

Applause

Issue 34

Masthead

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Fiction

Su Mundo, Cada Día Más Amplio

by Amy Arrendondo

Yeslín had never left her home country until she turned 17. She never skipped class, never snuck out past curfew, never drank or smoked, and never *ever* stepped out of line. Kids at school poked fun at her for her “stuck-up” nature, but Yeslín would choose being called *presumida* over Mamá’s disapproving glare any day. Yeslín lived in a small world, but she preferred it that way. She was content with a small life, a small group of friends, and a small family. Which is why her current predicament left her feeling like the universe was simply against her.

On the night of Yeslín’s 17th birthday, after her few friends had left for the night, she stood cleaning up the dining table when Mamá quietly beckoned her over. Taking a moment to look her over, Yeslín took stock of the new expression on her mother’s face. Her eyebrows, although usually knitted together with stress, were almost touching with worry. The familiar hard line of her mouth angled downward in a faint frown, so faint that a stranger wouldn’t notice. But Yeslín did; she knew her mother well. What worried Yeslín the most was the look in Mamá’s eyes. Mamá’s deep brown eyes, glassed over, looked ready to spill tears. The idea itself frightened Yeslín. Mamá had never cried in front of her before. As quickly as it came, the moment passed, and Yeslín’s observations were interrupted by Mamá pulling her into her arms.

Mamá was never a woman who showed much affection. Such a sudden touch from her mother was awkward for Yeslín. She didn’t know where to place her arms or rest her face, so she stood stiffly with her arms hanging by her side. It was short, ending as soon as it started. Mamá pulled away, but only slightly, resting her hands on Yeslín’s shoulders. Like she thought her daughter would disappear, disintegrating into a million particles of dust if she even thought of pulling her hands away.

“I’m sorry, *mi hija*,” she finally spoke, “I’ve held that in all day.” Yeslín couldn’t shake the anxiety crawling up her throat. “It’s fine. What’s wrong, Mamá?” she spoke quietly, her words disjointed and murmured. Until that moment, Mamá was almost vibrating with unease, but hearing Yeslín’s question left her still. For a long time, she didn’t speak. That awful expression that clawed its way into Yeslín’s brain, infesting her memory for years to come, finally softened, if only a little. Only when it felt like eons had passed did Mamá speak again. “You’re going to live with your *papá* in the United States. You’ll leave Friday,” she said with an air of finality that suggested no room for question. But Yeslín couldn’t help herself. What her mother said was too outrageous, too sudden. Seeing Yeslín gearing up to protest, Mamá interrupted, “No. *Sin comentarios*, Yeslín. It’s what’s best for you. There is no life for you here.”

Yeslín had never felt so angry in her life. She couldn't process the bomb Mamá dropped on her. It was Sunday. How did Mamá expect her to pack up her life in less than a week? To leave Cuba by herself when she could count the number of times she had been allowed to attend sleepovers with one hand? To live with a man she had never met? Yeslín knew her mother as a rational woman, yet now she was being anything but. Feeling her eyes well up with tears, the only thing Yeslín could do was sit in her room. She was careful not to slam the door, even though she wanted to. Her little world now had a little crack in it. Yeslín cried herself to sleep that night, ignorant that her mother did the same.

The days leading up to her departure passed quickly, slipping through her fingers like sand. She only remembers that time in flashes. She gathered up her life into two small suitcases with Mamá. She went to get her hair, nails, and eyebrows done. She went to her last day of school and cried when her friends made her stay after class to say goodbye. She took a taxi to the airport with its deep blue walls and crumbling floors. Mamá hugged her for what felt like the last time. She got on the plane, her first ever plane ride. She passed through immigration, stumbling over her words as she tried to remember all the English she learned in school.

What Yeslín remembered most about her first day in America was laying her eyes on her father for the first time. She didn't know what he looked like; Mamá had divorced him before she was born and threw out all the pictures in the house with his face in them. The only way Yeslín knew the man standing before her was her father was the big sign he held, reading "Welcome Home, Yesí!". She knew he was the opposite of Mamá from the moment she saw him. He had kind eyes and a smile so big his face must've hurt. He looked young, even though Yeslín knew he had to be older than Mamá. Most of all, he had affection pouring out of his seams, hugging Yeslín the moment she was within reach. Although she knew it was rude, she couldn't bring herself to reciprocate, the upending of her life still fresh in her mind. If Yeslín's lack of interest affected her father in any way, he never showed it on his face.

Her father lived a life of luxury compared to her back in Cuba. His car was new and shiny. A *1995 Honda Civic*, he said it was, and only a year old. The sleek, grey exterior was nothing like the old *almendrones* back home, with their bright white roofs and colorful bodies. Despite her sour mood, she found it hard to conceal her excitement when she slipped into the car's passenger side and felt the fresh kiss of air-conditioning. Her father noticed this with a laugh, explaining that most cars in America had air-conditioning systems built into them. As they drove back from the airport, he pointed out several landmarks. He spoke animatedly about a race track they passed and the hospital where he worked as a nurse. He explained that he lived in a city called *Hialeah* and told her not to worry about assimilating because the city's population consisted of Cuban immigrants such as themselves.

During his spiel, Yeslín mostly kept quiet. She had always been shy, even more now after such an overwhelming day. Eventually, her father must've sensed her hesitance to converse because he dwindled off, reaching for the volume button on the radio and turning it to the right. A man's voice filtered into the space, talking animatedly about the next song scheduled to play. He spoke of a

group named Oasis, whom Yeslín had never heard of before, and introduced the title of a song she couldn't understand. Then the music started playing.

It was unlike anything she had ever heard before. Yeslín mostly listened to the music Mamá played over the dusty, old radio with its lively beat and dramatic singing. She didn't know what kinds of music her friends listened to, as they were always more concerned about dissecting the assignments in front of them. The music she heard now had no trumpets, claves, or Celia Cruz yelling *azúcar*. Instead, the song was slower, and the lead singer sounded whiny. It was weird. Yeslín must've made a face because suddenly her father was laughing. Turning down the music a little, he spoke, "What? Not a fan of my taste in music?" She pondered the question, trying to listen closely to the song. "I don't know. I've never heard anything like it before," she said shyly.

Her father looked at her like she grew a second head. "There's no way you haven't heard rock before! It's so popular, especially with teenagers like you. Your friends back home didn't introduce it to you?" Yeslín shrugged, looking out the car window. Her father was quiet for a moment, seemingly thinking. He tapped his hands on the steering wheel and mused, "I'll tell you what. I'll try my best to introduce you to all my favorite songs in the next couple of weeks, and then we'll see what you think. Deal?" She nodded shyly, humming a soft affirmative.

Her father kept his word with impressive dedication throughout the next two weeks. He worked a busy schedule but was home in the afternoons when Yeslín came home from school, taking the time to show her songs saved on an array of CDs. He introduced her to the "greats," bands like Queen, AC/DC, Nirvana, and Metallica. Most of the time, he sat beside her, watching expectantly for any signs of enjoyment from her. She couldn't lie that the music wasn't growing on her, but something was missing. They kept that routine for most days of the week, on the days Yeslín didn't have much homework. However, one day, he paused his old CD player and turned to Yeslín with an awkward look on his face. Yeslín felt uncomfortable bubbling in her stomach, like her body knew what was coming.

"Your *mamá* called," he spoke, sounding like a cough. Yeslín hummed nervously, taking a sudden interest in doodling on her math homework. She was still furious at her mother for waiting so long to tell her such life-changing news and for not considering her feelings or opinions. Mamá had called every couple of days during the first two weeks, but conveniently, her father was always home to take the call. While her father greeted Mamá, Yeslín would pretend to be asleep or showering. She was avoiding Mamá. She knew it was wrong; she knew how expensive it was to receive calls from Cuba and the effort it took to make the call, but she was just so *angry* with her. Her thoughts were interrupted by her father clearing his throat, seemingly looking everywhere but Yeslín's eyes. "I've noticed... no, *know* you're avoiding talking to her. I know you're angry, but she's your mother. She misses you," he said softly, with a tone she had never heard before. Yeslín didn't answer, instead continuing to scribble away on her math homework.

Soon, Yeslín had spent a month in her new home. Every day was mostly the same. She woke up, went to school, came home, listened to music with her father while doing homework, and dodged Mamá's phone calls. Rinse and repeat. Yeslín was bored, painfully bored. The kids at her school were kind enough. When she started classes, she was excited to learn she would be in a

program with other immigrant children, but it was too late in the year, and they had already formed friend groups. There was no space in their worlds for Yeslín. Despite being in a new place, Yeslín's world still remained small and cracked.

One day, her father burst into the house with a smug grin. Yeslín looked up from her English homework, her eyes falling on the two glossy tickets in her father's right hand. "Guess what these are!" said her father with so much excitement that it sounded like he was singing. Yeslín shrugged, biting back a smile. She turned in her chair to face him while he animatedly explained that he had bought tickets to what he called a "cover band," a group of musicians who played other's songs. Although she tried not to show it, Yeslín was intrigued by the idea of going in person to listen to the music her father loved so vehemently. The excitement bubbled inside her chest, feeling like little sparks. She never did anything like this back home in Cuba; she never had the time, and Mamá would never allow it if Yeslín asked. Looking into her father's bright, hopeful eyes, she couldn't help but feel her world expand by the tiniest inch.

Now that she had something to look forward to, Yeslín didn't mind her copy-and-paste daily routine as much. If anything, she found that the days passed by faster, filled with daydreams about what her first concert would be like. Would there be a lot of people? Would she be able to hear the band if she was too far away? Would she have fun? She was teeming with questions, so much that she felt she had nowhere to put them all. She couldn't ask her father; he worked long, tiring hours, and it didn't feel right to bother him. For a moment, just a moment, the thought of calling Mamá crossed her mind. She pushed it away as if it had burned her.

The day of the concert started with a bang –literally. It was a Saturday, so Yeslín was sleeping in. However, she woke up to a quick and loud banging on the door. *Rude*, she thought with a groan, dragging her covers over her head in an attempt to go back to sleep. Hearing her door open a crack, Yeslín burrowed herself deeper into her bed. "*Oye, no sigas durmiendo!* I made breakfast. Today's the day!" he said, closing the door as quickly as he had opened it. Yeslín could feel his excitement from across the room, his childlike wonder despite his age making her smile, if only to herself. Tumbling out of bed, she readied herself for the day and slipped into the kitchen to meet her father.

Yeslín had never seen such a big breakfast spread in her life. Her father had taken the day off of work, so he had more time for breakfast that morning, taking advantage of it with gusto. Across the little dining table, Yeslín saw pancakes, bacon, sausages, and fried eggs. He even set out her *café con leche* for her with little soda crackers next to the pink mug he had bought her when she moved in. She watched as he fussed with the food's presentation, nudging plates every which way and muttering under his breath. Yeslín sneezed, ruining the moment. Her father looked up, face instantly lighting up with a smile. He beckoned her to sit, saying, "Come on, sit. *Come bien*, we have a long day ahead!". Sitting at the dining table eating breakfast with her father, Yeslín allowed herself to smile and laugh, feeling genuinely happy for the first time since moving to Hialeah.

Her father wasn't kidding when he said the day would be lengthy. The concert venue was two hours away in another city, so they had to leave the house early. After breakfast, they buzzed around town for last-minute errands. The afternoon felt chaotic, but everything slowed once they set

off towards the concert. They spent the car ride blasting music, animatedly chattering while her father drove and Yeslín gave him directions from a map.

Entering the concert venue was like stepping through a portal. It was outside with no seating but was teeming with people sitting on the cool grass or standing in huddled groups. Despite the evening darkness, the gargantuan lights from the stage lit up the space all the way to the parking lot. People were talking so loudly to each other that Yeslín couldn't hear her father next to her. The loud and busy environment was almost overstimulating, setting her on edge. Noticing her discomfort, her father gently grasped her shoulder with a sympathetic smile.

The band filtered onstage, and suddenly, the loud talking turned to screams of excitement. Yeslín watched as they waved to the crowd, tapping microphones and fiddling with instruments. As the band introduced themselves, the crowd only got louder, ushering them to begin their performance.

The first guitar strum entranced Yeslín. The environment shifted, the screaming no longer jarring, and the cramped space more comfortable. Everyone was dancing together in time to the music, creating movements and shapes in the crowd that fascinated her. The lead singer was talented, but nothing sounded better than the audience singing along loudly and amusingly off-key. Yeslín didn't know when she started to sing along, but her pride because she knew all the lyrics almost brought her to tears. Struck with an epiphany, Yeslín finally knew what she was missing during all those listening sessions with her father. Human connection, she realized, was the most integral part of music regardless of its genre. The lived experience of her first concert would be something Yeslín would carry in her heart for decades to come. Looking at her father's wide smile and bright eyes made ever so brighter by the lights, she felt her world expanding rapidly, bursting the cracks and flourishing into a pool of warmth and energy. Her little world was not so little anymore.

The rest of the concert and the drive back was a blur. Even as her father pulled into the driveway and unlocked the front door, Yeslín couldn't wipe the smile off her face. Bidding her father goodnight, she sat on the living room couch and let the feelings of the night course through her. Despite being alone, Yeslín still felt an overwhelming warmth in her chest that threatened to burst forth in sparkling beams of light. Eyeing the landline on the kitchen counter, she dashed across the living room. Shakily, she dialed the number and waited for the line to connect. After some time, the person on the other side answered with a hesitant greeting, and Yeslín released a breath she didn't know she was holding.

"*Hola Mamá! Cómo estás?* You'll never guess what I did today," she spoke into the phone as if she had seen Mamá yesterday.

On her 17th birthday, Yeslín had her life turned upside down. Now, she had a hunch she was going to be just fine.

Equivalence

by Emma Huang

On his deathbed, my boyfriend started writing a dissertation. Something about dark matter and complex equations and wormholes. He was on medical leave from his PhD program, which everyone knew he wasn't returning to, but he still insisted on seeing it through as far as he could. "This is all I have left to give," was his response whenever I suggested he write a will instead.

It's not that I really wanted his belongings. Most of them were textbooks, full of scrawled margins and dog-eared corners, and he kept them in a haphazard stack next to our living room couch with the fraying seams. Even when the couch was still just mine, in the early days of our relationship, the stack existed: it was shorter back then, but definitely there. Sometimes, I left my coffee mug on the top textbook and it would leave a circular brown stain when I removed it a few hours later.

"Shit," I said every time, "Sorry."

And he'd laugh, and kiss me on the forehead, "They're just books. You're you." A few months before he started dying, he told me that his most prized possessions were his telescope, and me. I gave him an incredulous look, something about how I didn't belong to anyone already coming out of my mouth, before he cut me off, "I know, I know. But I just mean that you're it for me, you know?"

He never wrote his will.

I ended up getting everything anyway, the textbooks and the telescope and myself. We lived together, and I was his girlfriend of almost six years, and most of the things were mine too. I suppose I just wanted him to do normal dying people activities for my sake. I asked him if he wanted to go out to the park before the weather turned too cold, and when it did eventually turn too cold, I asked him if he wanted to go out and feel the snow. He always refused these offers, kindly but firmly, and it was only in the sterile, white hospital room that I found him more alive than ever, radiating something golden as he poured over his thesis.

I asked him once what he was writing about. "Entanglement and wormholes," he laughed, "You knew that."

I did. Entanglement, he explained once, was a concept from quantum mechanics that described how two seemingly isolated objects were correlated. Wormholes, on the other hand, were predicted by special relativity, a completely different topic, and they connected two black holes across time and space. He studied the connection between the two, the bridge between distance and dependence. How two seemingly unlinked phenomena from opposite corners of physics might be fundamentally related.

He had told me this many times already. But by that point, the doctors had told me anything I could do to keep him talking and conscious was something worth doing. "No, I didn't. Tell me more."

He reached out for my hand then and kissed it, lips dry and cracked against my skin. He was always doing small, romantic things like that. "You'll be the first to read it. I promise."

A week before he was transferred to the ICU, I asked my boyfriend if he remembered our Costa Rica trip. He laughed, and the sound was too dry, too brittle, like it sucked the air out of him to even try.

“How could I forget?” He coughed out, and I rubbed his back. “We had our biggest argument.”

He died not knowing what that argument was really about. I think (and this is only speculation; he could very well have known exactly what I was angry about) he thought I was pissed over his reluctance to return to our hotel when it was getting too late that night. The sun had set nearly an hour prior, and the winds were ripping along the waves and pushing cold fronts through my hair and raising goosebumps on my arms.

“Five more minutes,” he kept saying.

“Five more minutes and you’re going to have to carry my frozen body back.”

In reality, the anger was actually jealousy: when I watched him watch the Pacific, he did it with a reverence that he usually only reserved for me. Until then (and we had been together for about a year at that point), he had rarely argued with me, or even disagreed – not because he was a push-over, or because I was a pusher, but because he had no desire to. There was no point in fighting over the useless. We both knew that. So that night, as he spoke to the ocean for longer than he listened to me, I felt this ugly foreign jealousy cut into my throat, red and hot, and I stormed off the beach and back to the hotel room.

“Then don’t come back,” I threw over my shoulder as I left. He stayed for another hour. I spent that time pacing the room and feeling very sorry for myself, wondering if I had ruined something great, thinking up ways to apologize to him. When he finally did return, he opened the door slowly and saw me sitting on the edge of the bed. “Hi,” he said, very obviously muting the happiness in his voice for my sake, “I’m sorry.” There was something brilliant in his eyes.

At his funeral, I told this story. I talked about how absurd I was, being jealous of the ocean. “Everything should have the chance to be loved by him,” I said. “Been loved by him,” I corrected myself after a few beats – he was no longer the wind-blown boy on the beach staring at the black ocean and the night sky. He was no longer the man who later confessed to me that that night on the Costa Rica beach was the night he decided to apply for graduate school. He was neither of those. He was dead, and had been for a month by then.

There were very few things about him that I didn’t like, or at least admire. He always walked on the half of the sidewalk closer to the road, never forgot an anniversary, or a friend’s birthday. He was better than me, I secretly thought, in almost every way possible: kinder, smarter, more patient.

“He’s your sunshine,” one of our mutual friends said to me once.

“What does that make me?” I asked, and she shrugged.

I spent a few days obsessing over that comment – was I the dark? The moon? The night? I eventually told my boyfriend this, who laughed and told me I was his sun too.

Truthfully though, she hadn't said anything I didn't already know. There was a simplicity to him that I couldn't reach, something pure and golden that settled warm in the bottom of my stomach without any effort at all. I was okay with it. Happy, even. If all of us were as good as him, we'd go blind from the light.

What did upset me, though, what might still upset me, was how I would never be a mystery to him. He spent his entire life shrouded in the uncharted – I would never be as fresh as the universe, as counterintuitive as that sounded. I was not as new as the science he was so hellbent on uncovering. I was just there for the ride, something to ground him to reality.

We met in the middle of undergrad, when he was a junior and I was a sophomore, where he spent most of his time in the physics building at our university. He was brilliant in his field, studying ideas bigger than I could ever imagine, and I never interfered. I graduated the year after he did with a degree in computer science, and so while I spent the days at the office, he spent that time in our spare room. His makeshift laboratory, he called it.

He was a theoretical physicist, which meant most of his work was research rather than experimental, and so the floor of the room was always covered with scratch paper and open textbooks. His telescope, a sleek, expensive model that he bought during undergrad just because he liked looking at the stars, permanently took up a corner of the room. He always left his laptop open on the desk, running some indiscernible mathematics program that pinpointed wormholes.

I asked him once what their connection to quantum entanglement actually was. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't?"

He smiled, and I saw the way the lines in the corners of his eyes crinkled deeper. "Not yet." And wasn't that it?

So it was okay for a while. It was good. I wrote code and he did whatever he did, and we would meet in the overlaps between our works, quiet Thursday night dinners and early Sunday trips to the grocery store. Sometimes, maybe once every few months, when we were both able to get the entire weekend off, we'd drive the Camry two hours north and stay in the mountains for a few days. We'd bring tents and dried food and our hiking shoes. No textbooks. No laptops.

"I think those trips were some of my best memories," my boyfriend confessed to me on his deathbed.

I hated how he had started speaking like he had already died. But by then, moments of clarity, real clarity, were rare, so I had to take what I could get.

"Yeah?" "Yeah." He licked his lips. "Those, and that time with the stars."

I looked at him. I think my mouth was hanging open a little bit.

"You know. When I—"

"Of course I know," I cut him off. I was just surprised that he remembered it as fondly as I did; it was one of my favorite memories of us, one of my favorite memories in general. We had been dating for a few months by then, both of us still young and giddy with infatuation and not so busy. He pretended we were going on a dinner date: made a reservation and put on a button-down shirt

and picked me up. We must have driven for twenty minutes before I realized, sitting in his passenger seat in my favorite black dress with the cutout in the back, that we were not going to the restaurant.

“Where are we going?” I finally asked. And he had shushed me, holding a finger to my lips while keeping his eyes on the road, smiling softly, and it was that, that infectious, lovely moment with the pad of his index finger pressed to my closed mouth, that suddenly suppressed any other questions I had. He pulled into an empty grass field half an hour later, and then produced a blanket and a telescope from his trunk, and I think that was the first time I fell in love with him.

So of course I knew. “Pyxis,” I said. He had shown me that constellation that night, pointing to it with his left hand while his right was clasped into mine. “I remember.”

“Yeah.” He paused for a moment. “Hey,” and I looked up at that, at his voice, and saw him smiling, a sad upturn of his lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes. He didn’t laugh much anymore. I think it hurt to. “At least we were happy at one point, you know? Not everyone gets even that.”

“Are you saying I was your happiness?” I was only half joking.

“You reminded me that it existed,” he said quietly.

My boyfriend and I talked about everything, about what groceries we needed that week and where he got his scars and what color to paint our bedroom, but when it came to the big picture stuff – God, and religion, and all that – we learned to keep our mouths shut.

I was never raised religious, but I found bits and pieces of it in recent years, clinging to Christianity sometimes like it was the only thing left to believe in – especially after his diagnosis. For the entirety of that last year I had with him, I knelt before the hospital bed every night and prayed.

“It’s me again,” I’d start each time, “Please. Save him.”

My boyfriend didn’t believe in God, or salvation. His beliefs never strayed from hard evidence; it was in everything he did: his words, his research, his passions. I think the closest he ever came to believing in something unproved were wormholes, and even then, he always made sure to note that their existence was only assumed.

He used to say I was the closest thing he had to faith, though. He called me divine. Sometimes, on the nights when neither of us had work, on the nights he traced constellations on my back, he’d bury his face in my hair and tell me that he never knew kind touch before he met me. “You saved me,” he always told me.

It was all beautiful, of course, and true if he said it to be. *He* was beautiful, in that gutdeep, quiet sort of way; by extension, he made me feel beautiful.

But still, he was dying, and what’s beauty if you’re bones, so I was worried that if there was something truly out there, some force that could somehow reunite us, they’d meet him and frown. He didn’t believe in reincarnation. I was convinced that should God really exist, like I thought, his stubbornness would keep us apart in future lives. I attempted a subtle form of indoctrination (this was two months before he died), reciting stories from holy books without saying where they were from.

He understood what I was doing quickly though, and found it funny. “It’s a little too late to convert, don’t you think?”

“Why can’t you just believe we’ll meet again?” I asked him childishly before turning away. I had never been as composed as him. “It can’t end here.”

“I never said it did.” He relaxed back into the hospital bed, greasy dark hair fanned out on the white, before he noticed my crumpled face. He frowned. “What?”

“Yes, you did,” I said, frustration welling, “You don’t need to convert. You don’t even have to pick one. Just believe in something.”

My boyfriend laughed then. Laughed and laughed and laughed until it came out as broken echoes, rattling against his lungs and pushing against the bones that had started to protrude on his chest. He had lost all of forty pounds by that point. “Oh, Allie,” he said, looking at me, “I do believe in something.” And I still remember this image of him, smiling like a man with no tomorrow, held back by nothing but science, reaching over for my hand and intertwining them carefully to not rip out his tubes.

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

I think it was two years into his PhD program (I had been at my job for one; some small startup company) when we started missing each other.

He would stay up late enough to catch the sunrise, locked in his makeshift laboratory and pouring through articles and computer programs, and I would have left for work by then.

Sometimes, I’d call on my lunch break, and get his voicemail. He would never fail to leave a message a few hours later, but it was always short and unbudging. “Sorry, baby. I’m working.” To be fair, it wasn’t as if I had much free time – if anything, I was being put on more and more projects – but Thursday dinners became every other week and weekend mountain trips stopped happening altogether.

We were just out of sync with each other, only slightly, but still noticeable enough to both of us. It was like two metronomes set to a few beats apart: sometimes we’d align but mostly not. But there was no solution, nothing to be given up, no compromise; this was his research, and this was my job. This was our life.

“When are you guys going to get married?” My mother asked me every time we had lunch together at that Chinese place she liked (which was often; she was the sort of person to find something she enjoyed and beat it until it was dead). We had been dating for three years by then.

“I don’t know, Ma,” I’d say, “We’re just not ready.” And then I’d leave, and go home to a dark kitchen, and feel like I didn’t know the man I lived with anymore.

So what scared me, really, at the heart of everything, was how content he was by himself. Once, four years into our relationship, I screamed at him over this. Asked him why he even bothered to have me around if he didn’t need me. “You could die alone and be okay with it,” I choked out between tears. He had yelled back that day, which he never, ever did, something about how his work was important too and couldn’t I see that he was trying? I cried because I was supposed to be important, and he cried because he didn’t mean I wasn’t and then suddenly we were

both crying on our kitchen floor because we were missing each other and we missed each other and we were both right there.

I never would have talked about this argument at his funeral. Instead, I told quieter stories about him. The less serious arguments that I could spin into something pretty. But these are the real things that I remember after his death – a poor choice of words on my part when I said he could die alone, I think, since less than a year later his PET scan lit up like fireworks.

He had gone to the doctor after complaining for weeks about pain in his stomach and nausea and a headache that never seemed to go away and issues concentrating and the list just kept going. When they called him back into the office a few days later to discuss his results, I ended up going with him since I already had the day off.

“I can’t read anything anymore,” was the first thing he said when we got there.

“Make it go away, Doc,” was the second.

The doctor looked at him then. Really looked at him. There was something horrible in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, and I knew.

“It kind of looks like stars,” my boyfriend joked a bit later, tilting his head to one side and squinting at the screen. Liver cancer. The doctor had stepped out, leaving us alone in the room. Metastasis to the brain. I was sobbing, big, ugly breaths that wracked my entire body and left me gasping for air. For some reason, he wasn’t. “Oh, Allie,” he said, wrapping one arm around my neck and kissing my hair, “That’s all they are. Just stars.” That day, he was wearing a light grey sweater and the pair of jeans I bought him for his birthday a few months prior. I don’t remember what shoes he had on. He was warm, and sturdy, and had not yet lost the forty pounds he would in the coming year. “Just stars.”

I told this story at his funeral too. How I was crying, and he was not, and how he was dying, and I was not.

—

He loved me. I know this for a fact, like people know their names and how to breathe. There was never any question, even during those years we were slightly out of beat. Even when he lived and breathed research, he spent the rest of his time with me (the issue was that it wasn’t much). At night, he traced constellations on my spine. Boötes and Cassiopeia and Leo. And then he’d point to specific spots on them – the alpha stars, the moles on my back. Arcturus and Schedar and Regulus.

“That’s you,” he’d say, “The brightest stars.”

“I thought I was your sun.”

“You’re all of it.”

And then we’d lay facing the same wall, the skin on my back sticking to the skin on his chest and his left arm wrapped around my waist, and I’d count his breaths as he fell asleep. Sometimes, I timed my own so that we were breathing in unison, in and out and in and out until his evened out and I knew he had fallen asleep.

I felt something in those moments, and I think now, in the months after his death, that I really understood what he was studying. Folded in his arms, I would feel us taking shape in the flow of time and space, hollowing out a wormhole-like tunnel where nothing but his breathing existed.

Where we were connected, despite work and cancer and everything yet to happen. Where I could enter in one end and come out the other to the past, months ago, years, when we were still young and he was still alive.

Sometimes, I'd touch the scars his father left behind. On his ribcage and left clavicle and lower back. I wouldn't say anything, but I'd trace them too, softly but firmly. I never apologized for them because they weren't mine to apologize for and I knew he'd hate that, but I always got the urge when I saw them. He didn't talk about his family at all, except the first time I saw him cry, really cry. So I thought if I saw them at his funeral, I wouldn't recognize them.

But I walked up to the podium that day, and looked into the crowd, and for a second, I thought I believed in ghosts. My boyfriend was in a casket. But his mother, who he hadn't spoken to in eight years, had the same eyes as him: dark, and slightly crinkled in the corners. His father, who he hadn't spoken to in even longer, grew out his hair in the same way, curling past his shoulders and tucked carelessly behind his ears. I wanted to chase them out of there, wanted to scream and demand to know why they thought they deserved to be there.

I didn't. I looked away instead.

Again I got the urge to apologize. Again I didn't, because none of it was mine to apologize for, and he would have hated that, but if he had been there that day watching me speak, I think he would have said there was something sorry in my eyes.

It's funny how people who die are still almost alive though. If I close my eyes, I think I can hear his voice: he'd laugh, and kiss my hair, and tell me I was being ridiculous. "Don't be sorry," he'd say. Then he'd pause, and wink: "God wouldn't want that."

Eventually, when his hands were too weak to type, he asked me to do the job. As he recited his studies, voice still rich even on his deathbed, I remember recalling how jealous I was of the way he spoke when I first met him. His words were full of soft intellect, and sometimes I tried to mimic it, throwing in a word like *nucleosynthesis* to surprise people. But you know how some people wear hats and some people are wearing hats? It was like that. The ideas were only compelling coming from his mouth.

More than once, my friends asked me if my boyfriend was always like this – quietly brilliant, like he didn't even know he was. I never really knew what to say to this question; "Yes, I think," but that wasn't the entire truth. To me, it was a part of him so large and loud that it was burned into his soul; on our first date, he confessed that physics and chemistry and whatever else made up the universe had become his form of escape over the years. "Escape from what?" I wanted to ask, but it was still too early into knowing him.

"Really?" I said instead, flailing for a more interesting reply. I wasn't good with attractive men.

"I could always get lost in the science," he replied, smiling. For a moment then, I thought he'd follow with some cliché line about getting lost in my eyes. He didn't, but he did kiss me, and it felt natural, the whole thing.

Seven months before his funeral, the question suddenly changed. My friends started asking me what it was like dating a dying person. He was no longer quiet, or brilliant. He was just a man, and he was just dying. I, a bit put off, told them it was like dating any other person. They gave me a sympathetic smile and said, “But the dying part specifically. Doesn’t he get scared about, I don’t know, getting his affairs in order?”

I thought for a minute before answering. “No,” I said. “I’m not sure he’s scared at all.”

My boyfriend’s finished dissertation opened with a question. If a wormhole connects two black holes, he thought, then wouldn’t the elements inside the first black hole be correlated with those in the second? He described quantum entanglement as flipping two coins: if the two coins are entangled, then if the first coin is tails, then the second must be tails, and vice versa with heads. Correlation without physical connection. But the two distant black holes of a wormhole are physically connected – through their interior bridge, brought close via the theoretical passage. In easier words, he argued that wormholes and entanglement, two completely unrelated concepts, were actually exactly the same.

And although the language in his paper is scientific and a bit too heavy for me, I can read between the lines now: the beauty in it all, atoms and molecules light years apart somehow fundamentally connected, two inherently different objects somehow equivalent. Distinct bits of matter bending time and space to find each other. I have read this section of his thesis again and again and again and each time it reminds me of the first time he told me he didn’t believe in reincarnation. I had taken it personally, because of course I did.

“It’s not you,” he reassured me, “There’s just no evidence.”

“What if there was?” I asked.

He considered this for a moment. “Then I would.”

After he died, I stopped praying. And I never really blamed religion or faith or any of the big picture stuff for the cancer, or even for his death, but I think there’s something mocking about still believing in something that didn’t give me a reason to.

I told my mother this a bit after his funeral. We were both sitting in the spare room – his makeshift laboratory – sorting stacks of papers and old textbooks. It felt bigger than before. We had folded his telescope up and packed it away already.

“How do people believe in something they can’t trust?” I said, flipping through a notebook full of his handwriting. “I prayed and prayed and prayed and he still died.”

“Just because you pray for something doesn’t mean it’ll come true.”

“So what’s the point?”

Silence for a minute. Then: “You sound like him.”

I paused. No one had ever said that before. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Of course not,” she said quietly, “I just don’t think that’s how religion works.”

So now I don't believe in God. Honestly, I'm not sure I ever did; like I said, after the diagnosis, I clung to Christianity like it was the only thing left to believe in. For that period of time, I think it was.

Last week though, half a year after my boyfriend died, a package came in the mail. It was postmarked from his PhD program, and I was immediately reminded of the first time I read his finished dissertation. He had left a printed copy of it – all two hundred and nineteen pages – in a thick white binder with my name written on the front. When I first saw it in a pile of his belongings that the hospital gave back to me (he had been dead for two hours), I initially didn't recognize the handwriting. The letters were shaky and broken. It looked nothing like the elegant scrawls in his notebooks back home. And it was at that moment that I first realized he had really died, and was not coming back, and I suddenly missed him like I loved him, wholly and painfully.

I brought the binder home of course, but I left it untouched for a week. I pretended it was just another textbook on the haphazard stack next to our living room couch, another thing for me to leave a coffee stain on. And when I finally found the courage to read it a week later, I didn't make it past the second page.

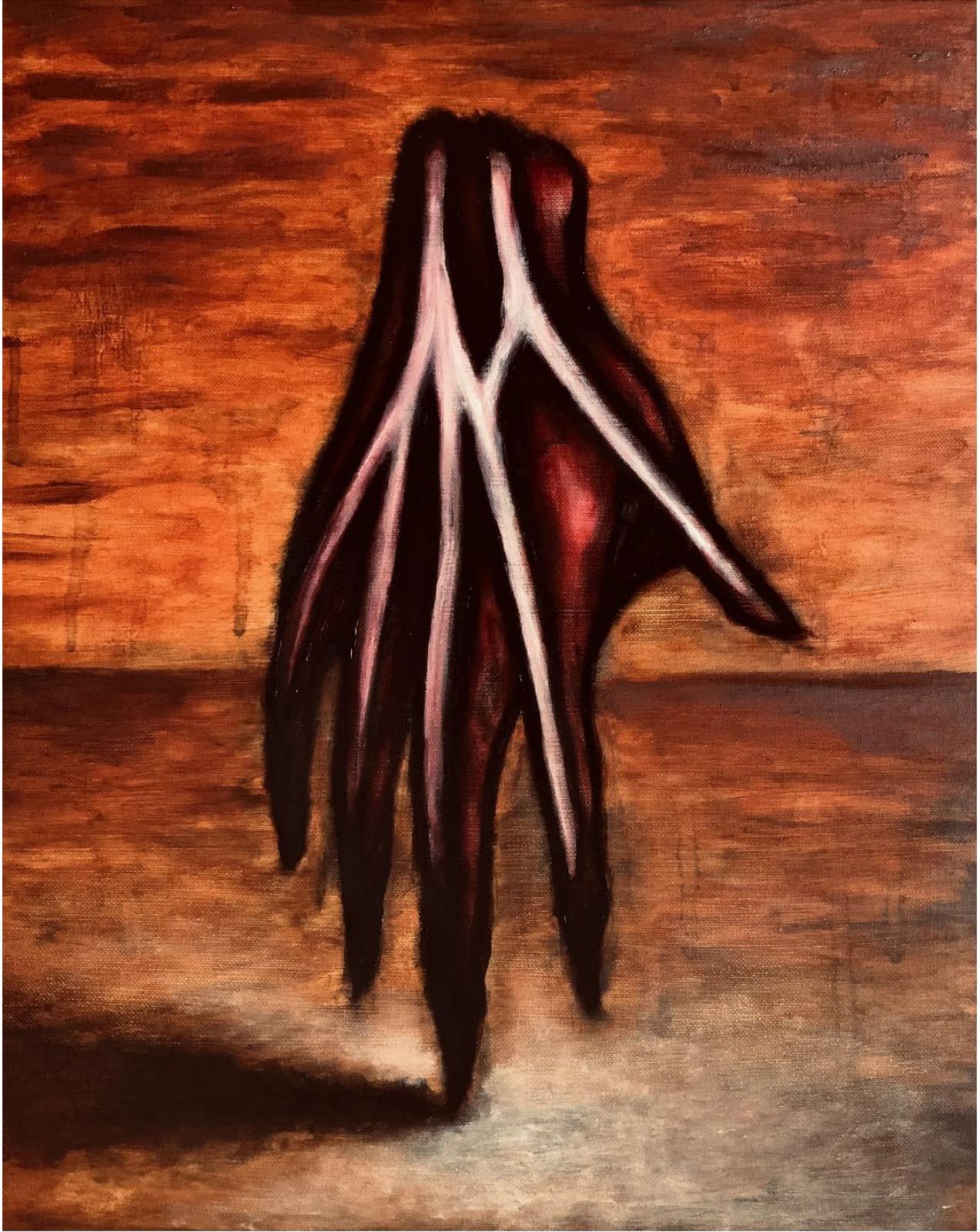
Even now, every time I open the binder, I stop there.

This, I think, is what dating a dying person is like. This, I think, is what faith really is. This is his evidence, hard and undeniable; the framed doctoral degree hanging in our bedroom, awarded six months posthumously, is his real answer.

My boyfriend didn't believe in God. Before the cancer, or during. For a long time, I wasn't sure he believed in anything but science.

"What do you believe in then when the numbers don't work?" I asked him once.

To my Allie, the dedication says. I believe in you.



To Feel by Donald Patten

Sailing Away

by Jochanaan Fair-Schulz

More than the wind, more than the whip of brine it bore and the shifting of the yachts in the marina or the asphalt pressed against his face, it was the bitter taste of cheap beer that filled Zacharia Fleck's world. It bloated out the stars above, choked memory, and smothered his senses. He could feel it in his stomach, bubbling-burning into his guts. When the vomit finally came it spread in a puddle around him on the ground. A few minutes later the taste in his mouth was the same, but his mind was a modicum clearer, enough that he could remember what he had been doing when he fell.

He had been in Richmond that morning, getting fired from a Denny's after a night of barely any sleep in the back of his Toyota. So instead of taking his shift, he had found himself at a bar with three hours to spare before noon. It was an old pub that had been refurbished into a club with red and purple mood lighting, music at once deafening and too garbled to understand, and paper palm tree decorations. Only the bar itself, hard wood, dark and lacquered, with its brass rail remained unmolested, and that is where Zack took his seat.

There hadn't been time for breakfast when he got up. In atonement he had started off by ordering a vodka-orange, and then another. After that is where things began to break down a little.

For example, he remembered leaving the bar at 1 pm, happily buzzing. But the next snippet was off him in a convenience store somewhere near Williamsburg, dragging his feet over the white floor tiles as he consulted freezers full of beer. Then he was driving through Newport News, passing his almost alma mater, Christopher Newport University. He had no memory of the bridge, but he would have had to have taken it otherwise he couldn't have been in Virginia Beach. And, of course, he had been crumpling cans of malt all the way.

That brought him up to the present. Now, he was going to steal a boat.

He pushed himself up off the ground then wiped the throw-up off his chin with the sleeve of his jacket. Looking around, he saw where he had dropped the carton of Heineken he had been carrying. Luckily none had broken though two had rolled away on the pavement. He collected them, then got up and made towards the dock.

There was a chain across the entrance to the pier. Carefully, Zack stepped over it. The boards were slick under his feet, and once the wooden walkway gave to the metal pontoons it was all he could do to waddle forward against the gale.

He passed several skimmers, straining against their harnesses like unruly ponies. Beyond those were the true 50 footers, yachts, ivory stallions of the sea. Their bucking was softer, but the groaning from their moors was twice as loud. Rigging and the loose edges of packed sails fluttered.

Zack went along the pier, shopping. His clothes became progressively more sodden until they stuck to his skin. He blinked out the beads of saltwater that ran down from his plastered hair and into his eyes. Finally, at the very end on the right hand side, was the perfect one. It was large, at least 60-something feet, looked solid, and, most importantly for his purposes, had solar panels and sails. As he stood there, the taste of salt on his lips and the crash of the waves filling his ears, he read its name, *The Escape*. This was the ship he would take.

The idea had come to him several years ago, just before he had dropped out of university. He had been working at a marina like this, and, one day, the thought had simply popped into his head, *why not just take one, and sail away?*

It had just been shooting shit then, but the idea had never quite gone away, and, over the years, he had worked it out little by little. All he had to do was reach international waters, and then sail south, or north, or literally anywhere other than back here. He would live off the grid, no more family, no more friends, but he didn't have many of either anymore so that hardly mattered, and there would be no more of the pointless-dreary shit: no more scrounging, no more taxes. It was time to have a life: full of fishing, sailing, nature, real stuff!

He clambered up the side of *The Escape*, a difficult task with no upper body strength and a carton in his left hand. Using his right foot to hook one of the stanchions, he pulled himself up onto the foredeck. He lay there panting on his back for a second, watching the top of the mast trace little circles in the night sky, then began crawling on all fours around the raised bubble of the cockpit. The bottles tinkled musically as he went.

Once he had gotten around the windscreen, Zack settled onto the more level rear deck. The shadows were deep here so far away from the floodlights on the land. He felt around, searching with his free hand. His fingers brushed against the cool metal of a locker. He followed along the wall until he found the companionway.

He had left his phone in his car several blocks off. He couldn't exactly have it on him anymore. The goal was to disappear. However, that also meant no flashlight. He brushed it off; he could check below decks in the morning. A ship this big had to have supplies tucked away.

But then, for the first time in hours Zack stopped to think. If he was wrong then he would be screwed. Food and water were a must for obvious reasons. He didn't even have any fishing gear with him to fall back on. He shook himself. He would figure it out. If worst came to worst he could always pick things up along the way. Right now, what he needed to focus on was crossing off the most important item on his list. He had to put the better part of a hundred miles between this place and *The Escape* before dawn.

To steel his nerves, Zack opened a bottle against the side of the cockpit locker, and then took a swig. Cradling it in the crook of his elbow, occasionally taking draws, he went about undoing the mooring lines. He left the others on the seat beside the steering wheel. The taste of fermentation mixed with the scent of sea rot and the stinging in his fingertips as he fiddled with the coarse ropes. Nicking himself more than once, the coppery tang of blood was added to the stew. He squinted in the dark and swore at the knots. It took twenty minutes before the last one finally fell away.

He celebrated by downing the last of the bottle then tossing it into the waves. Before he reached the steering wheel, the ship shook, nearly spilling him over the side. Holding onto the nearest stanchion, he looked to see what had happened, and saw that the ship had begun to turn. The rear had hit the flank of its neighbor. Now *The Escape* was drifting away, over black waves cut with the sparkling reflections from the shore, and out toward the wave break.

Zack made his way to the cockpit. As he crossed towards the wheel he slipped over the broken glass from a fallen beer bottle. The harsh smell of suds filled his nose and shards of the shattered bottle bit into his palm as his hands flew out to save him. The ship rolled over the water.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he hissed, lunging for the wheel.

He caught hold of the bottom of it, and, ignoring the pain, pulled himself up. In response, the rudder bent savagely, so by the time Zack had his feet again there was only time enough to brace as *The Escape* smashed head on into the wave break.

The jolt nearly sent him over the wheel. As is, the breath went out of him, and there was a moment when he thought his teeth were going to shoot free of his gums. Zack fell back, still holding the wheel and giving the rudder another bone breaking turn. The piled rocks that composed the jetty ground against the hull as the ship turned and began sliding horizontally.

Zack got up again and straightened the rudder. Through the windscreen he could make out the approaching mouth of the marina. The open sea lay beyond. Even though the grinding made his head hurt, he couldn't help but let out a whoop of triumph. He was alive. It had worked, and he was alive. But there was only a moment to celebrate. He had to keep the ship going straight. Right now its travel was entirely powered by the undulating tide. There was a motor onboard, but the time to get that on had passed. All he could do now was fight his way forward.

As soon as *The Escape* passed through the mouth of the marina the tide took it out of Zack's hands entirely. No amount of his straining, twisting, or yanking could alter the inexorable force that bore him out into the stygian black.

After a few minutes, he sat and watched the land shrink into the distance. Ports, houses, and other ships became stars low on the horizon. The constellations above flickered, like candles, seeming to come in and out with the ebb and flow of the wind. The current coaxed *The Escape* onto its own secret path. The land fell away, and in every direction, the entire horizon, and all the world above and below, was darkness filled with speckled lights and the heavy breath of vast things.

In the little light from the stars, Zack picked chips of broken glass out of his hand and threw them over the side, then cleaned the ones on the floor the same way. Only one bottle had survived intact. Zack tossed the carton and then considered the last of his meager supplies.

The bottle was lukewarm already. He spent the rest of the night nursing on it, while he watched the stars and occasionally fiddled with the wheel. The sound of the waves, the breeze, and the rigging were ever present, and yet it felt as though he was sitting in an infinite silence. There his thoughts crowded, only held down by the slow infusions of alcohol.

His clothes had dried by the time that the eastern horizon started to lighten. He blew into the neck of the nearly empty bottle, humming. Now that he could see, Zack knew that he had to set the sail. Despite his best efforts, he was sobering up, and it was time to get practical about all this. The rigging had to be set on the foredeck. Zack went up, dangling the green glass with its last ounce sloshing at the bottom. The deck was slippery, covered in dew. The stars were going out, and the sky had taken on a gray-blue hue. A warm breeze blew out of the East as golden light crept up.

This was it. This was what he had been looking for.

He tussled with the forestay, and then the jackstay, trying to coax the sail up the mast. There was a way to do this, he knew that very well, but he couldn't for the life of him remember how. So, he went to the boom and started checking the limp cloth. Looking at the pulleys, he tried to re-educate himself on what did what.

It was as he stood absorbed in this that the bottle slipped from his hand and clattered onto the deck. It rolled quickly towards the edge. He could have just let it go, instead, without thinking, he chased after it. As he bent, trying to seize it before it could go over, he felt his center of gravity shift. The slick decking slid out beneath his shoes and he was hurtling over the precipice.

He tried to correct, but nothing could stop him from going over now. Throwing his weight backwards only turned his headfirst dive into a feet first one. And, rather than banging his shin, the edge of *The Escape* clipped the back of his head as he went over.

Zack splashed into the sea, disappearing below in a pink mist that quickly dissipated as the waves lapped against *The Escape*. The bottle bobbed for a few minutes longer, drifting away from the derelict, before filling with salt-water and spiraling down into the blue. It was over before the first rays of the sun struck the mast.

Nonfiction

Searching for Dragons

by Sophie Mulgrew

David Whyte describes his poem “Start Close In” as a reflection on “the difficult act we all experience of trying to make a home in the world again when everything has been taken away.” He muses on the idea of first steps, on minute noticings. He wonders what it means to belong:

*“Start with
The ground
You know,
The pale ground
Beneath your feet,
Your own
Way to begin
The conversation.”*

The ground in Tacoma was rich and aged. On brisk mornings, dew drops balanced daintily atop soft pearls of earth, anticipating sunshine. Beneath stones and sprouts of split-leafed arugula the soil writhed with worms and other insects, busy with the duty of decomposure. Sometimes, as I walked barefoot through the garden, I could feel the tremble of life beneath my toes. I could sense the spreading roots of strawberries and red lettuce, holding fast to the ground that so faithfully sustained them.

It was there, in the earth, that my love of Tacoma began, quietly, like a seed carelessly dropped from the palm of a toddler. I didn’t expect to love it. I didn’t even expect. I arrived wrecked and overwrought from another lifetime. When I tried to conjure visions of what the future might hold, I drew blanks. I had no expectation of enjoying this wild and unfamiliar place, let alone discovering within it, a home.

Down the hill from our weather-beaten house, the earth curved gracefully around the Bay, as if embracing it. At its edges, the water lapped sleepily at outcroppings of rocks and angular assortments of driftwood. Often, as I strolled along the coast, I marveled at the placidness of it all.

Unlike the ocean, the Puget Sound felt heavy – settled and steadfast in its corner of the world. It did not succumb to undue toil.

Just up the water's bank, the ground flattened around a snake of train tracks which extended in either direction, curling along the coastline. In the track's time-worn wooden slats lay the memories of travelers and traders alike; eyes that cast upon that untamed landscape years before they had ever known what to call it. I still wonder about the hearts of those ancient trailblazers. The ones who dared greatly– who forged the paths and carved out the places I came to think of as my own.

When I was younger, I sustained myself on imagination. Perched in the branches of dry California trees, I breathed into life a world in which I was no longer confined by the bounds of reality. I stowed away on grain-filled boxcars bound for nowhere, I rode horses bareback through fields of wildflowers. In moss-laden caves by the sea I discovered dragons and carried them home in my hoodie.

I was perpetually dissatisfied with the constraints of my white, middle-class cul-de-sac. Where were the ravines? The unforgiving mountains? The tree branch from which to hang a swing? The only beasts to befriend were house cats, the only danger; cars.

Years later, having reached adulthood, I cast eyes on Tacoma for the first time. A petite city resting peacefully on the shores of the Puget Sound. Rusted bridges rose in rainbows of twinkling car lights, boats took leave from their journeys in the harbor. Beyond this dollop of civilization, great swaths of green covered the landscape imbued with the soft texture of rustling leaves. Above it all, between low-hanging layers of mist, the top of a great mountain peered out over the city. I beheld this sight in reverential silence. Something inside me stirred.

Every now and again, on a morning walk through the unroused neighborhood, I encountered a deer. They appeared suddenly, without sound, emerging from the lingering dew like a mirage. They would plod across driveways and planter beds, stealing timid nibbles of the most delectable offerings– at one corner a cherry tree, the next parsley. They signaled the fast-approaching dawn, visible only for the few precious hours in which the world shifted out of darkness and into light.

My days in Tacoma were spent in bliss. I strolled through farmers markets, inspecting line-caught salmon, cider, cheeses, and zucchini blossoms. I dipped toes in the frigid water of the bay, tracing the tracks of hermit crabs and other aquatic critters. Often, if I lingered long enough watching the water, the head of a seal would pop up somewhere along the horizon. Small little things with dark, insightful eyes. I liked to think they saw me eyeing them, wondering at their life beneath the waves.

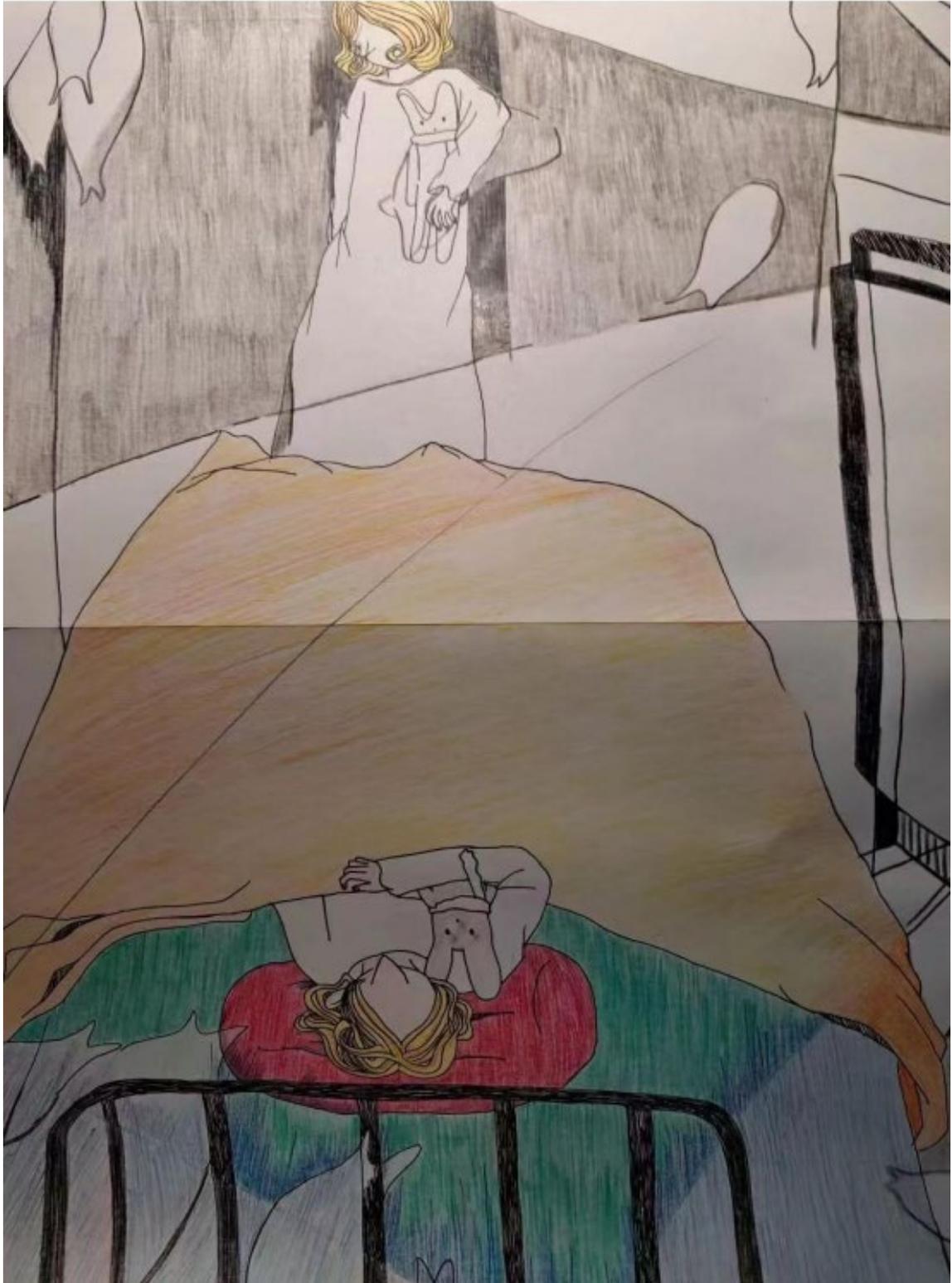
I frequented bakeries and local ice-cream shops. I walked to pick up dinners for picnics or porch nights. I read beneath the shade of towering hemlocks. When I ventured out from our neighborhood of shingled houses, the natural world showed its true prowess. I reveled in the lushness of the foliage, the unpredictability of the landscape. Every day, the scenes took on new varieties of expression; clouds gathered grumpily, the sun shone fervid ochre. Always, the silhouette of the mountain lingered above it all like a deity, each day appearing in various degrees of distinction.

On a weekend trip through the northern islands, I looked down from the bridge upon which we were traveling. Far below, a length of land extended out into the water in a large arc, creating within it a protected cove, seemingly untouched by human hands. Tall grasses sprang from the slope leading down to the water. In the afternoon breeze, the stalks tilted gently, as if beckoning onlookers closer. Tucked into the side on the outcropping was the mouth of a cave, framed by insets of smooth stone. I cast my eyes upon the scene, marveling at each detail of wild perfection. If there were ever a place for a dragon to live, I thought, this would be it. I wished I had brought my hoodie.

I did not grow up in Tacoma, but it was there I found my way back to childhood. It was in Tacoma where I rediscovered wonder, bliss, and innocence. It was in Tacoma where I once again felt free.

Sometime in late spring, after discovering my mother's attempts to kill the caterpillars feasting on our garden, I set about to save them. I sat in the soil, carefully plucking the little beings off basil and brussels sprouts. When they had all been collected, I dropped them into a large glass jar replete with a healthy serving of greens. I covered the opening with punctured plastic wrap, set the mini-ecosystem on the table, and waited.

Months later I sat at the same table, eyes fixed on a wavering chrysalis - the first of the bunch to move. I watched enraptured as the tiny structure peeled open, revealing within the feeble, nearly translucent body of a butterfly. The tiny creature spread its crumpled wings and pulled itself on feeble legs away from the cocoon's remnants. With a delicate hand, I extracted the butterfly from the jar, and carried it to the yard. It paused as it was doused in sunlight, wriggling in reaction to this new sensation. And then - as if suddenly remembering - it spread its wings and lifted effortlessly in the clear air, to rediscover the world; reborn.



Fugue by Helena Jiang

American Gladiator

by Brandon Yu

“He looks like he’s from Great Britain. That’s how you know he’s fucked up,” Noah said, taking a contemplative sip from his beer can.

Each year of living in a college dormitory was like the progression of the Terminator movies: the first one was good, the second was okay, and it all went downhill from there.

To complete the trilogy of sub-par living situations, I had the incredible fortune of being roomed with three beer-guzzling jocks who had known each other since elementary school, which effectively put me into nonhuman status the moment I stepped into the dormitory. Once again— as now and as always— I had become a fourth wheel through the vagaries of fate.

Noah took another sip while we watched the midnight UFC championship. Louis sat next to him in a saucer chair with a bowl of microwave popcorn nestled in his lap, watching someone being beaten to a bloody pulp for our nightly entertainment.

The slow-motion replay of the round showed a lithe fighter, sporting several tattoos across his muscled ribcage and shoulders watch in punch-drunk bewilderment as a fist lanced towards him at an excruciatingly slow pace. He dodged into the blow, closing his eyes just as his opponent’s fist connected with his face in an expression of extreme displeasure, as if object permanence was something he had learned just a moment ago.

“Oh-ho!” Noah said, covering his mouth with one fist. Louis shot up from his seat, almost capsizing the bowl. “Did you see that?” he said in awe. “You see how he took that combo?” he mimed the succession of brutal uppercuts with his free hand, grunting with each imaginary assault. “Unh— unh— unh!” he said. “That’s how you do it!”

It was past midnight. I leaned against the formica island of the kitchen, watching the violence unfold with the clinical detachment being awake for sixteen hours brings. For minutes I’d posted myself there, wondering when the best time would be raise the issue of quiet hours during a school night since I had an exam tomorrow. I suddenly changed my mind, lest I end up looking like someone from Great Britain.

This had been going on for weeks. Seth, the third roommate, had wisely moved to his girlfriend’s apartment when the semester began. As if Noah and Louis sensed a deficiency in their ranks, they soon had their lacrosse buddies over— all sixteen of them— to lighten up the mood and watch Trailer Park Boys in the living room until three in the morning. It was on those nights I’d stare at the ceiling in the dark, wondering why I ever attended an out-of-state college in Florida instead of the one thirty minutes away from home.

Getting them to quiet down was impossible. We operated on a fundamentally different wavelength, like different radio frequencies. If I ever said anything, I’m sure all they ever heard from me was static. For one thing, I was the only engineering major. Noah and Louis and the rest of the lacrosse gang were business majors, which meant they would have sooner missed an exam than a

single game of football. They were textbook jocks, the kind of people who walk around an apartment shirtless at all times of day to display their abs and drink themselves to death over the weekends with cheap booze. In short, it was a special hell that would make Satan gawk and say, “Jesus, seriously?”

I’d nod and give him a world-weary grin, as if to say, You have no idea. Between regular hell and college roommate hell, I’d choose the lava bath and pitchfork massage any day.

Things grew exponentially worse as the semester drew to an end. Although the lacrosse gang eventually found another place for them to occupy and devastate in the way America does to third-world countries, Noah and Louis had just returned from Spain over Thanksgiving break, fully refreshed from a vacation abroad to return to binge watching Trailer Park Boys until three in the morning with a renewed sense of life purpose.

Around midnight, I’d stick my head into the living room and say, “Guys, quiet down.” “Yeah yeah yeah,” Louis said without looking at me. “Cool.”

After a few nights of this, I started feeling like a mom, which is never a good thing when you’re a twenty-year old college student in Florida.

Daytime wasn’t much better. Fortnite became their full-time job, waking up at seven to play video games in the living room together, elbows on knees, headphones clapped over hoodies, the shutters closed and lights off. They never left their seats all day, except for those rare moments when they migrated to the kitchen to microwave a frozen pizza. They’d play into the night and the early hours of the morning, speaking to the television screen with the concentrated coordination of two people defusing a ticking time bomb.

Amazingly, Noah was failing a couple courses. Considering he was a marketing major, this was an impressive accomplishment.

Yesterday was my breaking point. After noticing the undynamic duo mashing buttons on my way to the fridge at eight in the morning, I biked across campus to study in the library, something I haven’t done in months. I stretched out my study session until two in the afternoon, but I had to go home after I realized I didn’t bring a laptop charger. As I stood outside the door, I steeled myself for the dark, dispiriting scene I was about to bear witness to.

“Sup,” Noah said as I stepped inside.

I nodded to him and reminded myself the semester would be over in two weeks. I glanced at their duffel bags, filled with soiled jerseys, cleats, lacrosse sticks, padded gloves, and the rest of their gladiator gear, and mentally calculated if I could take both of them on in a fight. I took a deep breath and then decided I wasn’t going to lose my shit to two college students with the emotional maturity of fourteen year old boys and went into my room to study with the kind of patience a monk would envy.

But a man can dream, of course. A man can dream.

Half Myself, Fully Alive: The Consequences of Falling in Love at 14

by Julia Savala

“...although I am half myself, I am fully alive.”

I wrote these words in a poem four months after my breakup with my boyfriend of six years. I was 20 years old. A few months prior to this, I was convinced my life was over.

When my long-term boyfriend broke up with me, all my life plans went out the window. I had been dating this guy since we were in middle school. I had been friends with him for longer. He had seen the worst and best parts of me. We were forever bonded by the experiences of adolescent life. I saw my entire life with him at the age of 14: married out of college, apartment on the second floor, walking down grocery aisles together, and a cat curled up at our feet at night. I always thought I was so lucky to find love so early in my life.

Until I wasn't.

When he broke up with me, it was on a phone call. We were in two different countries – I was the one stuck in the hometown we shared. Although I was alone, I was surrounded by him. I grew bitter towards the world that carried the memories of us. It was a constant reminder that I lost something important to me. I wondered if I haunted him like he haunted me. I prayed to God that he would hear my voice in his dreams.

For many mornings following the call, my knees found themselves down by the toilet as anxiety pushed up and out of my throat. I cried until lunch and slept until dinner. I grew sick from prescribed antidepressants and sobbed to my therapist on Zoom. I wandered around the hallways at home and journaled my pain. I no longer felt like myself, but how could I? I was in a relationship during the formative years of my life. I grew with him, admired him, and absorbed his habits. I mimicked the way he spoke and always made sure I sat in his favorite spot in the library. I danced the way he did and laughed at the things he found funny. I thought to love is to be a reflection of who I loved. I didn't know how else to live other than devotion. I once thought of this as beautiful, but now I see it as a flaw. I gave myself up without knowing who I was. I did things because he liked them, not because it was something that reflected who I was. I did not know my existence as an individual, but as somebody's girlfriend. I was not his anymore, though. Now that he was gone, there was a part of me missing. I was half of myself.

I believed it was my fault he could not love me. I was too much towards the end. Too overbearing. Too anxious. Called too much. Texted too much. I wanted too much. I was entirely too much. I cursed the blood in my veins. I swore hatred to my nature. I felt entirely unlovable. It was my fault for making his love for me my identity. I lost my value when he told me he didn't love me anymore. Maybe he would take me back if I changed myself into someone he wanted – the someone he sought for when I was gone. I wanted to show him I could be the cool girl. I would've sliced my tongue if it meant I could give him the promise of keeping my worries to myself and he would accept me again. I thought I was the only one who had to change. I didn't even think about the fact he ended a six year relationship with a 20 minute phone call and a couple monotone words. I was consumed by his explanation. “You hurt me first,” he had said.

I had to come to terms with the fact we were both hurting each other. I was just as responsible for the end of our story as much as he was. Maybe I should've let him breathe. Maybe I shouldn't have been so suffocating like he said. I apologized for the blood I drew from him in our arguments, yet he allowed me to keep bleeding. His justification for the month of silence and the mysterious girl were like knives to my back. Betrayal was the only word I could think of while we died. I could not understand why I was given empty promises of loyalty and faith instead of him doing us both a favor and killing us earlier. I wished he did so, and I wouldn't have had to spend weeks wondering where we stood. Maybe he was just as terrified as I was.

My family and friends were the ones to pull me back into reality. My sisters watched me blame myself for months. They watched as I tried to fix something that wasn't good for me anymore. I laid in bed, curled up and crying at their laps. I would let the days pass as I took refuge on the floor of my youngest sister's room because I couldn't stand being alone. They listened to me talk about him for hours, trying to make sense of it all. When I wondered out loud if he would realize his guilt the way I had realized my own and apologize, my oldest sister told me, "He's not thinking about you right now." The realization hurt me in ways I could not explain. We had only ever known each other, and now I wasn't even a passing thought in his mind.

When I told my best friend I was depressed without him, she said, "You can't disrespect yourself like that. You're not living for him."

Their words lingered. I had been reborn into the world; to stand on my own two feet was the first thing I had to learn.

The summer faded away into fall, and I started my junior year of college in tears. I didn't know what to do in my spare time since it was no longer filled with him. I spent most of my time alone in my room. I hid myself away from my friends because I was embarrassed about my loss. I found that I was still blaming myself. I was still waiting for him. I didn't know life without him and I almost didn't want to.

Eventually, I was tired of feeling pity for myself. I couldn't make the world stop with me no matter how hard I tried. I had to stop avoiding filling the empty spaces of who I once was. I had to realize he wasn't coming back. I made the effort to spend more time with my friends. I picked up some extra work and joined some clubs. I attended open mics where people read poems that were so raw and honest that I felt moved and inspired. I eventually ended up writing my own poetry to perform.

I hadn't written poetry for fun since 8th grade, back when I wrote love poems about the boy that was now a stranger. It was a part of me I missed, but I couldn't find my way back to her until I decided to write about my breakup. Poetry became the way I made sense about the whole situation. I would cry over my lit up phone screen as I poured out all the words I wished I could say to him. I released my anger, my longing, my sadness, and my pain. I searched the deepest parts of me to let out on the page. I performed my poems for the first time a few weeks later at the open mic. I was surrounded by a community that understood and listened. They applauded my honesty and congratulated me on my boldness. I was so inspired by them that I kept writing and performing. For the first time in the last few months, I felt okay. I felt valued. I felt seen. I felt heard. I began to

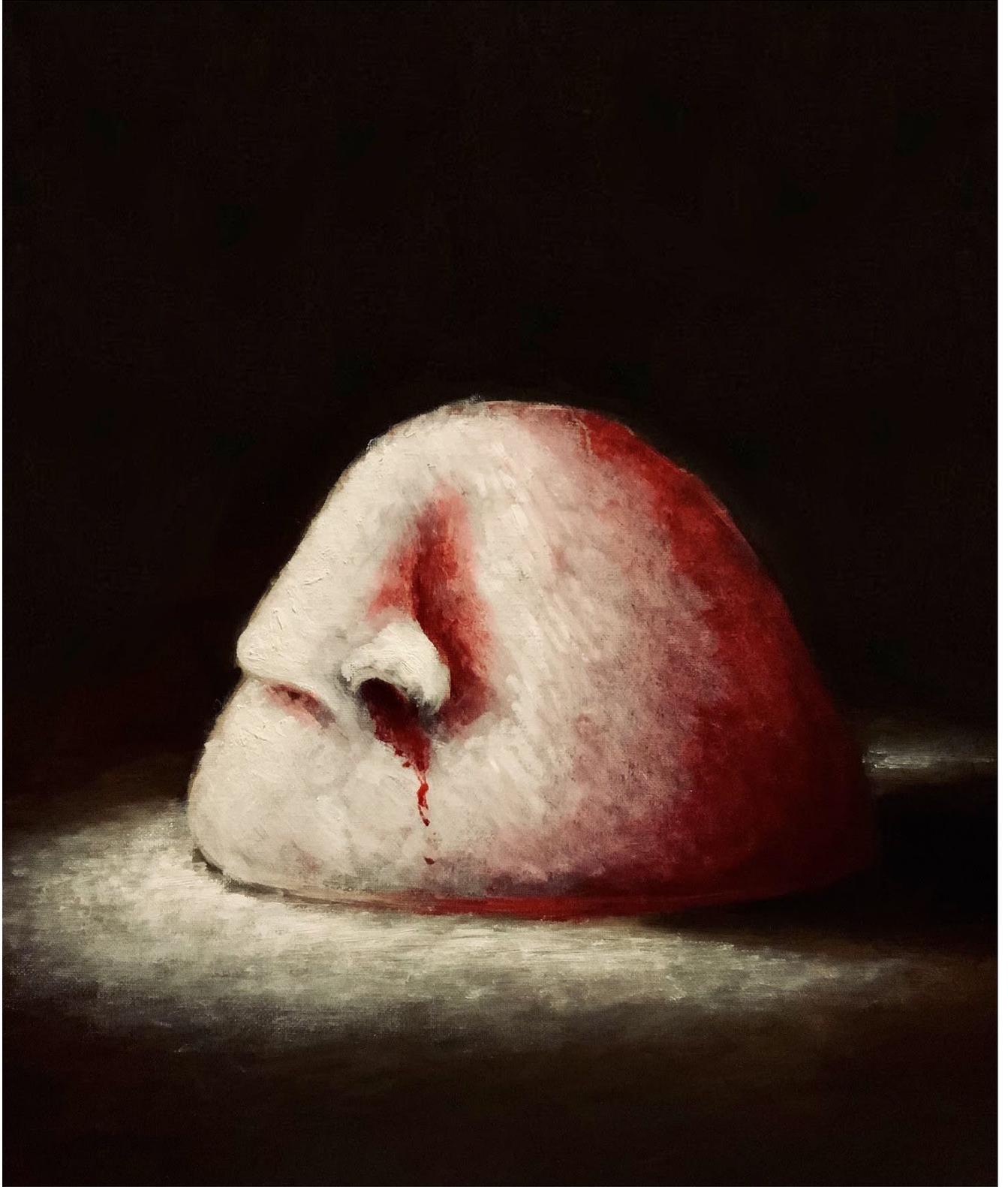
think that the breakup was the best thing to ever happen to me. I never would've stepped foot on that stage if my heart wasn't split in two. I found courage in the agony. I found peace with the suffering. "I don't think you are half yourself," one of the community members said, after I read one of my poems. I could see in her eyes she believed what she said, and I realized I was beginning to believe it too.

I continued to step out of my comfort zone. I made more connections, I wrote more, I expressed myself more, and I was no longer a lesser version of myself. I wanted more things out of my life other than a boy who could not love me. I wanted meaningful friendships and familial relationships. I wanted to be creative and brave. I wanted to become someone I had always been afraid to be. I wanted to start living and stop waiting. Instead of wondering how I could change for him, I started to think about how I could change for myself. Although I still thought about him sometimes, I only did so because I wished he could see how free I was.

Four months after the breakup, I reflected on my realization in a poem:

"Now that the dust has settled I just wish you could see / although I am only half myself I am fully alive. / I know I am alive because I feel it all."

Without the pain, I never would've found myself. Without the heartbreak, I never would have felt more alive. To live is to love. To love is to lose. To lose is to gain. I have lived all these truths, and it has been for the better.



To Smell by Donald Patten

Poetry

A list of what I can or cannot bear to part with

by Jania Richards

In my memory, it is late and rainy.
I could barely make out the shape of my sister
from behind the blurred window, the question
didn't leave my lips
before I found my answer
in car headlights turned oblique.

I attempt to lift my hand in goodbye,
and find my fingers unwilling.
On the sill, there's a hollow
beetle shell,
a reminder of the collection
my sister kept in a shoebox under her bed

when we lived in that treeless town,
which constricted her. In the madness
of hastily packed bags
and sharp words thrown at our mother,
a cage takes shape in the four walls
of her barren room.

In the tentative blue of the dawn,
I find a worn paper tucked into the crack
behind her headboard titled, "A list of what I can
or cannot bear to part with" and imagine the dust
collecting on her windowsill.

Purple Pond

by Maya Kantor

Thursday evening, my olive colored bookbag was thick
with the weight of my future.
Bulky and burdensome, heavy as two bricks,
that bag held all the information stored on my computer.
I carried my backpack, yet I was moved by the bag, carried by it.

I was a two-legged turtle navigating through my swamp.
By the time the parking rules were lifted,
the aluminum surface of Maria's motor scooter was glittering at the top.
The rubble of our risk-taking days would make a naked foot sizzle.
Ultraviolet solar radiation was converted to vitamin D3 by our lipid bonds.

I inhaled every cool current generated by the turbulence of two,
each draft serving as a vitalizing wave of decompression.
The cherished crescent of the city exerted centripetal force
on us, releasing giggles reminiscent of childhood celebration.
I was always flummoxed by the format of the roads.

Dismounting the vehicle always yielded me unstable.
I yelped in distress as my body-mass lost balance.
Her steaming exhaust groped my raw ankle.
I sensed the mutual collapse of skin and psyche—
Dermis and consciousness ripped in sync.

The incineration of my cells
was perfectly elliptical.
And like how the burden of my bookbag
propels me forward,
This purple pond of pain records my heritage.

Human Compost Pile

by Anna Deason

I want to return to the soil today,
to my hydrangea garden
back home. Where I dug up
worms and displaced them
inside home-made Tupperware terrariums.

I wish to curl myself up
like a roly-polly bug, like armadillo roadkill
on black, stinging asphalt. I want the sun
to drown me, then boil me alive,
evaporate my soul from my skin
'cause my blood is burning too hot inside.

Red Mississippi clay, stain me in crimson;
sun-bake me like ceramic, let me emerge terracotta.
Then glaze me with spit so I shine
like your river. Take me, willing prisoner, beneath
the surface of your font, wash me away, bury me
Alive.

the choice

by Aubrey Accomando

my heart feels
as i look into your eyes. the
mended me, but now causes my
to be. this surely cannot be you. the one
you put me through. how did you become
knew? i mean, we've known each other
the doubts. but, i never would've guessed this
friends, you offered. you know, forget
suffered. i don't think we should lose the
must ask, does your heart hold the cracks
you've trusted with your body, mind,
wounds that get reopened with
a guarantee, i would say your
words you have said to me. for
of how easily you can make
fragile. and perhaps, i'm
never cause your defeat.
in my life, i cannot
you would not
or hammer my heart to pieces.
like none of it ever
mattered.
so,

heavy with sorrow
face of someone who once
demise. you aren't who you used
i loved couldn't ever imagine the hurt
a stranger from someone i once thought i
for years. the ins and the outs. the wishes and
from you. *we can still go back to being just*
about the past and the ways that you've
friendship we used to have. to which i
caused by another? especially, one
soul, and others. do you, too, have the
every memory of your ex-lover? with almost
answer is no. especially after hearing the
if you had a heart, you'd be aware
one fall apart. and perhaps, i'm
weak. but even at my lowest, i'd
if i were to keep you
trust your promise. that
dare to hurt me again.
that

i
figure
that
the hole in my heart with you gone
would be easier to fix than the dozens of cracks
you'd make if you were to stay.

TRAGEDY

by Abdulmued Balogun

The world is in flames, the world is Congo
In chains, under the scorching sun, under
The caustic tears of the poisoned sky, bleeding profusely
At the ugly, inhumane sight of her people falling
Like autumnal leaves in thousands, in millions,
To their untimely graves from despotic shots
Fired from colonial nozzles.

The world is with a robust noose around her fractured neck,
Gasping for air despite the abundance,
The world is stationed at a gallow, just a wink
Away from a doctored extinction, the world is
Palestine, watching helplessly as winged
Israeli drone missiles shred her golden children,
Her heritage, priceless mothers
And angelic fathers into debris.

Tragedy is seeking some tears to pacify the searing
Throat of your personal woes, but on reaching
Your lacrimal vault, you remember, like a bad dream,
Disbursing, only last night, your last liquid savings
On watering, like a firefighter, the flaming woes
Plaguing others, elsewhere, in the world,
Somewhere like Somalia.

Overmorrow

by David Reynolds

A refined and handsome procrastinator, a firstborn older brother.
He only eats eggs over-easy, rosemary lambchops, and freshly cut cedar,
A quickly folded napkin leads a full regiment of spoons at every meal.
I think my eccentric uncle Terry and him might find much in common.

Wardrobe full of fitted suits and maroon-maple flannel,
moose hide slippers lined with eyelashes.
No mirror sits on the closet door,
in its place, a four-foot telescope,
so he can see how he looks from afar.

He says his job is confidential, kept six feet under
and behind a lock that reeks of hot glass.
But sometimes Tuesday hears some sweet murmurs,
carefully-laid-plan caramels laced with moonlight-on-red-metal chocolate,
And if paid a pretty penny, and he just might share such delights.

la seine à vétheuil

by Grace Annabella Anderson

the sky hums and pulls apart like wool
softly draping over a glossed landscape where
verdant shades melt
into a barely-breathing seine
evidence of the eclipse of countless seasons cloaks the poplar trees
the french countryside invites her voyeurs,
capturing their attention in her details,
demanding to be witnessed
only to turn a blushing cheek when she is.

from a distant train leaving
the gare saint-lazare
and rocketing
through the
terrain this
would only
be a mere
blur,
a fleeting
whirlpool
of soft moss,
dips
and
crests
of ringing altitudes.

but here
the seine at vétheuil is crystallized
like the eye of a passionate hurricane
a love letter
thick with ticket stubs
paint swatches
french incense paper
and pressed foliage
tucked between its sheets.



To Hear by Donald Patten

I think

by Garret Miller

It would be nice...
to sit under the eaves with you,
and watch the rain fall from the wet black roof
to profusion or sterility below,
and see the magnolia budding with its immemorial white
squibs of empty life
in the corner of the garden where, not long ago,
the last bit of snow sought shelter.

Retaining Walls

by A.C.E Ridenour

Every morning I laugh at the spotted dog
who walks beyond our yard.
She tugs and pulls, losing breath,
the same intensity no matter the weather.

Her owner often has the same expression;
one of anger and contemplation,
as if the act of commanding another life
is forcing him to consider
who truly controls his own.

Does society hold the leash?
Religion? Principle? Guilt?
Are they each so different?

Someone holds the leash, deciding
for him how far into instinct he is permitted
should he wish to stay outside
the metal cage.

I think about how many chipmunks are
allowed to live because society maintains its grip.

Then chance a thought
at how much dopamine the dog would
drink if that poor muskrat's skull were
crunched instead of burrowed
under my retaining wall.

How many more years could I afford
before it needs to be repaired?

The dog is funny and I wonder why I laugh
at the oppressed; her neck a ravaged,

rashy mess.

Maybe if she didn't pull or tug,
if she simply walked astride her owner,
never thought to kill or fight,
she would enjoy her walk all the more.

And me, I would regard this animal
with amazement, unable to laugh.

At the river

by Jania Richards

I smear bug spray and sunscreen
on the goosepimpled skin of my sisters' arms
and legs. They're as tall as me now, maybe taller.

I miss the simplicity of being younger. I
show the thousands of different ways that I care.
They splinter off from me,
tree slivers wedged in my unwilling
skin. I gasp and choke and buckle beneath
the weight of it. I miss
them and I miss us.

I ease myself into freezing
green water. A swimming hole.
They're afraid to stick their feet
in the mysterious brown muck. I tell them
it's not so bad. We cling to slippery rocks,
my sister nearly pulled away
in the current.

Eventually, we climb back out,
the sun pinching our pale skin pink.
I stain my finger pads purple, searching for blackberries
along the river. My fingers are stuck
with thorns and my bag heavy.

Fireworks

by Sophia Decherney

In silence waiting on the blanket, red
we're contemplating a sky fading orange
from fire to amber to honey yellow.

We stretch our patience on the dewy green
awaiting, still, something out of the blue
to take our breath away, turn us purple.

We heard the night descend a soft lilac
like velvet mixing calm's azure and anger's rust.
Cicadas nestle singing out their blues
and bubbly chatter peels like a clementines
in great bursts and then once again the green
quiets with the last shred of a pale yellow.

Now, time for popcorn smothered with butter,
and bursting watermelon and artificial purple-grape
flavored ice pops spilling out onto the green.
We sit tasting memory with cherry
lips set in permanent smiles. Gingerly
we hold hands taking in the stars, the sky's own royal navy.

The air turns colder and I see a shiver reach the ocean
of her eyes. Two warm sweaters lean together to be each other's suns
as down their backs golden locks tangle with soft orange.
Ragged uncut grass mingles with silky mountain violets
to hover the blanket, red,
a few inches above the slightly dewy green.

Vanilla shampoo wafts faintly, mixing oddly with the burnt scent rising from the grass.
An edge to the the air washes away the sticky sweet fragrances of the sky's blue
hours. Black now, smoky excitement reigns red
with fervor and the sleepiness of sunset fades as fast as did the pale sun.
We sit impatient, the perfume of excitement like violet's—
as strong and as sweet. Waiting as glow sticks are cracked and sparklers light up yellowish orange.

Then BANG Orange—
HOWL Rings of Green—
CRACK Pearls of Purple—
WHISTLE Comets Blue —
SCREECH Yellow and Yellow and Yellow...
the sky sparks slowly descend to illuminate the blanket, red

BOOM Orange! BOOM Red!
BOOM Green! BOOM Yellow!
BOOM Purple! We hear singing through the night of Red White and Blue.

A Memory Of The Childhood

by Maya Collins

English woods are thick. rustle. howl.
Even as pavement presses up against feet.
Even as hair becomes tired. even as
Skulls are pressed.
Sang to me then and sing to me now.

Woods wander
Aer me. woods of the
New Forest.
Cottages. stone.
Worn and the weary.

Elderly beings, grown
Up from earth. dirt.
Wisdom unfurled in the fern.

Woods, quiet.
Loud. tall.

Rhythm in the noise of the rustling.
Broken bones, meeting.
Ligaments are tearing.

Woods are a song,
Breathing.
The way a breath is slow.
The way a memory.

Collective Memory Obituary

by Kendra Boyd

Collective memory—dying stone by stone.
Survived by a lone man, among men who
hold the world in their minds. Observe
the cracks in our weathered heads whose
clocks have broken—hands out of reach,
until you crumble with us in this dust
garden. We used to stand united and tall
but erosion forced us to grasp at our
sediment, spreading in dissolution, until
we are diluted across generations for a
child to stumble over. The child may
deposit a significantly tragic piece into
their pocket to take home, to name, to
paint a face, to keep as a pet that won't
wander off. One day the child will let it
rest on their chest and breathe. They will
feel a coldness invade their bones or it
will whisper ticks that used to be
precious, but even that is an echo.

Artists and Authors

Abdulmueed Balogun is a black poet based in Nigeria. He has been using poetry for years now as his mouthpiece, and he believes that once he's gone, his craft shall outlive him.

A.C.E. Ridenour is best discussed in their own words. "I endure a tremendous amount of consternation. It's like I am a walking picogram depicting the inside of a paradox machine. I hope to get a grip someday, for that I'll need better boots, and therefore less cold feet. Moreover, living in the moment is my bread and peanut butter (I'm allergic to traditional butter, though I'll eat a cookie if it's the only unhealthy thing around). I wonder when this whole writing thing is going to pay off; my volunteer hours are through the roof! Somebody is going to start asking questions, getting suspicious."

Amy Arrendondo is a freshman at Florida State University, studying Music and Creative Writing. Originally from Miami, Florida, she's a first-generation Cuban American who dreams of becoming a professional opera singer/Broadway performer and published playwright/novelist.

Anna Deason is originally from Memphis, Tennessee, where she first fell in love with writing in middle and high school. She's since come to find a second home at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, where she's in her senior year of undergraduate study, majoring in Creative Writing and double minoring in Film Studies and Gender Studies. When she's not writing or studying, she enjoys playing Dungeons and Dragons and listening to fiction podcasts.

Aubrey Accomando writes and lives in Waterford, Wisconsin. She is an English & Writing undergraduate student at Carroll University.

Brandon Yu likes telling stories.

David Reynolds is a student at Corban University who has been recently encouraged by friends to share the poetry he's written over the years. He enjoys doing whatever he can to serve other people, but often just finds himself bringing joy.

Donald Patten lives in Belfast, Maine and attends the University of Maine at Augusta.

Emma Huang is a third-year student studying English, Creative Writing, and Biology at Duke University who finds the intersection between humanities and medicine to be a circle and hopes to emphasize their connection to each other in both medical school and writing.

Garrett Miller is a senior studying English at NYU who's looking to pursue a career in publishing or a related field, possibly by way of tech writing.

Grace Annabella Anderson is a senior at NYU graduating this spring with a BFA in Drama and a minor in Creative Writing. She has been avidly writing and consuming music since she was young, and has recorded two EP's— the most recent, *Bandages*, was released in September 2023. She lives in Manhattan where she continues to sharpen her flair for storytelling, bringing stories to life both onstage and through her poetry.

Helena Jiang is a student majoring in English Language and Literature at Shanghai International Studies University, China.

Jania Richards fell in love with poetry during her time in college. Her love for it comes from her passion for serving others, meeting their needs and helping them to feel seen in hopes that they may see themselves in her words and be inspired to engage their own creativity and experience through writing.

Jochanaan Fair-Schulz is currently enrolled in an undergraduate program in History at Clarkson University in St. Lawrence County. He is 21 years old and is a German Canadian immigrant who has been writing creative fiction since high school.

Julia Savala knew she lived to create from an early age. She had so much to say about life and interactions, so she found writing as an outlet. She is pursuing a Creative Writing degree because she wants to convey her thoughts and feelings to a wider audience. She hopes that one day, she can resonate with others and help them to feel seen.

Kendra Boyd studies Poetry, Fiction, and German at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. She's served on *The Linden Review* and *13th Floor Magazine*. Her writing strives to be experimental in form and focused on pivotal moments in life.

Maya Collins is passionate, temperamental, and driven. As a biracial 21st century woman, she is interested in the multiple factors that influence naturally occurring and crafted forms. These may be the trees that surround her childhood home, the multicultural community she grew up in, or the way her forehead tightens when she cries. She is curious about how such things are constantly responding to their histories, living in light of oppression, resistance, and growth. Almost constantly in conversation with others, her work is an overflow of excited thoughts that swarm her mind.

Maya Kantor is a curious, open-minded, optimistic soul who perceives the world around her as constructively as possible. Every experience that she encounters serves a valuable purpose for

growth and positive change. She cherishes the natural healing properties of love and reciprocation with her life-long dream is the concept of world peace.

Sophia Decherney hails from Wynnewood, Pennsylvania where she incorporates influences from both the vibrant, artistic city of Philadelphia and the contemplative wooded areas in which she resides. As an advocate and a lover of nature, Decherney works to promote climate advocacy through legislative action. Decherney writes in a wide range of capacities publishing everywhere from academic journals to encyclopedia entries to proposed environmental bills. Currently, she is a student of poetry and philosophy at Brown University, Rhode Island where she serves as president of Brown's literary society.

Sophie Mulgrew lives and works full time in NYC, but her heart has never forgotten the years she spent in the Pacific Northwest.