
Are my breaths balanced, am *I* balanced?
Do I have a balanced diet?
I should really eat more fiber, *I should really get*
more exercise, I should really be doing anything
but—

Anything but this.

I called it a failure,
I'd say, "It's just not for me."



Meanwhile the kettle boiled away,
A constant, shrill whistle under my skin.

Until one day,
Exhausted from trying to silence it,
I decided to just

Watch.

Watch the burning steam rise,
floating up and away like delicate silk.

Watch the cars roll by,
red and silver and blue.
Glass faces gleaming in the afternoon light.

For once, the movement is outside of me.
A bird flies by, a streak of crimson
Grass waves and bends under the weight of a beetle,
brown body climbing
and climbing only to spread its crescent wings
and hum away into the distance.

Nothing profound, nothing
world changing.

But turning back to the kettle,
I find it gently bubbling,
simmering instead of screaming.

Reilly Kendrick

Daffodils

Daffodil, you're
so gaudy—your
proud trumpet,
your feathery petals, bright, blinding, unashamed sunshine.
You flaunt an unforgivingly green stalk to the neighboring
brown mulch, off-yellow grass, fallen leaves. Not realizing decent
flowers have not bloomed yet, you dance with chimes.

Still,
you
create
grins,
Refresh,
Remind.
Spring
nears.
Living smile,
you incite
my wonder.
Maybe we
Need
Something
Gaudy.



Change

Yellow

I never liked yellow.

Yellow is warning signs,

Go slow, look out,

And old obits

of people I didn't know

And disease,

hospital faces,

And my first car

That only gets cool in certain places

But I've repented

Because

Yellow is also daffodils

Poking out in a warm February

And my friend's shoes,

Which force me to grin

And my nourishing mother

Sun.

Yellow is life and sickness

Support and weakness

Can it be both?

Maybe.



Brock Wolverine

Rapture



A man is nothing but skin and bones,
skin, marrow, and bones; marrow,
bones, skin, and flesh; skin, flesh,
bones, marrow, and a mind;
a troubled one, in between.

A soul ambling terrified
on a devastated land.
Although, surviving
and notwithstanding.

Crumbling stores and ravaged cities.
Marching over inglorious paths
among tumbling towers
and cobblestone bricks.

Loaded.
A rifle and limited ammo.
Too young to sip liquor
old enough to aim a gun,
fighting for unclear reasons.

“For freedom,” they argued,
“In six months you will
be back home,” they assured.
But ruins and massacre
are far away from their promises.

Deeply wondering

if a beacon of hope
will pull up at dawn,
in aircraft carriers
or bombing planes.


Aftershock and aftermath.

Landing is imminent.
War is over.

The battle has only just begun.

Khedaren Perumal

Self-deceived



Seeking warmth, I passed him —
A collapsed silhouette beneath the lintel of the world,
His breath wrapped in the cold like an unanswered plea,
My inner guilt was too strong,
My eyes, disciplined in their refusal,
Slid past him as one step over a crack in stained glass.

Inside, in search of comfort,
Incense spiraled upward, rehearsing ascents I had never earned,
I knelt, reciting syllables polished by repetition,
Albeit, not from the soul.

But the silence flickered,
My prayer, once neat as a ledger line,
Fractured into its hidden arithmetic,
The mercy I requested cost me nothing,
The mercy I refused lay shivering outside.

And when the candles trembled,
The self-deceivedness woven in my soul was stripped,
I understood:
I had come seeking absolution,
Not transformation — a pilgrim to my own reflection.

My Mom's Crockpot Cooking

It seeps in at midday, stirring
A suffocation of braising
Meats that pierce brazen
My quiet closed door. The pot
Stems something angry;
Stomach drop like Alka-Seltzer.
She woke up early to cut and craft
Each vegetable each seasoning
Selected with the purpose of point
I'm apprehensive to ask if dinner's
Ready. Revving, Rising.
Waterfalls' hunger fills my mouth,
Or eyes?
Spice stings, pinches, familiarizes
Then secedes. Pattern continued.
Meat pulled apart delicate
By the simple kitchen fork that pries
Into the dead heart of the animal,
Stabbing.
At 7pm I sit down next to her turbulence.
How are you doing this evening?



Elizabeth Radgowski

Avian Thing

Oh she wishes she were Icarus.

Between the sun which melts
Or the cage which ices,
She would choose to let the wax drip
Down the feathers of her wings,
always.

For then it would be,
At least,
By her own folly that she falls,
Hot body hissing as it
crashes to the
waves.



Sleepwalker

Sleepwalkers,
do you remember wandering
nine hours and thirty miles
across the dark?
Through echoing,
empty countryside
and cities without stars?

I do.

My feet bleed through my socks
from the thorns of the wild,
from the asphalt of the street,
following your tattoos
like roadmaps,
my fingers and my feet
to your tired skin,
tracing the way home
from my blood
to your bones
as you sleep.

And even if your dreams
never deliver me,
I am postmarked to return
nine hours and thirty miles
to our bed, to the earth,
my body borne back to
your face like a kitchen light,
romantic and wan



but invisible in the daytime.

I want to dance to you
on tender feet,
'round and 'round the island,
my arms outstretched to save
what flickers in the depths
of our sleepless dark.

I think it could be *I love you*.
I think it is your heart.

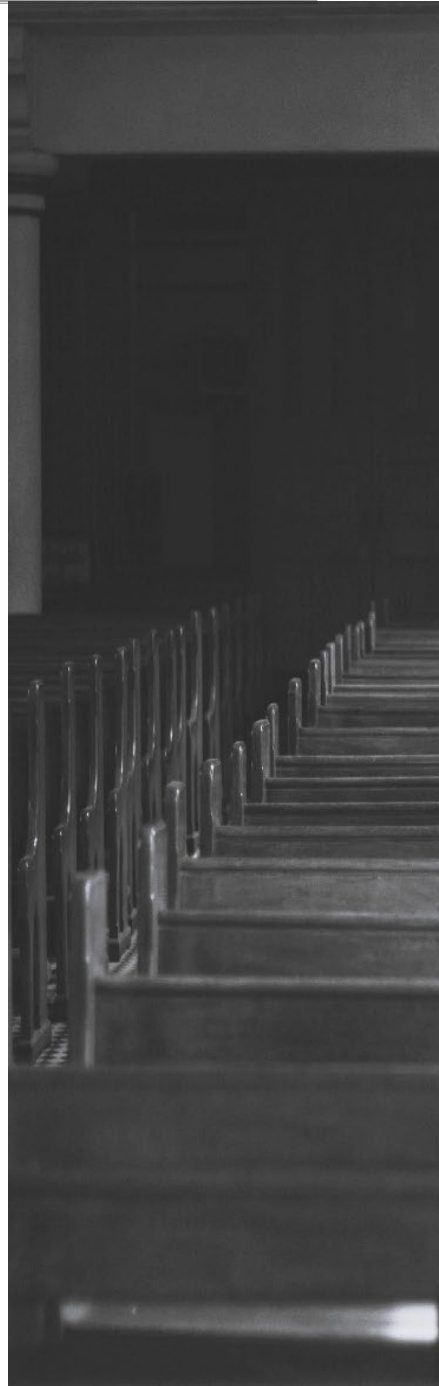
Baby, you look like a dream,
you look like a star,
and I am the cloud,
pink in the morning sun,
glowing with love
even as you leave.

Father Mark's Funeral

Shuttled between Sundays and sacraments,
I drink my cup of condolences from
the church coffee pot—my bitter penance,
poured with pity, trivial as crumbs,
as if to satisfy my holy grudge.
Yet for eulogies I hold no hunger,
and force down Mass like remedial sludge.

Still, death does not get any easier.

Why take a soldier of your own army?
Kneeling on the damp, cold dirt, I wonder
why Lazarus got to be so lucky.
I dig for closure in broken prayer:
Hail Mary, full of grace, I'm not with thee.
Grief has ruined religion—ruined *me*.



M.S. Blues

Reverie of the Aloof

a lady's legs point like fingers towards the sky as she lays on velvet white sheets, the pulsing asseverations promised by *the cross-fade* now echoing in her ears.

she is staring into an obscure ravine—a ceiling of gnat guts and scars of water damage—as her lips are seduced to a reserved conversation she never realized she yearned for.

friends of hers call from the next room, revelling and convulsing with similar mirth. the lady is not inclined to respond, so she does not. she snickers and licks her stained red lips.

and to think i almost missed this, she brings her legs down and rolls on her stomach, resting her head on her arm. she closes one eye and keeps the other open, staring off into the distant california lights.

the imploring calls of her friends continue, 'til they become only white noise with every breath this weary lady takes. *'tis what i looked forward to, not the frolics those fools out there participate in.*

she is cocooned by new temperatures that emerge with every turn her body makes. the sheets take her in their arms by this point, ensuring the lady knows the regard they harbor for her.



she does and affirms with another sigh. that is when the *cross-fade* enables the lady to achieve her ultimate exultation. she is grateful to have her mind volatilized by something dear—*my melancholy shall be rectified!*

the lady is now reduced to arbitrary movement, the total satisfaction! the friends are not yet pleased and continue to chirp and plead, but the lady is happily oblivious to them. *this is what i please!*

... we now are given the other perspective, the calling friends—now disgruntled friends. *i told you we should not have brought her*, remarks one. the second crosses her arms. the third adds, *let her be the weirdo she is.*


so then they relinquish the calls and return down the hall where the mayhem carries on. the lady does not acknowledge their departure. she is happy to be the one locked away by choice—free of contrived mouths.

that is what many wish to have too, an acceptance of the solace that they repress, due to narratives derived from folks who fear being alone—facing what they are beneath sober masquerades, pitiful facades, and rumors.

they call her aloof ‘cause of that, and the lady pays no mind to how she is rendered. how can she when a luck like this has found her and bestowed what she rightfully deserves—a solitude.

Marie Anne Arreola

Blur



But enough about me—
have you ever noticed how the mind
is everywhere and nowhere at once,
how it keeps slipping through your fingers
even when you swear you're holding it,
or how strange it is to see yourself clearly
without really seeing yourself at all?
What if I gave the feeling a name,
something you could remember without effort:
I'm a person trying to hold things,
a nobody who lately forgets how to be a body,
though the body keeps acting
and undoing and remaking itself,
unwinding sighs that murmur
like that rope once wrapped
too closely around my neck.
I long for a lukewarm spirituality
where you can touch whole horizons
and skim mountaintops
with the back of your hand;
I want to be transparent in my unclarity
about beings that look solid
but fold like silk,
collecting shadows in their pleats.
Tell me, do you see it too—
how the blur might be
the truest biography we have,
you being a blur of my species, too?
Would you hold my body
just long enough for me
to disappear inside an embrace,

to stay held in your heat,
dreadfully and
dangerously soothing?
Sorry, we just met,
and an interrogation is no way
to greet anyone, but sometimes
I wish we could all merge
and let our vague presences
do the explaining,
because whatever spirit is,
it has more tricks up its sleeve
than I have sleeves to hide them.
Since childhood, I kept a heartbeat
like a marching band
parading in my chest
and then I lost it;
I had a mind once,
traded it in almost immediately,
and it's disarming
how quickly perception turns—
a wheel spun,
a dread wandering in,
a lightbulb flickering just
as you walk home
through the dark until
something in the universe
changes its mind
and pulls the other end
of the rope hard enough
that you lose.
We are children of divorce,
powerless before the tugs
and shoves of unseen forces,
and maybe five senses

were never meant to be enough,
so I try believing in spring
shaking off its snow-weight,
in filling my pockets
with fire and dry leaves,
burning myself into ash
and calling it a new day.
Maybe it leads
somewhere more lasting
than this collection of bones,
smoky and well-read,
trained in the rules
of not staying framed
in any afterlife;
today I'm learning to be solid
inside myself,
stocking my multitudes
and keeping each shadow
stored beside its element.
Tell me what it felt like
when you believed you were haunted,
when I found you radiant
under a cloudy sky—
would you help me not feel
so unanchored,
like an amoeba-shaped cloud
so formless I could become
a racquetball, a train car,
or the beginning of a raindrop
falling with sudden
consciousness?
I loved that weekend,
the way you taught me
to give in to a sixth sense
of existing, believing
that what awaits us

isn't flesh
but the electrochemical dream
we lace with sublayers,
a mystery held by the skull
like a secret pressed to the chest.
My wit still cobbles together
a working draft on
what it means to be hammered
by another psyche
until we sign the quiet memo:
everything real is also tiny,
a murmur from another room.
I've waded through the red river
of my heart to understand
that fluid means love, rage,
and grief swimming inside us
like raspberry juice;
I know you worked
as a mailman that summer,
and since I never found time
to speak to you again,
here's your newsletter:
mornings are still dew-sweet,
afternoons bruise,
and you had a nosebleed
that last Sunday
where I gave you a tissue—
my little rockstar,
my midnight angel.
You told me to walk straight,
eyes down, but I wanted
to bottle infinity;
you taught me the early moves:
aim, ignite, catapult—
but my rocket crashed
and distances tore

your wanting from
my falling star.
I remember you raising
your hand in class
to say that being disciples of light
is just a temporary fix
to shut God's eyes,
and I remember you
at my mailbox,
not knowing it was mine,
while I called from the window
to hand you a letter y
ou wouldn't answer
for weeks.
I stopped calling
and gave you nicknames
like hypotheses,
each one explaining
why your name rhymed
with every stage of my life,
a present-past experiment
that I keep running even now.
Check your inbox;
I wish you'd come back
for the sealed package,
a parcel of stories
with your name
and your blood on them,
each narrative
threaded through our bodies
as our faithful
correspondence.

Marie Anne Arreola

Ripeness past ripe

I keep numbers in my phone the way people keep
bread they swear they'll use for croutons, hardening
into a version of themselves no one has the heart to toss;

I tell myself it's archival work,
like I'm a detective of my own former stupidity,
but really I'm afraid that deleting them would delete
the kid who believed an Audi parked on someone else's lawn
meant the night was going well. Back then, I also believed

access was intimacy, but now I know access is just
a door you learn to close quietly, even if lately
those numbers have been calling again
with reunion talk and narrative-continuity talk—

as if the past were a single room
instead of a whole building that failed inspection.

The beach keeps showing up in my mind like a witness
I don't want to interview, and I can already hear
the accent of regret while I walk the old streets
with the same chain-link fences and the same pit bull
digging a metaphor into the dirt. Nothing changes,

not even the ghosts who still lean on porches,
and though my memory swears it saw them,
my memory also once swore I could sing;
so at night I watch *Law & Order* for the way
everything moves in a straight line,
like grief finally getting its shit together.



I know life doesn't work like that,
but I like the idea of someone saying "objection"
on my behalf, and then, there you are—an open case
I shouldn't be working but can't stop opening.

Even desire feels like paying in the wrong currency,
a bill that got rained on or an oil-slicked bird
that doesn't understand why the water lied;
you trust gold while I trust almost nothing,
and even the sunset looks Photoshopped
as you walk past the sculpture garden
while the exhibition sweats in disbelief.

Your grin resurrects words that should have stayed
in the dictionary's basement—"abhor," suddenly with abs,
and the way your mouth moves makes me think of trout,

how they leap because their bodies insist
rather than for poetic sense. That's when the feel-beast wakes,
my private security system that never went through training
and doesn't believe in analysis; it believes only in force of feeling,
a drawer so full of evidence it explodes when I touch it.

Afterward I pick through the shards as if I'll find myself labeled
and properly stored, keeping notes that say *I am beast, feelings cleave*
me,

the private is public and I reach for you without a warrant.

People ask why I wear so much MUBI merch while I drink
until the headache walks around like it's checking fire alarms;

someone once told me hate is love's ugly twin
and I nodded like a man who doesn't want to meet the family,
even as the neighborhood cat judges me, takes attendance,
and notes I'm still me. After a week with friends


I reach the threshold where I don't want company
but also don't want to be witnessed—rot that calls itself ripe
one second too long. Somewhere in all of this

a poem starts to spoil with warm fruit and soft language,
the slow confession I keep forgetting to confess:

decay, I've learned, is the one thing that doesn't lie,
telling the truth simply by continuing to be.

Abdulmued Balogun

Song of Ordinary People



Beneath the silence
Blanketing the world
Are tales begging to be told
By eloquent tongues
Imploring to be heard
By ears seasoned in wisdom.

Beneath the silence
Shrouding the world
Like a shivering child
Are bloody tales begging
To be cleansed
Tears of malnourished children
Yearning to be mopped, obliterated...
Mothers paralyzed
By the grief of mourning their children
Fathers crippled by the ache
Of yearning for their wives
That'll never return.

Beneath the silence
Of my unruffled face slumbers
My untold legend of barely surviving
Ghostly aches
Gashes scribbled across my chest
By the same hands that once planted
Flowers atop my heart, named
My navel after their favourite flower.

Beneath the silence

Of a world masquerading as sublime
Growl the bellies of famished beasts,
Beasts masquerading,
Like the world as sublime,
As folks you can bank
Your peace with and never
Withdraw remorse.

Beneath the silence
That will conclude the last lines
Of this poem, heaves a prayer for
Our ailing world, for the pains we dare
Not give wings to before animated eyes,
For those who like us pray
To make it out of here, fulfilled.

Abdalmueed Balogun

Past Lives Are At The Door With Knives In Their Hands



I. Ah! Alas! Sometimes, breathing can become laboured too, difficult to propel into smoothness like the motion of staying chaste in this naked world.

II. In the midst of worldly chaos, hope and all its brilliant relatives crawling out of sight like a herd of slug, I murmur a curse-like prayer in my mind, Dear God let my sleep trans mutate into an eternal rest.

III. In the silence of my mind, a whisper rises skywards like soot from bushfire during harmattan in Egbeda, the boy I once was rears his head into sight, a certain grief gnashes against the flesh of my peace, I lost my head in the fog of remorse.

IV. Past lives are at the door again with knives in their hands, threatening to shred the cocoon of my peace into confetti, memories take on the shape of warlords, thirsty for blood, ah! I seek refuge of Allah against everything thirsty for my blood.

V. The bloodthirsty hounds of past lives have severed the locks of their cages, like castaways they're roaming the streets of my mind again, craving the flesh of my newly found peace, baking with deafening decibels to repel the elves of tranquility from perching on the bough of my

trembling mind.

VI. There's a new moon blooming at the center of my perforated heart, unfazed by the storms of my past lives. Dear God, grant me the wisdom to shield her from the poison of myself.

VII. Dear God, grant me the grace to never return to places that no longer echo my names.

VIII. Attempting to divest my life of all its sticky darkness, I shredded the armour of my ego into crumbs, plunged into the scanty sea of seekers in the middle of the night seeking eternal light.

IX. Whoever you are, whatever your crime might be against yourself there's a room in eternity yearning for the warmth of your voice.

X. When the night of separation is pronounced dead, you shall never see me seated in the park of past lives patting the head of some rabid memories, if you desire holding my hands, seek me in the heart of my beloved.

Abdumueed Balogun

What Other Name Befits Mayhem

what other name befits mayhem?
(feel free to say love)

what other balmy place to be, outside of ourselves?
(don't you dare mention the beloved's)

anarchy. no where, i swear, is refuge enough, out there
in the bleeding world, to go unclad. unshielded. unguarded.

semantics. the best synonym for love is no longer passion but
hemlock, liquid cyanide, slow poison.

admonition. when love, i beg your pardon, liquid cyanide waves
its jolly hands at you, it's profound to crawl like a frightened snail

inside the shell of yourself. don't wave back!

lies. history had it wrong, when he said there will never be
till the end of time another hitler. the soothsayers are then to be damned

to crucifixion, for their prophesy of love never being unkind
had managed with time to crumble and pulverize like dust into myth.

epiphany. the bluebirds of this heart, no longer sing soothing blues.
the new hitler of this age, had gripped & ripped apart

the red galaxy of all we hold dear like a bag of ivory dreams. we are in
bondage. we are in bandage. love is the new hitler of this age.

Mahalia Collingsworth

Carbon

Tonight, I am wearing a dead woman's eyeshadow and

I spent the whole drive here trying to decide
if that's morbid or beautiful. "Don't let it go to waste," her sister said
as she handed me a bag of products, unopened, unused,
waiting for a special occasion that is never going to come.

I didn't even know her all that well when she was living,
but now I carry this friend of my mother's with me to Halloween parties
and birthday dinners and the occasional concert, and tonight.
Tonight, where there is something old humming through the speakers and
and the air feels like something to lean into.

"It's easy. It's all just carbon," someone is explaining to me,
scandalized when I told him I have
never cared for the science of the world. I nod like it means something.

The party is heady and breathing-
there are much more interesting things to worry about than
molecules I will never see.

For the softest second, I am boundless. I blur around the edges.

This room holds me so gently.
A glance, a drained glass, a light brush on your forearm,
and when a stranger shouts over the cacophonous music that the
glitter brings out my eyes, it smacks me in the face right then:
this is it. This is the life I will write about.

Look around, quick, I tell myself. You'll need these details for later

For a moment I am crushed by it:
The humanity in this muggy room, the ritual of company,
the strangers I'll never see again
and the way she never even took it out of the packaging.

And then I am dragged right back out of
that consciousness because the song they are playing is something
that I used to love and apparently

is still written all over my face because a girl next to me
has grabbed my hand and is screaming each
lyric at me like she is trying to convince me of something and usually,
I would push her away, brush her off, desperately establish
that distance I like to keep but tonight I don't.

Tonight, I focus on the sweaty warmth
of her hand in mine and the pulsing press of bodies around me,
the elbow at my back, the foot crushing mine,
the smell of her shampoo when her hair flies all too close to my mouth.

This is it.

The keys that usually clack in the back of my mind,
constantly trying to catch it all in real time,
dead set on proving I am living something real and worth writing down
have gone quiet for a moment
and four drinks in I am beautiful and I love you
and I am sorry for some things but
they matter so little now. The glitter brings out my eyes.

The song changes and the girl is gone.

A friend finds me in the crowd and laughs in my ear and says,
“You look like you're having fun,”
and he is right. I almost tell him about dead women and crowds
and something else but what does it matter?

We're all just carbon. Me, you, the floor beneath us.

It's all just carbon.



Mahalia Collingsworth

Early Morning

and the cicadas still hum in the grass.
The air smells of sulfur
and the osprey who nests in the neighbor's tree
flies home,
fish in her beak.

I hear the tentative chirping of her babies
unused to the sound of their own voices
and here I know I have been wrong about almost all of it.

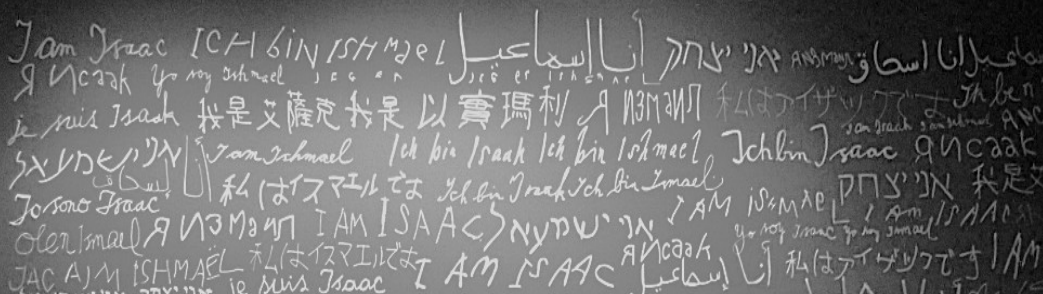
A sweet wind whispers between the mangroves, and
there's a soft golden glow caressing everything I see.
And how terrible of me to forget this-
how arrogant of me to treat anything else like it mattered.

There is not a single debt I owe that can't be paid.
There is nothing to explain.
Only this-

The damp grass softens my seat while
the dirt gives to my weight, then resettles
and when I lay back, my body is embalmed in dew.
There is nothing that does not hold me.



Sarah Baskin



The New Age Yiddish-English Dictionary

Schmooze — /'ʃmuz/

Coping Mechanism

1. Engagement in warm and worthwhile chit chat;
2. Mandatory regardless of the social event

Kvetch — /'kvɛtʃ/

Embodied Experience

1. Complaining, typically about a small or petty contrivance;
2. Performed as part of natural Jewish self-expression

Nosh — /'nɑʃ/

Involuntary Reaction

1. Snacking;
2. For full effect, occurs in conjunction with schmoozing and kvetching

Oy vey — /ɔɪ veɪ/

Interjection

1. Dismay with an undercurrent of exhaustion;
2. The quintessential response to anything that happens;

3. What you say at dinner when your cousin mentions Israel

L'chaim — /,lə'xai,m/

Exclamation

1. A celebration of both what life is and what you hope it will become;
2. For gentiles, the song from *Fiddler On the Roof*

Gentile — /'dʒen,tai,l/

Other

1. A non-Jew;
2. Someone whose ancestors never had to forget the shtetl

Schlep — /'ʃlɛp/

Catch-All

1. Carrying an impossible burden;
2. Immigrating to America;
3. Holding 2,000 years worth of pain in one's skin

Meshuggeneh — /,mə'ʃʊ,gɪ,nə/

The One Who Doesn't Know How To Ask

1. A Jew who ignores their history;
2. A Jew who refuses to learn from their history;
3. A Jew who only applies the lessons from their history to themselves

Mensch — /'mɛntʃ/

Ideal

1. A person of integrity and honor;
2. Any relative who died before you had the chance to remember them

Bubbe — /'bʊ,bi/

Grandma

1. Arlene, a genius forced to limit herself because she was born a girl;

2. Elaine, who forgot me slowly at first, then all at once

Zaidy — /'zeɪ,di/

Grandpa

1. Paul, who worked himself to the bone to give his parents a better life;
2. Raymond, a public school teacher who gave me a teddy bear when I was two

Mishpocheh — /,mɪʃ'pɒ,xə/

Broken Branches

1. Those whose blood seeps into the record;
2. Grandparents and great-grandparents who refused to teach their children their mother tongue in the New World

Tchochke — /'tʃɑtʃ,kə/

Tradition

1. A knick knack or trinket with little real value;
2. Yiddish words that can not be translated;
3. Yiddish words that can not be reclaimed.

Greta Oswald

this is what moves me

wild, open green
holding up the fog with pointed fingers,
a fence of vacant spiderwebs, a patch of wildflowers,
a topped sign reading *Janet Morris Memorial Garden*.

i want to find out how many strides stretch
between me and the treeline,
to hold the hands which
buried the bulbs and scattered the seeds,
to know the woman
for whom the milkweed and the irises grow.

all at once
i hear a bark echo from the ribs of a dog,
a bullet spit from the metal mouth of a shotgun,
the jarring cry of a crow,
a distant highway's mechanical thrum.

dawn spills over us, me and the earth
and all its music,
day breaking like the yolk of an egg
in the cast iron skillet of night,
like God's yellow highlighter
drug across the green page of this moment.

two sunlit bodies go still at the sight of mine,
a doe and her fawn, frozen in the tallgrass.
i gaze, unflinching,
wondering,
what metaphor could ever suffice?



we were strangers, minutes ago
padding softly through our lives,
now face to beautiful face, unmoving,
yet never in my little life
so moved.

Never Have I Ever

had the Sunday scaries/forgotten everything the day
of the test/sobbed in public/~~ignored~~ forgotten my
New Year's resolutions/watched history repeat
itself/ noticed some devastatingly beautiful sun
dappled pavement/ran from grief until it caught up/cradled a heart as it
was giving in/buried my face in a sweater to smell someone again/sucked
the sweetness from a honeysuckle realized a cup of tea was good
company/learned the difference between being open and being
vulnerable / left my heart on regret's shelf / made space for people who
hurt me / forgiven myself



Nathan Conti

Calm Storm



Do you love it when it rains?

When the charcoal clouds cover the sky,
and the rumble of thunder is felt deep
within your body,
do you wish you could be somewhere else?

Are you content with the storms that interrupt your
summer days, soaking your clothes
as you're walking home,
from hours spent baking
in the humid heat?

I love nothing more than a thunderstorm.
One that lasts for hours, with rain pattering against
the window,
lightning flashing against the dreary
colorless clouds, and the feeling that there is
something
much more powerful
than I am.

It offers a comfort,
that can't be described,
only felt.

The chaos of the storm
drives calmness in my heart.



Urban Forest

What is so different between a tree and myself?

I breathe in, I exhale, as does a tree.

We drink the same water, soak up the same sunlight. We have families, descendants and ancestors.

We can live for a century or die much sooner, a tree and I aren't much different—but we like to pretend that we are.

I am much more important than a tree.

We live on the same land, but only I have the power to decide which of us can stay.

As a tree grows slowly, year after year, my cities spread their roots, taking over our shared land

with the speed of a thunderous storm moving in.

The city booms with construction and people and cars
and washes away the forest that stood,
to replace it with one that lies dormant and lifeless.

There are people in my cities, but these people don't live.

They go quickly about their day checking empty boxes while the tree just sits it listens—patiently on the sidewalk, between the house and the road, and underneath the powerlines that are eventually swallowed up by its trunk.

The tree sits still.

Jaya Basu

Elegy From the Guest Room Bed

I can't sleep here one more night. I can't
wrest uneven sheets from the torn mattress,
can't toe-graze the rust-colored spots that won't wash out,
can't spend one more morning blanketed in a darkness
reserved for strangers. I wake up licking the dregs of sleep,
smothered by thick beige duck curtains and rebirthed into an
empty house, hotel-white bathrooms, cardboard piled
in corners, rooms pre-furnished and
refurnished and wherever I go, I choke on
dust.

The living room has never felt smaller,
with walls knocked down, opening into the kitchen,
huge marble island, small dining room, so
many light fixtures. The cracking chandelier is replaced with
short, shallow cylinders; so modern, so unfeeling, with no
kettle, no hand-painted teacups, no
ice cream bowl I made in ceramics class,
no apron printed with my brother's artwork.
The dining table is the same, though, and sitting at
my place, I remember dinners where Dad cooked
and Mom met my eye.

Upstairs,
the room I discovered girlhood in is choking with boxes
of summer clothes, deflated pillows, American Girl books,
empty pill bottles, clumps of hair from home cuts, never-finished
DS games, crushed origami flowers, and bras shoved to the back
of the closet. Dresses weigh down plastic hangers
threatening break. A builder knocked

a proud *S* from its shelf. I'm surprised it didn't shatter on impact.

I don't miss the chipping pink paint, but I miss the windows. Waking up to the sun gives me a headache, but in the light, at least I can tell when the sheets are falling off. The lamp is always within reaching distance, and I have memorized my arm's trajectory, so even in the blackness, even in the pinkness, even when there is nowhere to go and no one to care how late I sleep, even when Mom asks about the dresses or Dad asks if I pray or my brother doesn't know whether to say niece or nephew, if I'd be aunt or uncle, well at least I'd be family, well at least he asks me and not the ground, even when surrounded by evidence of the girl that I don't think I drowned, even then, I can find the light.



Josie Fournier

Without Pity To Anarchy

I am pummeled with reminders
From every direct:
I am dead.
I am alive.
I am all.
I am none.
There is no I.
There is only us.
There is only them.

The desire I know is not mine.
It is someone else's.
It is the machines.
The joy I feel is not mine.
It is the flame confined,
Absent of truth.

How could I love in a world
Who negates love 'round
Every corner?
How could I feel warm in a world
Without seeking nil to the cold:
That isolating capital.

I am a cog.
I will be a cog.
'Till all is ash.
And suffering forgone.

~~~



Suddenly, in my black and red forgery,  
Without pity to anarchy,  
Came the comradery  
Of windy streets,  
And comely greets,  
Severed with joyful treachery,  
Where I stood silent, in graceful harmony with all.

# Chastalynn Martin

## Valse Triste

*Inspired by Jean Sibelius' own Valse Triste*



We walk down an alleyway  
merging on the edge  
of Hogsmeade in the end-of-summer.  
Your hair glitters in the dim  
flame-lit lanterns. Anticipation  
races from my heart  
to my hand where it brushes yours.  
Pearly bubbles bounce  
around the vast night.  
Chill and crisp, the air  
shimmers with hues of  
lilac, carnation, tangerine, and silver,  
and children dance among scents of  
cinnamon, apples, and sugary butter.  
You smile. You laugh. The sound  
lilts on the side of average,  
yet it is full of life,  
full of enjoyment of the  
simple things. My heart  
breathes, moves closer to you.  
Meeting your burning gaze,  
our hands kiss.

Can it be so?  
You are a girl.

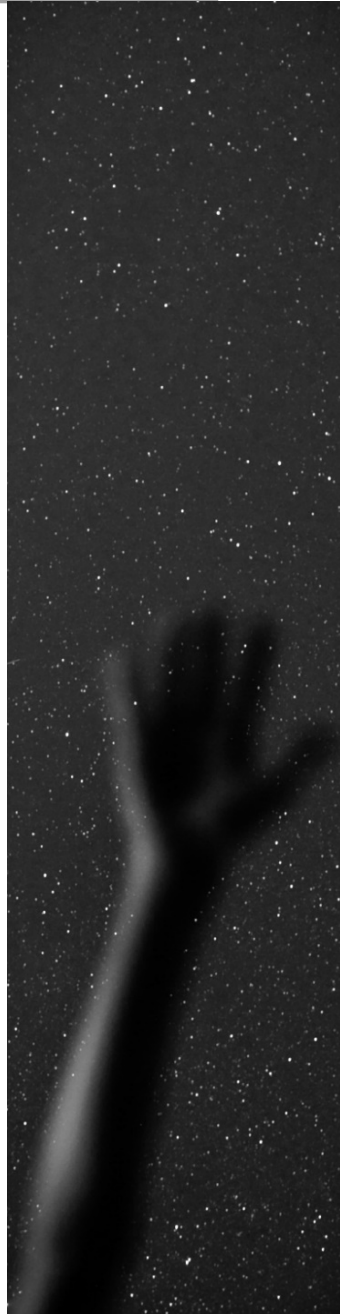
## Finlandia

Masses and throngs of waywards  
line the outer edges of decayed lands.  
Haunting choirs hail utter destruction.  
You look behind, hoping for freedom,  
but there is no turning back now.

Time is hastening.  
The evils approach.  
Do not linger  
on the thought of loss when  
victory is ever close.

Stars shoot across inky sky,  
tracing the paths we long to take—  
their light outlines your trembling hands,  
clinging yourself to the ground. You cry:  
“Why hast thou forsaken Me?”

When mercy and hope have left,  
What else is becoming except death?  
Be still, My soul—  
your time is yet to come,  
and even so, I have faith in Thee.



Everix Machan

autism diagnosis as an acquittal

---



guilt runs like rain through strands of my hair  
    slithering deep into knotted preverbal poetry  
the stream isn't hot enough until muscles flake  
    and my nerves scrunch under false frigidity

i dress myself in aluminum and wonder  
    what the hell sunrise is supposed to smell like  
one of the infinite incomprehensible ideas  
    born of a stark, brilliant neurological deficit

why insist that it is not my time to comment?  
    how long must i play defendant to your curled lips?  
why ask me to pry open your vast jaw, unhinging  
    like lightning forking, stark and bitter in the sky?

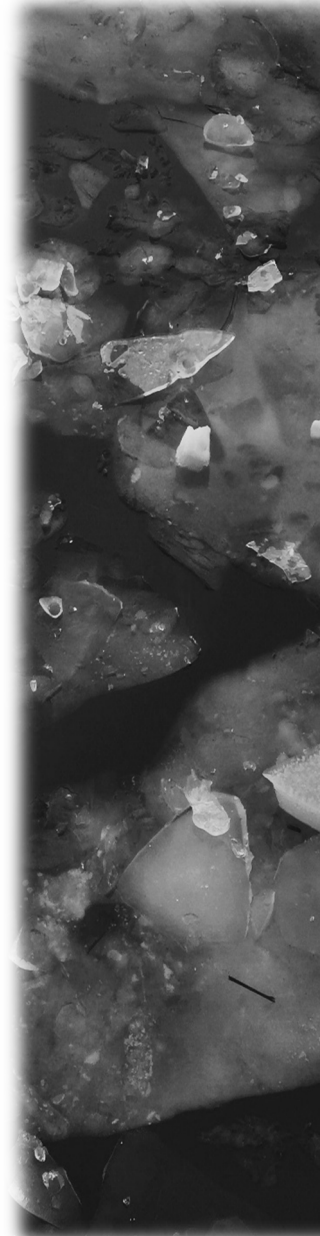
instead i want to be asked how my blood would taste  
    if it was not made of iron crawling under sweet  
and i want you to wonder what hue my soul takes  
    if my mind is not just unfathomable, but blind

because i think it would tang with cranberry-pineapple  
    and my veins run with visions of music refracting on  
something colder than morning, more bitter than  
    moonfall, more striking than color at every angle

testosterone has numbed the edges of my  
anxiety to a blunt point

---

i skim thick, sludgelike, across ice sheets  
let meltwater pour from my lips  
reach into the talik and let the salt run  
clean, pristine as the funeral of the earth  
i worry i am losing my internal motor  
pulled by the heel across miles of desert  
scraping senseless away from sensation  
the twisting vice below my larynx  
detonates like compacted snow 2000 ft down  
i want to rip myself open before anyone else can  
suffocating under the weight of the cloudy attic  
pressing caustic and heavy on my chest  
i can't bring myself to say things just to argue  
i would rather collapse and compress to  
the size of a folded boardgame dollar  
crisp and useless in your pocket  
i don't know how to live with attachment except  
the way the ship loves the sweeping steel anchor  
the way fire embraces the framelike hearth  
so necessary that without it  
something monstrous overtakes peace  
aspen trees' eyes follow like a sunken portrait  
each branch beneath my boots ruptures  
like false ribs, sighing out in silence  
*are you man enough?*  
*are you man enough yet?*



# Selen Frantz



## *F-Painting, 1973*

---

It all begins with a corner— something blue adorning  
the dizzying scene, returning to its view by  
tracing back the limbs of a key;

an opened hatch, the arms as they intersect,  
the place where a wound wept      perpendicular to the sea;  
peculiarity;

the bodies overlapping, grasping and wading; a salt palace  
collapsing; two connections reflected in a worn mirror; a lapse

in a degree      of separation, a point of intersection;  
disparate; duplicate, triplicate;  
foam on the crest, wrapped in a torn veil of spray—

the haze floating; everything in its precision  
position,      a hand wrapped around the arm, the cobalt and  
cadmium, all together, an effect  
on the direct image of the ocean;

an embrace, a blurring of lines, muddying  
of hues; the parallel, the point, a ray extending from the sun to the muck  
or the body to the next—through the lines, the waves,  
the next current;  
connected and present at the hip,

at the crook of the arm; limbs creating a portrait,  
arranged as      a chain across the deep landscape;  
pink on green on blue at the corner of the earth and its sky.

## Force of Nature

---

by the end of the day  
i will catch chaos in my hands  
i will undo my own entropy  
and photosynthesize under  
solar fits and flares, capturing  
the sun's bubbling laughter

by the end of the month  
i will be free from observance  
i will be in superposition  
holding multiple realities  
behaving authentic and wildly  
free, beyond scattered stars

by the end of the year  
i will come out of this black hole  
i will claw my way back to the  
event horizon and rise  
my shadow twice as heavy  
my light twice as blinding

by the end of the world  
i will be dancing furiously  
i will be singing joyously  
the sound and movement vibrating  
through the atmosphere's gradients  
the air thinning and our ears ringing



# Nate Murphy

## To Endure

---

In this life, you must learn to love terribly well,  
and then of course to lose it.

To grieve awfully,  
because there is no antonymic way of doing it

To speak to headstones  
and acquaint yourself with their cold stares  
and uniquely silent humor.

To dam your eyes  
despite the best attempts of violins and pianos.

To feel the overwhelming fullness  
of the consequences of loving something completely.  
To bathe in the impermanence  
of all about you—and still choose  
to love anyhow.

That is the only way.



## Contributors

**Abdumueed Balogun Adewale** is a black poet & pilgrim from the city of brown tenements. A Pushcart prize and BOTN Nominee. He was shortlisted for the 2024 Gerald Kraak Prize. His poems have been published in: *Boudin*, *The Coachella Review*, *The Oakland Arts Review*, *The Mid-Atlantic Review*, *Progenitor Art and Literary Journal*, *Zaum Magazine*, *Ember*, *Brittle Paper*, *The Westchester Review*, *Soundings East Magazine*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Red Cedar Review* and elsewhere. He tweets from: @AbdmueedA

**P.M. Alexander** is a D.C.-based writer with previous publication in *Altered Reality Magazine*, *Waymark Magazine*, and *The Floating Acorn Review*. He is currently seeking representation for his debut short story collection. When not writing, he enjoys D.C.'s free museums and tolerates its overpriced coffee.

**Marie Anne Arreola** is a bilingual poet and editor whose work lives at the intersection of speculative lyric, digital culture, and diaspora memory. She is the author of *Sparks of the Liberating Spirit Who Trapped Us* (Foreshore Publishing, UK), winner of the Plumas en Ciernes Short Story Prize, and founding editor of VOCES, a bilingual platform for global artists and writers. Her work appears in over 40 literary journals across the U.S., Europe, and Latin America.

**Sarah Baskin** is a senior studying Computer Science and Linguistics at Brandeis University. Although a Software Engineering trainee by day, she spends a lot of her free time engaged in the creative process. Her fiction was published in *Laurel Moon*, where she won the Dafna Zamarripa-Gesundheit Memorial Prize. Additionally, she is a staff writer for her school's student-run newspaper, *The Brandeis Hoot*.

**Jaya S. Basu** is a multidisciplinary poet, playwright, director, visual artist, fiber artist, and sewist based in Washington D.C. They are a BIPOC Fellow with Trans Poetics Archive, and are poetry editor of *Collegian*. Their play MAHAMOHA was featured at the inaugural T4T4T Festival in Baltimore and they were a featured playwright in Rorschach Theatre's *Klexography: Vox Populi*. He enjoys cephalopods, pointing out linguistic mergers, and saying "thank you, I made it!" when complimented on a clothing item.

**Finn Bradshaw** is a primarily horror/thriller poetry and prose writer based in Fort Smith, Arkansas. He is currently pursuing his bachelor's degree in media communication at UAFS. When he is not writing alongside a lavender latte, Finn spends most of his time reading, watercolor painting, journaling, and catching his favorite bands in concert. An admitted film fanatic, he feeds his addiction by watching almost a movie a day. He writes with his favorite Stephen King quote in mind, "books are a uniquely portable magic." This is his first publication.

**Natalie Bridgnell** is a junior at the University of Michigan studying classical voice performance. As a first-generation college student, she is interested in accessibility to performing arts and representation of marginalized groups in opera. Additionally, she is seeking a minor in creative writing with aspiration to pursue music journalism.

**David L. Butler** is an undergraduate student (senior) majoring in History at New Mexico State University. He is an out-and-out spiritualist and hopes to reflect his personal truth (that everything is simply unconditional love) in his fiction writing.

**Valen Castonguay** is a poet interested in the beauty of the natural world and the intimacy of everyday moments. He was born in Bristol, Connecticut and now studies Interactive Narrative in Vermont, focusing on bringing stories to life through interactive media such as video games and visual novels. When not at the library studying, he can be found at home with his tuxedo cat, enjoying a cup of earl grey tea.

**Drew Clements** is a horror/fantasy/poetry writer based in Fort Smith, Arkansas, currently working on a horror novel surrounding a small-town cult, another fantasy book series that has nymphs and sirens, and a book of poetry containing a collection of poems written over the years. She enjoys writing, singing, being outdoors, watching nostalgic movies, and shopping. This is her very first publication.

**Mahalia Collingsworth** is a poet from Palm Harbor, Florida and a sophomore creative writing student at Florida State University. Her poetry aims to remind readers of themselves and to worship the world around you. Her work has previously appeared in *The Kudzu Review*.

**Nathan Conti** is a senior at Champlain College studying Creative Media, and an avid outdoor enthusiast. Much of his creative work surrounds his experiences and connection to nature. He believes that the outdoors has

invaluable lessons to offer, and through our interactions with our environment we can learn more about ourselves. Through his recently discovered love of writing Nathan strives to create work that translates these sensory experiences we receive from our environment into a collaboration between human and nature.

**Alexander Dyga** is a student at Schoolcraft College studying journalism. They are a published poet, journalist, and research-competition veteran. In their free time, Alex enjoys building and collecting Legos.

**Danielle Ellis** is a writer from the Quad Cities and a reader for The Colored Lens. Her work has appeared in *Westbrae Literary Group*, *Kings River Review*, *Third Wednesday Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Penumbra*, *Neon & Smoke*, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. Website: Danifellis.com. Bluesky: @daniellefellis

**Beatrix Fauth** is a 22-year-old poet from Rostock, Germany. She studies philosophy and English, weaving philosophical inquiry into her art. Her ambition has long been on poetry, a commitment deepened during a year in Princeton, New Jersey, where she attended open literature lectures and immersed herself in an international literary environment. Alongside her writing, she volunteers at a refugee center and an elementary school, seeking stories beyond the familiar and translating these encounters into her art. Writing in her own voice, she gives space to stories that must be heard, exploring perspectives often left at the margins.

**Josie Fournier** (She/Her) is a college student studying philosophy. As a being of queer understanding, gender identity is a major part of virtually all her work (However difficult to see). She loves poetry as she loves life and tries to imbue her work with whatever she finds meaningful at any given moment in time. Please consider her work for submission.

**Selen Frantz** is an urban planner from Detroit and is currently the William T. Battrick Poetry Fellow at Oberlin College. Her work has appeared in *Lucky Jefferson*, *BarBar*, *Meniscus*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *ellipsis*, and elsewhere.

**Samantha Fujimoto** is a fiction writer from Waipahu, Hawai'i. She is majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Editing and Publishing at Pacific University. When not incessantly typing up stories on her laptop, Samantha can be found hunched over her sketchbook with graphite stains on her fingers or with an iPad and stylus in hand. She has designed the

cover art and written creative nonfiction for the anthology *Garden of the Mind*, published through Pacific University. She has also published artwork in *Pacific's Literary Undergraduate Magazine (PLUM)* and illustrated designs for Pacific University's annual *Lū'au* and *Hō'ike*.

**Hannah Guo** is a writer and a student at Rice University. She has been published in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Milking Cat*, and elsewhere. She is passionate about humanity, creative work, and the pursuit of joy. You can find more of her work at <https://hannahguo.substack.com/> or @hannahscorneroftheuniverse on Instagram. She is happy to be here and feels lucky to have you here.

**P. A. Henley** is a fantasy author from Arkansas River Valley blending lyrical storytelling, rich worldbuilding, and mythic themes. She/they studies English and geoscience, works as a writing tutor, and crafts immersive stories exploring resilience, friendship, and quiet magic in vividly imagined worlds.

**Anthony Ikeh** is a Nigerian writer & self-acclaimed cinephile. His work is on or forthcoming on Brittle Paper, Kalahari Review, The Shallow Tales Review, Yugen Quest Review, Metaworker Literary, Eunoia Review, The B'k Magazine, African Writer Magazine, The Mixtape Review & elsewhere. He tweets @lanalovesbooks0

**Reilly Kendrick** is a senior English major at Harding University. She loves to write and is involved with the university writing club. Although she was extremely skeptical when taking her first poetry class in college, she fell in love with the diversity in poetic forms. She's been a poet ever since and is published in *Polaris* and *Shapes and Names*, writing mostly about campus life and the confused feelings of college students.

**Dana Leung** is an excitable young author whose morbid daydreams and crack-job delusions dilly dally their way onto a page and arrange themselves into questionably enjoyable pieces of literature. She enjoys spending time on her roof, hanging out at church, cackling with friends, and thinking about writing. Maybe even doing writing. She's especially good at writing author bios, so good that they gave her an A+ in the class, which is both normal to want and possible to achieve. God bless!

**Everix Machan** (he/him) is a queer, transgender, and autistic undergraduate poet and theatre maker from Wisconsin. He often writes about angels and godliness, body horror, and times of transition.

Otherwise, he spends his time doing research, reading, and finding excuses to perform. You can find his poetry published or forthcoming in *None of the Above*, *DYONYZINE*, *Flowermouth Press*, *The Gentian*, *Yin Literary*, *The Sandy River Review*, *The Branches*, and *The Rebis*.

**Chastalynn Martin** is from St. George, Utah, and is pursuing a BA in English at Utah Tech University. Further educational plans include attending graduate school and expanding on her love for learning. Outside of English, she enjoys learning about different cultures and what makes people unique. When she's not spending time with her husband, she can be found writing, playing musical instruments, or coming up with new hobbies.

**Nate Murphy** is an undergraduate student at the University of Cincinnati, where he is pursuing an English degree. He strives to write poetry that is vivid and resonates with the average reader. Outside of reading and writing, Nate is a care provider for an adult with down syndrome. He typically spends his free time writing in the outdoors.

**Eliza Nester** is a psychology major at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts who works closely with survivors at her campus Sexual Violence Support Center. She enjoys reading, baking, and spending time with her pets outdoors. This is her first publication.

**Greta Oswald** is a student at Winthrop University studying Special Education. Her poetry has been published in two student-run literary journals: *The Anthology* and *Patchwork Soup*. She has also formally introduced poet Adele Elise Williams at a showcase. Greta is particularly inspired by poets Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry. Greta desires not only that readers recognize themselves in her work, but that they come to know the divine Hope compelling every word.

**Kaja Pedersen** is a writer and undergraduate student at the University of Victoria. She currently resides on the unceded lands of the L'kwungen speaking peoples of the Esquimalt and Songhees nations. Her work has previously appeared in *Eavesdrop*, *The Warren*, and *This Side of West*.

**Khedaren Perumal** is a 21-year-old engineering student from Mauritius who is fascinated by literature and has been writing poetry since the age of 13. His poems are about issues that don't often get the attention they need and thus his poems aim at raising awareness pertaining to these issues such as homelessness.

**Stephanie Peterson** is an undergraduate student at Purdue University Northwest. When she isn't wearing the hat of a student, Stephanie identifies as a self-proclaimed foodie, a Jeopardy! watcher, and the owner of all eight seasons of Full House on DVD.

**Elizabeth (Libbie) Radgowski** is a first year architecture student at the University of Virginia. She enjoys art in every form; drawing, music, ballet, writing, and sculpture. As an architecture student, writing may not be the forefront of her professional world, but the values of curiosity, wonder, and observation she encourages in both her studies and daily life lend themselves to her double life as a self-identifying notes-app author

**Jolene Reed** is currently a junior at Stephen F. Austin State University studying creative writing and literature. Jolene is the author of historical fiction novels *Iced Milk* and *Red, White, and Bleeding*, and the children's book *Fitzgerald*. She resides in Northeast Texas with her family and two dogs.

**M. Shahid** is a poet from California. As a queer, South Asian, and neurodivergent writer, their writing is informed by their intersectionality. Please enjoy reading :^)

**Mia Soto | M.S. Blues** is a 20 year old student, writer, and Mental Health field employee based in the Bay Area, CA. She has over 280 publications. She is a Senior Editor at Low Hanging Fruit Magazine and the Executive Editor at Vellichor Literary. She is also the EIC of Cuentos de la Gente and the Founder & EIC of The Infinite Blues Review. Her debut book, *Collected Works: Poetry & Short Stories* can be purchased through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, other booksellers, and in store at Caspian Books located in Tracy, California.

**Brock Wolverine** is a senior English undergrad at the University of South Dakota. He is the recipient of the 2025 Dean Joseph H. Cash Award for Excellence in Writing and the Gladys Hasse USD Scholar Poetry Award.

**Zee Timko** is an undergraduate poet based in Gainesville, GA. His work has previously been published in *The Elixir*, of which he is also the Assistant Editor.



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## Featuring

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Jolene Reed  
Kaja Pederson  
Elizabeth Radogowski  
Marie Anne  
Natalie Bridgnell  
Nathan Conti  
P.M. Alexander  
Samantha Fujimoto  
Sarah Baskin  
Stephanie Peterson  
Zee Timko

Alexander Dyga  
Beatrix Fauth  
Chastalynn Martin  
Danielle Ellis  
Drew Clements  
Everix Machan  
Greta Oswald  
Jaya Basu  
Josie Fournier  
Khedaren Peruman  
Mahalia Collingsworth  
M.S. Blues  
Nate Murphy  
P.A. Henley  
Reilly Kendrick  
M. Shahid  
Selen Frantz  
Valen Castonguay



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