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MARQUETTE LITERARY REVIEW

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Volume 14



When Day Comes by Leslie Demasek

*Authors***Nora Bravos**

Nora Bravos is a Junior here at Marquette University. She's the president of an on-campus poetry club, her socks never match, and she hasn't had a consistent sleep schedule since elementary school. When she isn't writing, painting, or making a mess of things, she's working as a tutor and studying for her LSATS.

Gwendolyn Lazenby

I am Gwendolyn Lazenby, a junior at Marquette studying Educational Studies and English Language Arts.

Rebecca Mathew

Rebecca Mathew is a current undergraduate student at Marquette, and her love for writing persuaded her to pursue a minor in Creative Writing. An avid reader and writer since the age of eight, Rebecca one day hopes to publish a series of fantasy novels.

Eric Seger-Pera

Eric Seger-Pera, sometimes known as The ESP, is a Marquette undergraduate student studying Chemistry and Spanish. He occasionally makes art, including paintings, poems, and songs. His favorite genre to work in is lighthearted fantasy.

Margarita Buitrago

Margarita Buitrago is currently a sophomore at Marquette University majoring in English literature and minoring in medieval studies and philosophy. She is from Miami, FL and enjoys traveling, learning languages, and studying history and art. She enjoys writing as a way of expanding her knowledge and imagination in the pursuit of a career in academia.

Karen Nakhla

I am a senior majoring in Biomedical Sciences at Marquette University. Poetry has been a hobby of mine ever since 4th grade, when I would write poems and songs for my church. I used to submit my poems to midwest competitions in high school, but I am very excited to be part of the Marquette Literary Review now!

Fiona Kelly-Miller

I am currently a sophomore at Marquette University, majoring in Gender and Sexualities Studies. Since I was young, I have always loved reading, which lead me to love words and writing.

Matthew Faller

Matthew Faller is a junior taking Computer Science as his major at Marquette University. He's a poet who casually writes about things mostly on a whim. However, for this year, he's taking a poetry class as well as attending a poetry club on campus.

Ben Lash

Ben Lash is a senior at Marquette University who is majoring in Theatre Arts and Cognitive Science with a minor in Psychology. Outside of classes, Ben is the president of Marquette's Art Club and a gallery attendant at the Haggerty Museum of Art. Ben is extremely grateful for the amazing opportunity to contribute to the Marquette Literary Review and excited to work towards becoming a better poet.

Kelsie Kasky

Kelsie is in her second year at Marquette University majoring in Secondary Education and English and minoring in Dance and Theatre Arts. She viscerally loves expressing herself through the arts and especially enjoys exploring the writing world through poetry. Kelsie has a deep thrill for constantly learning and dancing through life!

Alex Garner

Alex Garner is a senior studying political science and environmental studies at Marquette. Whether fictional or factual, written or filmed, storytelling is the way she finds meaning in her life and the world. She hopes to help continue sharing stories through journalism and creative writing in the future.

Julie Whelan Capell

Julie Whelan Capell graduated from Marquette in 1983 with a bachelor's degree in Spanish. She currently resides in Viña del Mar, Chile and maintains an active international practice as a grant writer and nonprofit consultant. The poems selected by Marquette Literary Review are the first she has published. Many thanks to the Driftless Poets and Catherine Young for the feedback and motivation to show these works to the world.

Gracie Overstreet

Gracie Overstreet is a rising sophomore at Marquette University. She plans on majoring in Writing-Intensive English with a minor in the Classics. For her, writing is a therapeutic outlet and a rewarding craft.

Matt Covington

Senior, Arts and Science Major, from St. Louis, Missouri. My poem is dedicated to my late Uncle Rodney, a true fisherman his whole life.

Emma Mueller

Emma Mueller is a sophomore studying Biomedical Sciences at Marquette. As an aspiring physician, she frequently writes formally about research and healthcare, however, she also has a passion for creative writing and journaling in her free time.

C. K. Ives

C. K. Ives is an undergraduate student at Marquette University. She dreams of one day using her writing to make lots of money and upset people.

Timothy Knapp

Timothy Knapp is a first-year Master's student in the English Department at Marquette. He writes fiction and poetry.

Eric Nassos

I am a Junior, majoring in both Supply Chain and Human Resources, with a minor in German. I have been writing poetry for a few years and am currently a member of Marquette's Written and Spoken Club. Someday, I am hoping to publish a full book of my poetry.

Tess Murphy

Tess Murphy is a senior at Marquette interested in telling stories that spark change. She has published two policy reports for a D.C.-based think tank and hopes to pursue a career in screenwriting or publishing.

Bianey Calixto- Dominguez

Hello, my name is Bianey Calixto- Dominguez. I am a freshman in the College of Health Science in the Medical Laboratory Science Major. Despite my love for science, the arts such as music and writing have always been a major part of who I am, which is why I am minoring in creative writing. I've been writing since middle school and began to work on the possibility of writing a book in high school. The idea is to tell my families stories and my experience growing up as a daughter of foreign parents.

Editor's Note

As a high school graduate of 2020, I've had trouble finding a sense of community. For some time, I was not sure if it was something I wanted at all. Even though I was able to come to Marquette's campus my first semester, I turned up my nose at zoom events and socially-distanced clubs. The weight of the connections and opportunities that never came into being was too much to bear.

In fall 2021, I stacked my schedule with three English classes— Dr. Brittany Pladek's Romanticism and Nature, Dr. Jenn Fishman's Writing Practices and Processes, and Dr. Angela Sorby's Creative Writing: Poetry course. I worked on countless poems, reflections, and even rewrites of Romantic Era pieces. Throughout this whole semester, however, I do not believe I wrote a single academic essay. All of these professors allowed me to flourish creatively. No doubt was this also due to my peers, who cultivated creative energy through our discussions and collaborations.

All of my experiences last semester cumulated when I became the general editor of the Marquette Literary Review. Within this journal, my editors and I wanted to emulate that same sense of community we feel from Marquette's English Department, and Marquette as a whole. In doing so, we decided to split the pieces into three sections.

First, we collected pieces that focused on the writer's, or characters' relationships with one another and the world. Within these pieces, we included a number on the ongoing fight for racial justice in the United States. I am honored that the MLR is a vessel for these authors' experiences and calls to justice.

Next, we compiled pieces that related to families. As editors of all these pieces, we

cannot know for sure who they are about, or if the authors even know that themselves. However, all of these pieces, whether about blood-related family or not, spoke to experiences of unconditional love, and how one is supposed to deal with that emotion in the face of conflict.

Finally, we have the section on creativity. The pieces included are ambitious, sometimes nonsensical, and everything creative writing is meant to be.

Additionally, in designing the MLR, we wanted to include art that not only added to the aesthetics of the review but also spoke to the community we inhabit. We included historical photos from Milwaukee and the surrounding area, which were archived by the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Recollection. By including these pieces, we seek to remind readers that all creative work is situated in an author's sense of place.

Thanks to Jessica Diebold for being an amazing partner in creating this journal. Thank you to Grace Lambersten, Claire Carlson, and Emily Schultz for reading and editing these pieces, and for being a great team to work with. Finally, thanks to Wendy Walsh for making this project possible, along with the rest of the English department for providing a space where creative writers and artists can grow.

Throughout the process of writing at Marquette, collaborating with other writers, and of course, compiling this incredible body of work, I know a community is not something I look for, but something I must build with others. I am honored to share all of this outstanding poetry, fiction, and visual artwork with this community we have created at Marquette.

- Jenna Koch, *General Editor*

[cover] *When Day Comes*, Leslie Damasek

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Organizational Meeting for a Black Protest, UW Madison Archives

Gracie Overstreet

ON NON-HAPPY ENDINGS

Not everything has to make you feel good—
Sometimes you need something to make you feel,
to split open your chest like a coconut,
to take an oyster knife to your heart.
The heart beats euphoric
and sometimes it feels like it doesn't beat at all,
just cracks and caves in.
It's about being seen—
tearing and being torn open—
making them,
forcing them to fucking see you for once.
Open your eyes and look:
here, in this verse, in this chord, in this brush stroke,
here is where you'll find the secret loophole
to the cycle of life and death.
Art immortalizes.
The performance, the person, the feeling
all there, laid bare.
Born again and again and again
in the sunlight of the poet's dawn.
Watch the movie that makes you feel sad,
that makes you bawl.
Let the art do the breaking for once.

Tess Murphy

A WINDOWSILL

2 pm

Every day at 2 pm, rays of light flood into our pensione through white-laced blinds. The rows of daisy patterns stitched into the fabric distort the sun's rays so it casts long, drooping petals across the room. I love coming "home" to those petals, warming my feet or drifting gently across the bare walls. You reach in between the two long pillars of blinds and find the handle, pushing the window open just enough for the breeze to slip inside. The wind stirs the lace, and the petals dance across the room slowly, as if learning the steps to a song. They lazily fade and remerge all afternoon, creating a sunlit dance floor in the middle of the day. *The Kooks should be playing, you think, or maybe the Italian pop song you heard on your first taxi ride, you know, the one you can't get out of your head? You hum the tune out the window and it's swept up with the breeze.*

The room would look like a hospital ward if not for the window. The floors, ceiling, walls, heaters, poster boards, dressers, mirrors, and lamps are all unnerving shades of white, except

for the glaring red and yellow duvets that somehow make the room even bleaker. The absence of color, life, and beauty drains the room of its vivacity. The windowsill is our saving grace. Its massive oak panels stretch ten feet tall and fill half the wall, more of a door than a window, tempting you to step through it and greet an entirely new world. With elbows leaning carefully on the darkened wood, you can see the Duomo in the distance, its enormity felt from blocks away. From the windowsill, birds nip at some piece of forgotten food below you, the gardener examines his latest plot, and your neighbors' shutters are endlessly open. Your elbows begin to warm in the sun, and you notice the different kinds of trees and birds and people and sounds that you have never encountered before. You are reminded this is not home, or at least the home you are used to. This is something better.

11 pm

The pensione doesn't have a balcony, so at 11 pm, in the dark and emptiness of our room, praying that the windowsill will support the weight of two teenage girls, we climb onto the creaking wood, swing our legs over the edge, and make our own. The best conversations happen on "balconies," when the wood underneath my legs is cold

and the shutter swings against the outside wall with the wind. I grab it to stop it from swinging but mostly to hold myself steady. Its deep green color seems even darker against the night sky, chipping slightly at the bottom where it has brushed against the windowsill countless times. After a while, I let it go and feel my legs dangle off the edge of the wood with no guard from falling. My heels brush against the white walls below, coyly tempting death in a city that I really really really don't want to die in, but *come on, death by Italian "balcony" would be fucking poetic. I take out a cigarette and lean back as far as gravity will allow me. The wood creaks as I perform a balancing act until I can light it, uninterrupted by the wind.*

As we pass the cigarette between us, ash drifts onto our black stockings and sundresses. It is hard to see in the dark, but the trees and birds and sounds aren't so unfamiliar anymore. Without really seeing them, I begin to point them out. There is where the gardener planted his new thyme. There is where the woman in the neighboring apartment dries her clothes. Here, there, here, there. I point out my new home while my friend and I talk about love and sex and how we are killing our lungs and popstars and why the Duomo looks so much bigger at night....When the win-

dowsill creaks under our weight, it feels like its practically begging to play the Ramones. I can almost hear the first chords.

Eric Seger-Pera

LONG AGO, IN THE PALEOZOIC

I was one of the first who learned
How to be tall,
How to turn chlorophyll
Into sunlight, how to brazenly ascend
Past any shadow on my face.

There were others like me.
My eyes now freed from the floor's
Foliage, I could see them.
I waved my fronds, and they waved
back.

We spent wonderous nights together,
Watching Kochab replace Thuban, then
in its own time
Be replaced by Polaris.
We were young, and the world was
beautiful;
There was no greater task than to live in
it.

None of us had heard of death.

You later pioneers in fruition,
Followers to our every folly,
You hold in your memory
The trench.
How bodies piled and lay crudely
Stacked upon each, crumpled other

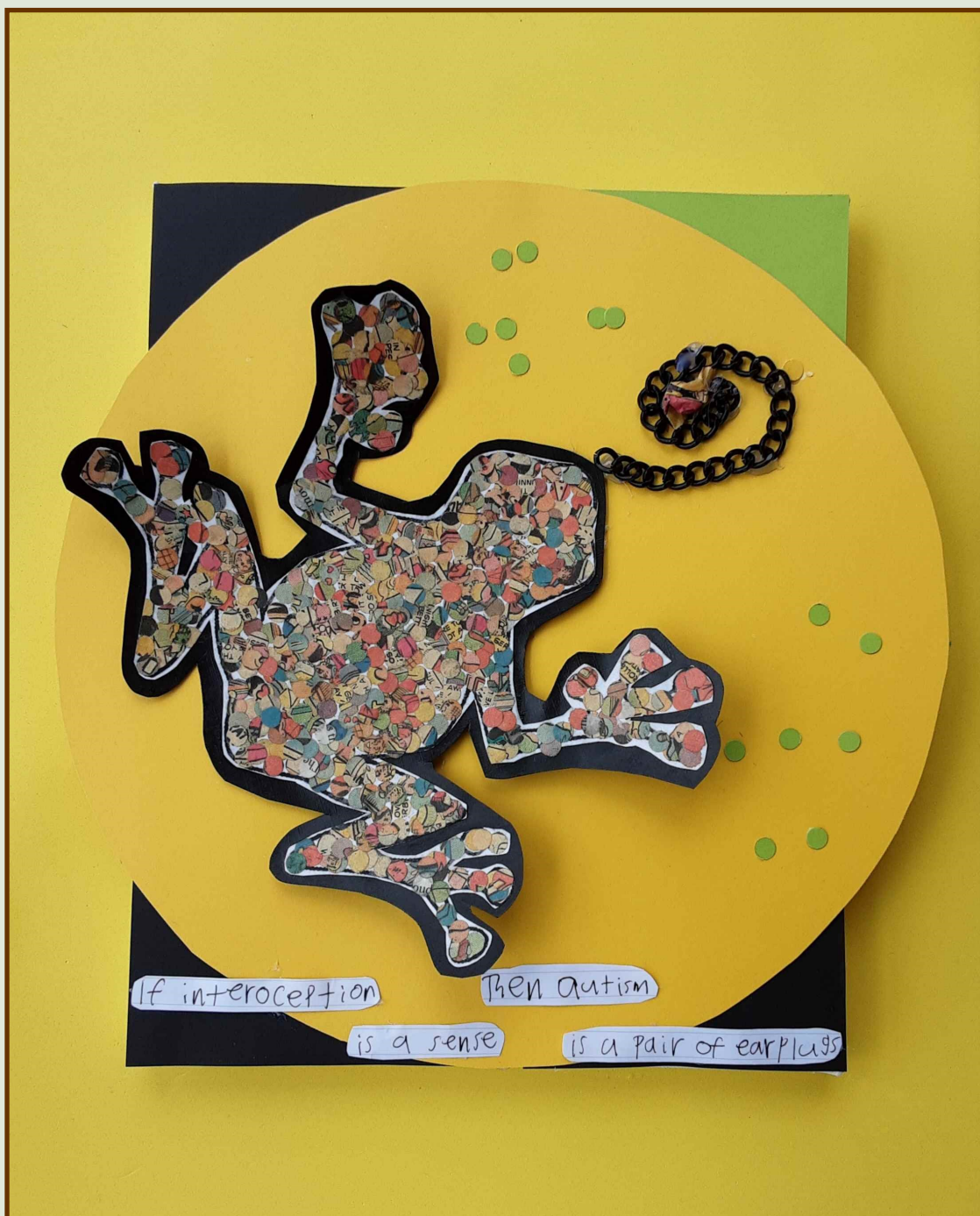
Bodies, with no place to go...

Our trench was the world.

With every breath, the air grew thinner.
The beggar in my chest calling desper-
ately,
'Alms for this palm!'
And the prodigy I was,
I begged out every penny
Until all the sky was locked
In my bones.

Then, like the rest, I crumpled,
Lay there, the tallest thing ever to live,
Tall, now
Atop the grave of its kind

No place to go
Until the pitying Earth shifted
And covered us in stone.



Interoception by Andy Mayer

Julie Whelan Capell

write her name
Breonna Taylor

WRONG AND RIGHT

they got the
wrong search warrant for the
wrong house for the
wrong man and shot the
wrong woman

[Italics refer to an email sent on 9/22/20 to all sworn officers in the Louisville Police Department by one of the officers involved in Breonna Taylor's shooting. The officer who sent the email was reprimanded by the police chief on 4/15/2021 for sending it.]

What we did was legally right

they charged the
wrong officer with shooting the
wrong direction and the
wrong victim for defending himself

What we did was ethically right

she committed
no crime, posed
no immediate threat, did
not actively resist

What we did was morally right

she was Black so for
two months there's
no mention of her
name in the local
newspaper

A GLIMPSE OF THE COURT HOUSE AND ST. JOHN'S CATHEDRAL,
MILWAUKEE.



E. G. KROPP CO., PUB., MILWAUKEE, NO. 4219

Gwendolyn Lazenby

THE CYCLE

1851

The only sounds I could hear were screams, angry protest, and groans of discomfort. At every occasional splash of water I heard, I looked up. Another one gone I thought. Though I was caged in, I hoped Olodumare could see me seeking for guidance. I needed the reassurance that I wasn't alone through this. I was scared. We were all scared. I had never felt so insignificant before.

I learned early on not to fight back. I wish others were fast learners as I was. I kept my eyes closed and head down. I couldn't bear to see the transformation of loss hope on their faces. I couldn't bear to witness the pain inflicted on them. I couldn't bear to see the sickness that made its way through.

I woke up in a cold sweat. This is how I started all of my mornings. For a quick minute, I remember being woken from my sweet dreams to the presence of my Baba and Mama. I miss them. I longed to be back home, but that was a waste of hope.

The elders told me to move on. To do what I needed to. If I didn't understand this, I needed to learn now. It was crucial for my survival.

Abeni Adebayo. That's who I am. Well, that's who I was. I wouldn't dare refer to myself as so now. I have a striped back to remind me why I shouldn't. Its Mollie now. Mollie Smith.

My name was not the only thing I had to learn to leave behind. I had to simplify Orisha into a God divided into the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit. It didn't make sense to me, none of it did.

We didn't do the same things here. I miss the things we had back home. I miss the stories my Baba would tell me and my siblings of Olorun while we sat around eating fufu. I miss the rhythm of the talking drum. I miss playing Ayo with my friends. I miss the beautiful cloths Mama made. I miss the Ojude Oba festivals. We didn't have any of that here.

I didn't know *these people*. All I knew is that we had to stick together. We had to lean on one another in order to make it through. They were my new awujo ofin. They were the only ones I had.

We worked. Worked until we couldn't anymore. I witnessed those I began to love be beaten and dehumanized on a daily basis. I tried my best to avoid being in their position, but it was inevitable. *It was our rite of passage.*

Families were separated here just as mine was from the beginning. We could relate to each other's pain, which unfortunately became my new sense of comfort.

Part of me wished I caused one of those occasional splashes of water. Instead, I eventually bore children that didn't have that way out. *This was all they knew. I don't quite know why, but I worked until my death. Eventually, I just became too tired to continue.*

1917

I was born with a single tiger stripe on my back. It was only about 3 inches long, but my momma told me it had power. Not real power of course. She just made up a story so I wouldn't feel different from my brothers and sisters.

It didn't mean much to me though because I didn't feel powerful. None of us did.

I saw how hard my momma and daddy worked every day; they taught us how to do the same. *We shared land with the Robinson family. They gave us a place to stay and food, so we had to put in the work.*

I didn't understand the logistics of it though. The Robinson family didn't work the same as we did. Mr. Robinson told us what to do while he handled the "business". Mrs. Robinson stayed in the house for the most part. Momma would help her cook and clean and look after their kids. We helped the Robinsons out a lot, but they didn't care too much for us. We had scraps while they just had more of everything. I never questioned it though because I didn't want to be ungrateful.

Their little girls were able to go to school. I used to watch them as they left their house with their bags filled with books, paper, and pencils, and I longed to be in their position. Momma told me I didn't need to learn. I still wanted to though.

One day, momma let me help her in the house and I remember finding a book in little Lucey's room. It was full of pictures and words. There were some animals and trees on some of the pages, and a man. I think he was an explorer. I didn't know what any of it meant, but I sure did love looking through it.

When Mrs. Robinson found me, she told her husband. I remember my momma standing, watching, as he beat me. I ain't had no right looking through little Lucey's things. Maybe he thought I was trying to steal it, but I swear I just wanted to take a peek.

That was the last day momma let me help in the house. She told me I was "too curious" for the job. I was in pain, but she didn't soothe me. She just shooed me off real quick to go help daddy outside and my sister took my place.

I ain't ever tell anyone this before. But one day, when everyone was sleep, I snuck into the Robinson's house and made my way up to little Lucey's room. I wanted that book. As the door creaked open, there she was, sitting up on her bed, awake. Fear ran through my body as I thought about what would happen to me. As I turned my body, ready to get out as fast as I could, I heard her sweet voice tell me to wait.

"I saw what my daddy did to you the other day", she said softly. Without saying another word, I watched as she slowly crept to the bookshelf she had in the room. After scanning for a bit, she pulled it out. She pulled out the book Mrs. Robinson caught me looking at. With one of her little ghostly fingers placed vertically in front of her mouth, she handed the book to me. It was our little secret.

I used to ask when we would have worked enough to be on our own. Momma and daddy just looked at each other and never answered. Eventually, I stopped asking. I knew we would never have worked *enough*.

I was only twelve at the time my momma sat me down for an important talk. She told me I had just a few more years before I would be helping the family in a big way. She said I was "just about ripe" and soon I would have kids of my own. I thought I was still a kid, but I guess we had to grow up quick around here if we wanted to survive.

Maybe I was selfish, but I wished momma and daddy cared more about me than they did for working for the Robinsons. It was a waste of hope though.

Funny thing is, once I bore life, it's like mine was gone. It made sense though. Momma and daddy ain't really had much *life to them*

1961

My mom and pops told me the stories of what they went through growing up in the south. They fought hard to get to where we are now. They'd never let me forget that I was *lucky*. *Lucky that I didn't have to experience the type of hardships they dealt with. Lucky that I didn't have to work as hard as them. Lucky that I had everything "handed" to me.*

As many times as I wanted to go back on what they said, I knew it wasn't worth it. They didn't get it. *I don't know the struggle. But indeed, I did.*

I remember once I went to the pool with some friends. I jumped in before my friends and they all saw my back. I always had this weird mark on my back. It was a darker, reddish-brown mark that you couldn't miss. It marked up about 6 inches down and 3 inches wide. When the kids saw it, they went crazy.

They told me I was a dirty boy with dirty skin and an even dirtier back. The taunts followed me home. From my friends, I could tolerate it, but it made me even more mad when the white kids witnessed it and joined in. *As if I didn't already have enough to prove to them.*

I went home and all that anger just turned into sadness. But pops taught me how to be strong.

He told me to suck it up, that "men don't cry"; *I was just a boy. He went on and on about how lucky I was to even be able to go to the pool. Though ours wasn't as clean or big as the others, we had one.*

I never wanted to bother them with them with my problems because they were just insignificant battles. But these battles followed me everywhere. They followed them too, they just didn't want to admit it.

Luckily, I fell in love with books. I especially loved the ones about places. Whether it was the history, the maps, the culture, travel; just anything that let me escape for a bit. I loved reading from the moment my mom taught me. I don't think I would have survived for so long if I couldn't.

Mom always made sure we were polished. She personally tailored my sisters' and my clothes. My sisters always had bone straight hair, and mine was always cut neat. Though we were presentable on the outside, I never felt like that was enough.

My sisters had fairer skin, so they didn't experience the same backlash I did. The long pants and long sleeve shirts and jackets didn't cover my dark hands and face. The darker your skin, the worse off you were, and I was on the far end of that spectrum.

I was dirty and dumb before *they even met me. I knew it. I hoped that one day, they'd actually see me, but that was a waste of hope.*

Just walking down the streets I wasn't safe. It wasn't just *the physical encounters I feared. I didn't have any protection from the thoughts that went through their head, from the thoughts that went through my head. With every look, I knew what they were thinking with-*

out them even saying it. I was just another dumb nigga.

I wanted to fight back. My pops straightened me out though. He said I'd be stupid to put my life at risk for that. He and my mom didn't work hard for me to throw it all away.

Once I grew older, I ran out of options. I couldn't fight. I couldn't complain. I couldn't even read the pain away anymore. But I could drink. And that was just what I needed for the worries to fade away. That was enough for me to eventually fade away.

2018

Regardless of the full 8 hours of sleep I got at night, I woke up tired. It seems like every day; I woke up tired. There is no explanation of this phenomenon.

It was finally time for me to get over my, as some put it, "irrational fear of the doctors". I had no option but to. I needed to figure out what was wrong with me.

As I walked in the office, I was met by the lady at the front desk. Without taking her eyes off the computer screen in front of her she asked nicely, "how can I help you?"

"Hi, my name is Grace and I'm here for my 10 o'clock appointment" I said in my *polite voice*.

She looked up, taken back a little when she saw me. "Oh", her voice sounding a bit sterner, "fill this out and we'll call you when we're ready". She dropped the clip board with papers on the desk underneath my open hand.

I examined the room before I chose to sit in

one of the chairs facing the exit door. I looked down at the papers and the first line asked for my name. I unconsciously wrote "Grace", but quickly erased it as I remembered that was my middle name, which I preferred to go by as I got older. I replaced it with a different name, my name, "Nikita".

I finished filling out the forms and returned them to the desk. Now, all I had to do was wait. My eyes went from the clock, to the door, to the clock, to the people, to the door, to the clock, to the floor, and back to the door.

Finally, after exactly 2 hours and 13 minutes, I heard the mispronunciation of my name by the nurse who was sent out to bring me into the doctor's office. *Luckily, I've mastered the art of patience.*

I sat on the examination chair with my knees facing the door I came through. When the doctor came in, he seemed to be in a rush. "What are you here for?" he said while flipping through the manila folder in his hands.

"Well, I don't know why, but I am always tired. I get enough sleep, I exercise, I eat healthy. So I think I'm doing everything right, but I'm still—"

He cut me off by raising his hand to signal for me that he'd heard enough. Then, he started the checkup routine. As he was listening to my lungs with the stethoscope on my back, he noticed the discoloration that started at my upper back.

He asked if he could lift my shirt. I agreed, not even thinking about why. He traced the almost 12-inch-long dark mark on my back with his finger then made eye contact with me for the first time.

“Miss—” he looked back at my chart, “Nie-kie-tay, do you have a husband back home?” My face scrunched up in confusion, so he continued. “It’s okay. I know how violent *they can get*”.

I finally realized that he thought my birthmark was a scar. I let out a chuckle and said, “No.” *In fact, I didn’t have anyone to go home to. “If you think someone caused that scar don’t worry. I was born with it. It’s just a birth mark”.*

He looked at me in disbelief, but he didn’t care enough to ask any more questions. “Alright then Nie—”. Before he could finish butchering my name, I told him to just call me “Grace”.

“Alright then Grace, I’m going to draw some blood so we can run some tests and see what’s going on”

After a little while, he returned and told me everything checked out. No vitamin deficiencies, no abnormalities. As he put it, I had a “perfect bill of health”. So, he just sent me home to get some rest and told me that I should consider myself *lucky*.

Instead of going straight home, I stopped by one of the only Nigerian restaurants within a 25-mile radius of my home and ordered my usual, okra soup and fufu. As I waited for my order to be ready, I looked at the pictures on the wall. I could never grow tired of seeing all the joyous faces and culture plastered on the walls. Sometimes Miss Vivian would interrupt my gazing and tell me stories of her family back home.

I couldn’t imagine being a part of such a rich culture, but Miss Vivian always said I was a part of her “ebi”, and that gave me comfort.

Once I finally returned home, I sat in the silence. I couldn’t help but feel dissatisfied with what the doctor said, so I gave my own self-diagnoses. Maybe I was just born tired, and hope was the only medicine that could help me with that.

2043

Hi, my name is Jamar....

—————

The pain followed me into every body I entered. It stayed with my soul, and plagued them, plagued me. I entered every new body, broken. Through every passing, I hoped I wouldn’t have to return. I hoped I had dealt with enough. But that was a waste of hope. I had new things to experience. New things to grow from. And it wouldn’t stop, until I finished learning.



Ben Lash

TIME WITHOUT TIME, SPACE WITHOUT SPACE

I remember a time
when the earth galloped and glided into eternity
the mountains like rams
the hills, like lambs
swaddled in vibrant amber
delicate sage
wind-swept
eroded by sea
all under a gold-speckled sky.

I think I was there again,
not long ago.
that time, that place
a moment repeated
warmer, closer
lapped by blueberry tides
sun-kissed radiance.
a laugh, a smile
in the eyes of a stranger

Ben Lash

MAIA'S MADISON GRASSLAND

The wind is petrifying, and I've
never felt more alive. The sacrament
of your laugh settles in the stems of our
plastic wine glasses. The corner of the picnic
blanket rises to salute your quips and
I am nothing but ears for you. Flimsy and tentative,
carried by your breeze. Today's parking tickets
and hungry kittens float in seas off the shores
of continents we'll never need to visit. Do you know how
you command this moment? The moment has never been so lucky
in the instant of its life. A smile escapes me and utters
William Shatner's name. Disjointed, clumsy, endearing.
Her smile is electric. I hold out my heart and it's met
with a new rhythm. Its beat is a square of smoked gouda
on Club crackers, a machete at a playground, a rusted
Turkish train car. Keith Haring's radiant baby shuffles
on the quilt beneath our woven nostalgia.
The grass rustles in admiration.
The air's sweet sting inspires a longing
for your world of scarred spirit. I stare, enraptured
by its worried wonders and tilted tectonics.
They tell me of growth, of life, of joy,
all stunted by the setting of the sun.
And I am coagulated by the wind once more.
And I am speechless and full of every word I know.
And I am revitalized, through you.



Un Tramonto a Lugano by Claire Shiparski

Bianey Calixto-Dominguez

SONG OF BROKEN TONGUES

to feel the zephyr of your warm sun,
to taste the nectar of your most precious fruits.
i long to feel,
as i did for too little years,
the feeling of rest and comfort
in my bones.
i want them to hear it,
the tale of the land that has bright crimson flower trees,
a beaming sun,
that warms the land and sea.
an iridescent story
heard in the song of the birds,
the rustle of the trees,
the moving river.
felt in the warm breeze
the food you eat,
the water you drink.
carried in our heart,
a distant memory that i wish all could decipher in themselves.
i, like the phoenix,
once died.
rose from my ashes, trapped in a cage in which I could not sing.
my voice crashing against the shore,
returning to the sea of unheard,
searching for someone to hear this story that had to be told.
i learned a song in me that i know many sing,
i understand the song the caged bird sings.
it is a song of broken tongues,
a song of beautiful sorrow,
that is afraid to know itself.

afraid to let others see,
the struggle of the seed you carry beneath.
that seed that was given to me.
watered with faith,
watered with belief,
watered with hope
that tomorrow will be
the day that someone can heal
what our broken tongues sing.

C.K Ives

A YOUNG WOMAN SITS ALONE IN THE ICU

I first met death when I was seven. It looked like my great grandmother, stiff and wrinkly and a little bit frightening.

The funeral had been open casket. Everyone was crying. I tried to cry, too, but I couldn't think of anything sad enough.

When we first arrived, there was a long line to get a look at her. It was so important to everyone, getting one last look. Mom said we couldn't skip the line, that we'd have to wait.

"This is how you do things, Cele," she had instructed me.

My great grandma had been all dolled up for the funeral. She was dressed in a plum-colored blouse and her hair was dyed a puke-like shade of orange. I suppose they had tried to match the color to what it was when she was younger. The couple in line before us compared it to the sunset. There was a touch of rouge on her cheeks where no color should have endured. Someone had painted her thin lips a pale shade of pink.

Mom said she looked good. I decided I didn't want an open casket at my funeral.

The service afterwards was beautiful, so I'd overheard some grown-ups say. Catholic church services made me nervous. The rituals were confusing and the priest was boring and the stained-glass windows were distracting. While I watched a colorful mosaic of Mother Mary light up with a burst of sunlight, I wondered if Great Grandma Cee would have to wear a halo too, now that she was in heaven. Everyone said she went to the upstairs place, but I wondered how they could be sure. I asked

my mom about it. She said Great Grandma Cee was a good person, that she would be fine. That was a relief. I decided then that I would be a good person, too.

When death next came knocking, I was eleven. It came slow this time, a growing tumor in my grandpa's pancreas. And for months and months, I watched him gradually yield to it.

His late wife had gone out in the same way. I remember hearing how awful and horrible and terrible it was, watching her lose her hair, then her vibrance, her strength, and eventually her life.

She had helped my mom, her daughter-in-law, pick out her wedding dress.

Grandpa swore it would be different for him, that he'd embrace his time when it came. My dad said it was because he didn't want to suffer as his late wife had.

But when he was diagnosed with death at 76-years-old, Grandpa resisted all the same. And when he did, my dad then insisted he fought for our sake. Grandpa had earned himself a few extra months, months spent in intensive care units or bed-ridden at home.

We had to visit him at his house almost every day. He had been laid out in an elevated bed in the sunroom. I didn't like seeing him hooked up to machines. The thought of having tubes sticking out of my own body made me squirm.

I did, however, have the privilege of scratching his head, a right reserved to only a few members of my family. At first, I was thrilled.

"You should count yourself lucky," my dad had advised me. "He doesn't let just anyone scratch his head."

But I didn't feel lucky for long. It felt like hours that I would stand there, rubbing his

balding head, avoiding one particularly large mole that had always made me uncomfortable. I hated the way my hands smelled afterwards, like an oily fish. When we would get home I would wash my hands three, four, five times to make the scent go away.

In his final weeks, he could hardly speak. Days before he died, he slipped into a coma. My aunt was with him when he finally passed. She reported that his breathing pattern changed, became laborious. Minutes later, he died.

I was playing Payday with my friend Alexa when my mom got the call, and I was embarrassed when she overheard the news.

Grandpa's funeral was enormous. He was a good sort of person and it seemed to me like the whole world had shown up to pay their respects.

Though, why so many people would come to see a dead body was beyond me.

It was another open casket funeral, and I remember watching with fascination as my aunt leaned over the coffin and pressed her lips right against his stiff, wrinkly forehead.

It was my turn next. I crept up to the casket. A light pink flower was pinned to his chest, and his face appeared dull and gray by comparison. The large mole on the top of his head was not visible.

Hesitantly, I reached up over the edge of the coffin, holding my breath to avoid getting a whiff of that familiar fishy smell, and touched his hand with my own. It felt cold and strange, like rubber. Frightened, I scampered off to my mother.

She took her hand in mine, and I traced my fingers over her sapphire ring. It was a gift from my dad.

"Mom, when you die, can I have this?"

I gestured to the large blue stone.

Apparently, a few nearby mourners overheard me. She was mortified. Years later, though, my mother would retell this story at family gatherings like the great, good joke that it was.

I don't blame her. When it comes to death, some people can only afford humor in retrospect. Some never grow a stomach for it.

I was a senior in high school when I met this boy, James. At the time, he was new to the school, and my classmates and I had looked him up and down with a shameless sort of curiosity. The rumor was his family had upped and moved out of state after his sister tried to blow her brains out.

We had taken pre-calc together. He would share homework answers with me.

One day, when the teacher had stepped out of the room, the self-appointed class clown meandered up to our desks. He swiped my worksheet and began scribbling on the margins.

"Very original," James said when he noticed what the boy was sketching.

"Tell me," I chimed in, "Is that life-size?" I leaned over James' shoulder and pretended to focus on his assignment.

Annoyed, the boy slammed the stolen worksheet down on my desk. My blue water bottle toppled onto the floor with a clatter. Still, we paid him no mind. Chatting away about question B, we made certain he could see our smirks.

Unable to bear the neglect, our charming class clown huffed like a child and muttered something under his breath.

It caused James to glance up sharply.

"What was that?"

The boy stilled.

“What did you just say?” James rose from his desk. He was a few inches taller than his peer. Our classmates were beginning to take notice.

A laugh bubbled up from my chest as I watched the tension grow.

“He said you should kill yourself,” I clarified, smiling sweetly at James, and then at the boy.

Taking his cue, the nuisance scampered off. James plopped back into his seat while those around us reluctantly returned to their work. I suppose they were hoping for a more interesting show.

After school tat day, James sought me out. He found me by the lockers.

“Hey.”

“Hey, James. You heading home for the day?”

“No, I’ve got practice.”

“Right. How has soccer been going?”

“Fine. My sister did try to kill herself. I know everyone’s been talking about it.”

I slammed my locker closed and twisted the lock.

“Everything’s fine now, I think. I just -- that’s why I was so stupid earlier. I don’t know, I just felt like I should explain myself, I guess.”

I flashed him a grin.

“Not to worry,” I said. “I was actually hoping for a fight. It’s too bad what’s-his-face ran off before you could take your baggage out on him.”

James did not laugh. “I try not to make it other people’s problem.”

“Why?” I asked, feigning incredulity. “I wish one of my siblings would try to off themselves, then I’d have an excuse for every-

thing.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Sure it is.”

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

I smiled again, so hard it felt like my face would crack in two.

“Don’t I? My friend *did kill herself*. It’s *fucking hilarious*.”

James stopped sharing his homework with me after that.

He did, however, try to apologize once. Days later, he found me by the lockers again. He said he was sorry for making assumptions about me, that he should have been more considerate.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said cheerfully. “We weren’t that close, and she was kind of a bitch anyway.”

It was true. Most of my time with Jocelyn was spent listening to her talk shit about her friends.

“Riley’s so annoying.” Riley was her best friend. “She keeps sucking up to Mr. Lorenzo. I hope they invite us to the wedding.” Jocelyn laughed. “She’s worse than you.” I hated her laugh. It was low and throaty, callous.

This much, among her other flaws, I forgave her for in death. Each day postmortem she became more beautiful, more endearing. And I wasn’t the only one who felt this way. Jocelyn had never been more popular than when she was dead.

I suppose she and van Gogh have that in common.

After the news broke, however, it was her Instagram account that blew up, not her artwork. She had hundreds of new followers in a matter of hours.

Sometimes, even years after graduat-

ing, I would scroll through the pictures on her account. There weren't many. Every once in a while, someone would leave behind a new comment.

"Missing you today," Aclew12 once posted beneath a caption about homecoming.

Another one read "I'm thinking of you and it aches."

I'd chuckle to myself, reading these posts. Jocelyn had been alone. She was an only child with two absent parents. She didn't have many friends, not in life. Who were these people? Where did it ache?

No one told me how she did it, but I heard the funeral was close casket. I didn't go.

We would eat lunch together, that was all.

Anyway, my mother knew her better than I did. She and Jocelyn had volunteered at church together. So, when Jocelyn ended it, Mom suffered. For weeks after the unhappy event, she would absentmindedly wander into discussions about the pain of losing a child. It seemed she in all her anxious glory had imagined me and my siblings in Jocelyn's position. As such, it wasn't long before she began lecturing us about the selfish nature of suicide. It was a preventative measure, I'm sure.

I distinctly remember my mother at the dinner table, wagging her fork in my direction as I picked at my roasted broccoli, an expression of great importance on her face.

"Her parents are in a world of pain," never mind that she had never met them. "Even if Jocelyn was sick, she should have chosen differently."

Dad, as always, agreed.

"There's no excuse for killing yourself. It's selfish. You shouldn't hurt the people in your life like that."

My father would reproachfully chime in with these sorts of insightful supplements to my mother's speeches on the moral implications of suicide. It felt like being charged with a crime I didn't commit. Though, I imagine it was the closest my parents could bring themselves to condemning a dead girl.

It hardly matters now, of course, all of their lectures. They didn't stop my brother from dying.

I wonder if he felt guilty in his final moments. I wonder if our parents will have the sense to be angry. After all, he betrayed us, right?

Cole didn't necessarily kill himself, but he did get himself killed. Drinking and driving. And the moron wasn't even 21 years old yet. He had a month to go. Idiot boy.

Cole had always been my favorite sibling. My little brother. When we were very young, he would follow me from room to room, laughing and clapping while I put on a show for him. I would dance and sing and twirl. He loved it.

I taught him how to ride a bike. How cliché is that? And when he learned, I gave him my old one. In the first grade, he had a difficult time learning how to tie his shoes. I showed him the special way I had learned when I was his age. We called it the "bunny ears method." In high school, he came to me for dating advice. But only once. He was in love with this girl in his chemistry class, Sara. He asked her out in the sweetest way. There were flowers, a sign, a suit -- the works. I helped him prepare the whole thing. And when she rejected him, he told me all about it, his humiliation and disappointment. I didn't know how to make him feel better, so I gave him a beer. His first one. He didn't like it.

“This is awful,” Cole said. “I’m gonna finish it, but it’s awful.”

“Good, it’ll help with the heartbreak.”

“Bite me.”

He made it halfway through his IPA before deciding it was too gross, and I finished it for him. Cole pretended to be embarrassed and swore me to secrecy.

“If anyone asks, I chugged mine and then finished yours. I was very manly.”

My little brother could always make me laugh.

I’m guessing he acquired a taste for beer at school. The police found empty bud light cans in the back of his totaled Ford Fusion. Stupid, stupid kid.

I spoke to him. Hours before the accident, I spoke to him on the phone. I knew he was going out. I knew he would be drinking. I should have done something. I could have done more. “Don’t go out. Don’t get in that car.” Fucking hell, that’s all it would have taken. It would have been the tiniest, little effort. The smallest thing. I wonder, is tragedy always lurking, one near-miss away? How many times did Cole almost die before the stars aligned just right?

I am still in the hospital. They called me about five hours ago. Apparently I was listed as Cole’s emergency contact. Mom and Dad are on the way. It’s the holiday season, so they had a difficult time finding plane tickets. I had to call them and tell them what happened.

Mom didn’t pick up, so it was Dad who got the news first. It was awful, not being able to see his face.

“Hey, sweetheart. I’m glad you called.”

God, I felt like throwing up. It took me a moment to speak.

“Hey, you there?”

“Hi, Dad. Yeah, I’m here.”

“What’s up? Is everything alright?”

I had practiced the conversation beforehand, had even written down the important bits. But the script was useless. How do you tell your father his son is dead?

“Dad, there was an accident. Cole, he...”

Words were not enough.

“Cele, what’s wrong? What happened? Where’s Cole? Are you with him? Celeste, what happened?”

I barely managed to get the words out, and then it was my father’s turn to be silent.

“Dad?” My voice came out in a whisper. “Dad, are you there?”

“I’ll talk to your mom. We’ll be there soon.”

We haven’t spoken since, but my parents emailed me their plane tickets. They should be touching down in an hour. In the meantime, I don’t know what to do. Where do I put my hands? My breathing is so loud, uneven. It’s distracting.

Hospital staffers are rushing past me. Someone was just wheeled away on a mobile bed. I wonder how many people die in a hospital on any given day. Probably a lot. I could never be a doctor. All that death and blood and pain. Speaking to patients and their loved ones. I could never do it.

There is nowhere for me to go. I have a car, but I have nowhere to go. This chair is uncomfortable. I’ve been sitting in it for a while. It’s hard to look at the people passing by. My hands, what do I do with my hands?

My little brother. My little brother is dead.
Cole is dead.

* * *

It is 6 a.m. at Edward Hospital in Naperville, Illinois. The day is December 19th. A young woman sits alone in the Intensive Care Unit. It is noisy. She has been waiting for nearly five hours. Her little brother is dead. The woman needs something to do with her hands, so she pulls out her phone and begins clicking on applications. First Snapchat, then Settings, U.S. Bank, Play Store, and lastly Instagram. She searches for a name, Jocelyn Stranje, and scrolls through the photos. Ten minutes pass. Then twenty. A young, filtered girl smiles at her from her screen. Slowly, she smiles back, and finally, finally presses 'unfollow.' It is 6 a.m. at Edward Hospital in Naperville, Illinois. The day is December 19th. A young woman sits alone in the Intensive Care Unit. She is sobbing.



White Washed by Jordyn Vena

Julie Whelan Capell

UNANIMOUS

1 pack of cigarettes

1 \$20 bill

4 police officers

1 knee

9 minutes

3 week trial

45 witnesses

12 jurors

1 day

1 decision

1 nation

Unanimously guilty



FAMILY



Family standing outside a home with lush gardens, Roman Kwasniewski, 1921

Matthew Covington

MOVING DAY, SUMMER 1976

Everything packed neatly into boxes
stacked in the front yard of the house
where they had all grown up.

Anxious but excited,
waiting for the movers to arrive,
ready begin the trek down to St. Louis.

Everyone in the family sitting around on the porch,
taking in the scenes of their neighborhood one last
time.

The oldest son appears around the corner.
proudly marching up the street,
wearing shorts that he cut up himself,
the biggest smile you've ever seen,
and holding a 12-inch bass.

They had never even noticed he was gone.
The family sat in stunned silence,
watching him get closer,
trying to process the scene that was unfolding
in front of them.

“Where did you get that fish?”

“Who gave that to you?”

He had never stopped to consider what was going to happen to the fish when he
got back.

But that didn't matter,
he had caught it and he had to show it off.

Dad grabbed the camera,
he struck a pose,
holding his trophy for the world to see.

Click.



Ben Lash

THE DRAGONFLY'S JOURNEY

Start with a sketch
in pencil, on your block
of linoleum.
Include plenty of details –
but not every detail,
the little ones can be hard to see
unless you have hours
to carve intricately.

Start with the large sections –
the ones where you don't want color.
Feel a little guilty
about accidentally taking supplies
after a printmaking event
hosted by the university's art club.

Continue carving
the smaller spaces on the block –
but don't trace the design.
Carve out parks and lakes,
not paths and streams.
If you don't want reversed colors,
think in negative space.

Feel a little better
realizing that the supplies
would probably just be sitting
in storage, if you hadn't –

“accidentally” –
taken them.

Look at the different sizes
of carving tool tips.

Choose one that works
for the smaller details.

Remove the tip you were using
from the carving tool
and insert the new one.

Tell yourself that you
decided to sketch and carve
a dragonfly
because dragonflies remind you
of kayaking with your dad, back home –
not because there's a dragonfly
on the packaging of the carving tool
and you couldn't think
of anything else to carve.

Once satisfied with your carving,
roll ink onto the block of linoleum –
then flip the linoleum onto paper.

Lift to see your dragonfly.

Maybe it isn't a perfect blue dasher
like the ones you saw with your dad,
but it's still a damn good dragonfly.

Let it be what it is.



Mossy Railing, Eric Seger-Pera

Fiona Kelly-Miller

OUR LAUGHTER

I swing my legs back and forth, multi-colored striped tights creating shadows on the floor

I am five and ignorant of all that's going on around me

All I know is the smell of the kitchen cleaner my mom uses on the hardwood floors

And her laughter as an onslaught of words come flying out, as my mouth tries to keep up with every thought that appears in my brain

I don't worry about what will happen tomorrow, all I think about is the quesadilla heating up in the microwave and how to better tell the story of my day

I hear the microwave beeping, the sound as familiar as the noise of the back door opening or the third stair creaking when someone steps on it

My mom places the plate down before me, cutting the quesadilla in triangles

I start blowing on a piece, trying to eat it even as it burns the tip of my tongue

And then I smile up at her, as she continues to move around, her red hair flying out behind her

I suddenly remember another story about my day

I don't hesitate, instead I start talking, already thinking of a joke to end it with

And every time I make my mom laugh, I always laugh harder.

I am fifteen and no longer unaware of the things happening around me

My school day no longer makes me skip from the bus to my front door

Instead, I can feel the stress settling into my bones

When I walk into the kitchen, I can't smell any cleaner and the house is filled with my siblings

The noise level high with complaints and the sound of footsteps and the thud of backpacks against the floor

But at the end of the day when my mom comes home, with tired eyes and a slight slouch in her shoulders

She sits down next to me and still listens to me ramble on, our laughter spilling out into the air between us.

Julie Whelan Capell

APOCALYPSE PANTRY

she's a baby boomer
 trained by
 parents who
 lived through the Great
 Depression but were never, ever
 Depressed

her children always teased that she was
 ready for the
 apocalypse they
 mimed zombies
 lacking the imagination necessary to
 see the multi-pronged
 alienness of the
 virus to be discovered in 2019
 shuffling slowly out of the east
 grabbing the world by the lungs

in her overstocked pantry
 neat rows of canned
 vegetables fruit soup juice
 packages of
 noodles rice crackers cookies
 receding into the darkness
 arranged by date of purchase
 neatly noted in her
 deceased husband's writing

bathroom cupboards stuffed with the
 treasures of the hour

toilet paper and an old
 shoebox full of batteries
 carefully dated by him and
 grouped by type

in the bathroom drawers
 overflow with leftover
 gauze tape bandages medications
 he never finished taking

in the laundry room enough
 detergent to last a year but
 not enough to wash away the
 memories of the
 one she has lost

Rebecca Mathew

CHAINED

The boy snuck in at midnight. Only fifteen, he had been with the circus but three weeks, and not a day had gone by where he had not mournfully stared at the great gray elephant that lay impotently in its tent. One of its enormous front legs was chained tightly to a tent spoke. The boy figured that once, the chain had been loose around a then-smaller leg. After many years of wearing the chain, the massive animal had outgrown the cuff that connected the chain to its leg, leaving it now tight and uncomfortable.

Since his arrival to the circus, the boy noticed that the elephant seldom moved voluntarily, for every inch that it did, the chain would rattle loudly. The sound would echo through the grounds near its tent, sending handlers from every which way, scurrying like evil little mice to the tent, each with a whip and tranquilizer gun in hand. They didn't often employ either, he had noticed, as there really was no need to if all the animal was doing was folding a bale of hay into its mouth or slurping up some water with its trunk, but they were ever vigilant.

Early into his stint, he had learned that some of the handlers had been there since the elephant was a smaller creature, chained to the tent spoke as ever. Now, the beast nearly filled the entire tent, and with one good lunge forward, the elephant could easily topple the tent spoke, and with it, the whole fabric structure that the spoke supported. Another elephantine lunge could very well yank the spoke up from the ground, freeing the animal and costing the ringmaster one of the circus' most popular shows.

Staring at the elephant that night, the boy realized that it had learned to be wary of the chain, for even if the shortest length of it rattled, the handlers would arrive, pain at the ready. He could only imagine that that was what they had done when the elephant had been small, and that was what they did when it was large.

But the boy couldn't stand to see such a magnificent animal shackled as it was. Surely it longed for freedom as any other creature did?

The moonlight peeped through a slit in the tent ceiling, and the boy crept further toward the elephant. Gently, silently, he removed the cuff and chain from its leg. However, the elephant did not move. The boy whispered a plea, motioning for it to be free, to run away, and only then did it take a few tentative steps.

But then, it stopped.

It backed toward the spoke again, lumbering more quietly than ever before.

For even in the silence, as it walked, both the boy and the elephant could still hear the chain rattling.

Kelsie Kasky

IN MEMORY OF

What if you don't know them
But their stars burn out
so your heart becomes a furnace...

*Is it wrong to elegize strangers?
Is it selfish to grieve the ones you didn't
know?*

You wake up to all of the posts
"In memory of..." and "Rest in peace"
and although you know his sister
or their friends or teachers
and not either one of them,
There's an elephant on your chest
and a rock blocking your airway;
you can't seem to dislodge it
and part of you doesn't want to.

I can only imagine how their families
are hurting.

Who found them?

What could have been done?
anything?

In memory of
the precious stars who
measured time with their own hands.
Stormiest clouds blocked their view of
the starlight that might have been
enough.

"In memory of"

just doesn't seem fair.

Those words shouldn't have circulated
for

many years to come.

But they're here.

What now?

"In memory of"
will never feel right
like this.

Charcoaled heart strings

glow and fly

hot embers

while the school checks off its

"Here's the counseling center contact
information"

list of responsibility,

stigmatizing suicide by

avoiding calling it by its evil name

because God forbid someone finally

address the elephant on our chests.

Classrooms full of elephant-chested
precious gems,

Teachers expected to mend the holes in

the burning hearts that occupy

their desks and their rib cages,

fending for the patchwork tools they

were neglected

all while fighting to keep the lifeboats

afloat.

In memory of

the precious gems

and all who came before and after,
 pressurized into diamonds
 by the grinding wheel of life.

*nothing breaks diamond
 but diamond.*

in celebration of life and
 the memory of.

(I don't even know if I'm worthy of
 writing these words,
 but I can't help but cry out for all the
 voices unjustly unheard).

Sun rises and crystals glitter the space
 around
 the memory of
 Sun sets in turn for moon to glow
 the memory of
 Stars are sky diamonds
 shining down from above
 the memory of...

The memory lives on beyond the
 sky diamonds
 in all the others they shone their light on
 through all that life
 threw their way.
 All things but a
 life preserver.

Persevere:
 beautiful, gilded hope fights daily war
 allied by unbridled, unending, uncondi-
 tioned love.
 The sky diamonds tell us that's what
 they want us to do

Alex Garner

REMEMBERING THE WATER

As I kneel hunched over in the murky puddle, spots of warm water blooming out over the knees of my jeans, paralyzed by the distorted sight of my submerged hands next to the empty floating Arby's cup, the growing feeling that I'm drowning again sprouting deep in my chest, the bus driver yelling down at me to get on the damn bus, I think of the first time I tasted Mama's key lime pie.

It was after my brother Andy and I went to the small lake down the street from our house to swim. The local health department had put up a sign earlier that summer warning of high levels of contaminants and "DANGER." Andy said rules were meant for breaking.

Andy runs from his doorstep now, his boots squeaking from the sticky rain.

"Casey, stop. Don't go, she's not worth it." He puts his hands on my back and arm trying to pull me up. But I'm stuck.

He's talking about Mama. Our imperfect, selfish, and gilded Mama.

I remember how the sky looked that day. The day that I almost drowned. The day Mama didn't show up to the hospital.

The clouds were fluffy and fat like cotton balls, like the kind Mama used to swipe off the polish from her fingernails when they became too chipped. She liked to use all shades of pink. I always thought it was weird that the little bottles of paint were named after things people eat: Rockin' Raspberry, Poppin' Pomegranate, Carnival Cotton Candy, Bursting Bubble Gum. I wondered if the polishes were flavored like those scented markers she bought us for the first day of school.

I could imagine Mama sitting with her legs crossed on the rickety toilet seat, blowing her breath onto her nails, lightly touching the tip of her pig pink tongue to the top of her baby pink nails, trying to get a little taste. Mama always indulged in little vices like that.

My fingernails shimmer sparkly pink in the water. Mama wouldn't have a color like mine: Glitter Goop.

My heart thrums in my chest. Andy got a call: Mama was out boating on the lake with a man and had fallen in. There's always a man when it comes to Mama. He didn't notice she had gone overboard for about 10 minutes. She was so drunk she couldn't swim. When he circled back, he almost didn't catch her body in the water. He got her to the hospital. Just in time.

The bus driver shouts down at me.

I can't move my hands. I can't open my mouth. My distorted reflection sneers up at me. I'm trying to move. I'm trying. It's like someone stuffed a rag down my throat.

The water. My eyes are two white round clouds in the water.

Mama didn't like when we went to the dock. She always told Andy I was too small, that I couldn't swim, but I protested, throwing my hands up like she had made a great offense against me. Like she had told me I couldn't be president because I was a girl, or that Andy could beat me in a race because he was taller and older. I wanted to feel big, expand my arms around the whole world.

I feel small now, cowering in the water. I feel it snaking up my arms in a stream, like the sky is sucking the rain back up.

I was told to stay on the dock, only put my feet in. I asked Mama why she didn't just come with us. She scoffed, took a large gulp of her beer, and belched. The smoking cigarette dangled in her hand, like a dead finger. Mama didn't go to the lake. She only let chlorinated pool water seep into her skin, claimed it was cleaner. What she didn't know as she was drifting on her inflatable orange slice, sipping a blue slushie drink with some fruity tropical name, was that Andy and I would giggle and pee underneath her, pretending we were squids squirting out ink.

That day, after I had pleaded with Mama as I usually did, after I had sat on the dock and let the sun burn my back red, after Andy teased me that I was a baby, I jumped in the water.

And then it all went blue. Then black. A black sky. No moon. The back of my eyelids pulsed with two clouds, snapshots of the sky in my head.

When I woke up in the hospital, my throat was raw like I scraped a metal fork down the back of my mouth.

I've never been near the water again. I don't take baths, no showers. I use a washcloth that Andy has to soak in the sink as I close my eyes tight. Cringe and cry as I drag it across my dry crackling skin.

I only drink juice, soda, or coffee. I know there's water there, but it's disguised so I can't see it. I stay inside on rainy days, keep my head buried under my covers, the curtains closed. I don't want to see those clouds again, in that black sky. In all that nothingness.

Andy's shouting something behind me, but I'm under the water. I'm there again.

When I got home from the hospital later that day, Mama was there.

She stood in the middle of the kitchen, the warm glow of the afternoon sun casting rays on the crown of her head, a mock halo. A wide grin across her face, as she held the key lime pie in her hands, the silver of the tin shimmering against her pink fingernails. She was beaming, her voice was soothing. Standing there like a 1950s housewife with the pie, like it would make it all better. And to me, a seven-year-old, it did.

I'll be better though. Do what she never did. I'll go to her. Be there for her.

"She needs me now." The words are ragged as they come up my throat. The image of her drowning flashes in my head, pushing out the two clouds. "I'm sorry."

Finding a will beyond my own, like a siren ringing in my ears, I get up. I pull my leaden hands out of the water, swallow the pool of spit under my tongue that gathered there from the thought of the pie. Andy's hands fall off my back, discouraged.

"She left us. *She left us! I hope she's dead, she never cared about you. She didn't care about us.*"

His voice drowns out across the growing space between us. It sounds like it's from some dream or memory; Andy yelling for help as I lay blue on the dock. I don't look back at him. I climb onto the bus, leaving Andy behind, the water dripping from my fingertips.



Karen Nakhla

GOLDEN TEARS

In my brother's tears lie

Insecurity.

His soft brain spirals with self-doubt.

What are people my age supposed to wear?

Should I even ask them to hangout? What if they don't want to?

He wishes to escape his brain,

but he can't.

In my brother's tears lie

Loneliness.

He yearns for a home within others,

but he gives

and gives

until the world has taken everything out of him,

and he's left empty,

aching for a hug

or any form of affection.

In my brother's tears lie

His unwelcomed kindness

that everyone seems to take advantage of.

His kind smile often gets mistaken

for a welcome doormat

for people to wipe their dirty shoes all over.

In my brother's tears lie

God's best work,

precisely crafted to shape him

into the man he turned out to be.

He is gold

refined in fire

time and time again.
And what on this earth is more pure?

What on this earth is more pure
than my brother's tears?
refined in fire
time and time again.
And what on this earth is more pure?

What on this earth is more pure
than my brother's tears?

Julie Whelan Capell

METTA SONNET

I send you love, I give you joy and peace
Acceptance too, I offer you today
There's care and understanding without cease
And kindness that I willingly convey

For suff'ring's a companion we all bear
A hungry ghost that haunts our ev'ry bone
A hole inside that no one can repair
Because we cling to all we think to own

Your ev'ry action I might not endorse
Not sanction, ratify nor advocate
Our lives, entwined, must surely stay the course
To move beyond the blame and fires of hate

So happy may you be and healthy too
Accept all things with ease as I do you

Inspired by JoAnna Hardy

Matthew Faller

A HUG

It was something Izzy asked for,
just like that.

But before I could say anything,
she already finished her deed.

It was a mere touch –
Her arm surrounding my shoulder,
something so familiar to all,
but not to me, the alien from Earth.

It felt pleasant,
as if I were floating on top of a pool.
Her silky hands were unyielding,
refusing to let go for that one second.

It didn't last long –
but it never needed to.
For this was my first time
with someone outside my line.

And sure, it didn't mean anything to her.
After all, we were simply classmates
that kept running into each other –
but it meant the whole day to me.

CREATIVITY



Our Artwork, Wisconsin Rapids' Daily Tribune

Matthew Faller

A RETURN TO WRITING

It's been a long time since you and I
reunited for our sacred tradition.
Sorry for the long wait... again.
I promise the laptop won't catch my hands as often.

The act of writing on pen and paper,
to let loose my feelings, my thoughts to others,
seems like such a lost art nowadays –
it's honestly a shame our youth has essentially forbidden it.

Nowadays, we just clickity-clackity those words
on our keyboards, mindlessly pressing key after key,
putting no strength, no true physical energy into the act
of putting those words somewhere on the white canvas.

It's easier to type it all out –
then simply forget afterwards.
It's easier to type a mistake, a bad word choice,
then backspace it away like it's nothing.

But pick up a pencil, and there is no longer an easy “erase and forget.”
Yes, flick the pencil and scrub that eraser on the paper,
or scratch out the error with more pencil marks,
but the error will remain as a sign of writing being messy.

There is no choice but to think more carefully,
to be more considerate as to what words one would say
so that one may say what needs to be said –
almost as though they're trying to converse with someone.

So I now await for our unity once more,
but it won't come until next Thursday,
when I'm given a chance
to pour out my heart to you again.



Priorities by Jordyn Vena

Margarita Buitrago

THE THOUGHT CIRCUS

Int. Chez Mademoiselle Spinello — Evening

Mademoiselle Spinello sits and muses on her smaragdine settee,
but, she is also an acrobat,
so she leaps into the air,
and dismantles and performs her every trick to perfection,
in what she deems to be great feats of agility

dexterity and

prowess.

her pirouettes are propelled by her inventive imagination,
however, she is still a Mademoiselle Spinello sitting and musing on her smaragdine settee,
and she bows, until her upturned nose is a breath away from kissing the floor.

Exeunt.

Timothy Knapp

PHONICS

The song was so damn catchy, he couldn't even think. He first heard it on the radio and he didn't know right away that he loved it—these infatuations take time—but he knew he wanted to hear it again.

Before he lost his job, Calvin listened to 88.9 on his commute. The song first played while he drove over the Hoan Bridge, from which the city's tallest building stood due north and occupied the horizon so that Calvin felt like he might drive straight into it, total his car, and he imagined this scene playing out while the song played. Phonics was the name of the band.

He listened to it later on Spotify, and then he listened to it again and again, and then the whole album, which was rock solid, and he eventually listened to the song so much it compelled him to think in terms of scarcity. It couldn't be overplayed or then the song would dullen slowly and he wouldn't love it anymore. After taking it too far, listening too much, he had to limit its plays. But at the crest of his adoration, he indulged completely, rode the wave as it broke along the headland, listened as it played and played and played. When he went to their show at Colectivo, the infatuation took on a new dimension. The lead singer was magnetic: she wore blue plastic sunglasses, a Burnhearts t-shirt tucked into denim shorts, and delivered funny banter between every song. She reminded him of someone he had met before, but with an overwhelming and singular quality that he couldn't quantify appropriately or distribute gradually

across his mental system. He wanted all of it all at once.

He woke up in his bed the next morning and he couldn't remember the end of their set, but he was wearing their t-shirt. It was cream-colored and had a sepia-toned photo of the lead singer on the front, the name Phonics in pink cursive across the chest. Calvin couldn't remember buying it, but he started wearing it every five days. It was his ace in the hole. Around that time, he met Janny on Tinder. They met up at a brewery and he liked that she was aloof. He liked that she knew about beer and he liked the questions she asked him about himself. So they kept hanging out, kept it slow, and their evenings together didn't happen to line up with the top of his t-shirt rotation until she invited him to a party at her brother's house in Bay View. He met her there, wearing his Phonics shirt, and she had never seen it on him before.

"Oh my god," she said wide-eyed, looking at Calvin's shirt. "It's so funny that you're wearing that shirt."

"Why?" he asked, but she dismissed the question. Calvin wondered if he should keep his coat on, if he'd done something inappropriate by wearing someone else's face on his shirt, if Janny found this rude. But she told him not to worry about it.

Inside, when Calvin tried to introduce himself to Janny's brother Jon, she interrupted him by telling her brother about his shirt before he could even finish saying his name.

"That's awesome," Jon said with a big smile. He had a buzz cut and a beer in his hand.

"What's the deal with my shirt?" Calvin asked Janny, trying not to sound anxious in front of her brother, but to sound aloof like her.

"Did you meet Cass?" Jon asked.

“She’s the face on your shirt. She’s in the other room.”

He was quickly embarrassed when he considered that Jon wasn’t joking. In high school, Calvin had learned a social rule about rock concerts, which was that it was uncool to wear the t-shirt of the band you were seeing to their show. Exceptions could be made if it was ironic and you were very confident. But in this case, he had leveled up the faux pas. The heat of the narrow hallway rushed to his forehead.

“Lemme introduce you,” Jon said.

“Hey Cass! It’s your number one fan!”

Calvin followed Jon sheepishly from the hallway into the living room where a scattering of people sat on furniture, chatting idly over inoffensive music. Cass sat on an armchair, leaning forward, and looked up at Jon when he called her name.

“Hey, sorry,” Calvin said to Cass, and gestured vaguely at his shirt. “Big fan, I guess.”

Cass looked at him, slightly embarrassed and slightly amused. She held her hand out to shake his, he slid his sweaty appendage into hers, and he said nice to meet you. He was mortified but so thrilled to be meeting her.

“That’s so funny,” she said. “Calvin is so friggin cool, I can’t believe it. Dude, stop apologizing, I’m so fucking flattered.”

Cass quickly introduced him to Jess who was perched quietly by her side, leaning against her like a puppy.

“It’s been so long since we’ve been able to do anything like this,” Cass said. “I’m so glad Jon had us over. That damn Omicron really fucked things up. We used to do this like every weekend, way back in 2019. But now we have Calvin so... *psh! it’s even better now.*”

“Oh gosh, I don’t know about that.”

Janny put her arm around Calvin’s arm to remind him that she was there. Cass thanked him again and said again that she was flattered.

“Janny, you know Jess, right?” Cass asked.

“I... uh, yeah,” Janny stammered. “We met once before, a while ago. Great to see you again.”

Jess smiled and gave a nod and Janny took Calvin by the arm into the kitchen. There were a few people leaning against the counters and drinking Hamm’s.

The kitchen, more than any other room that Calvin had been in so far, revealed the fact that it was a bro house. He knew all the signs because he lived in one as well: the plastic folding table, dishes in the sink, cylinder tubs of powdered supplements lining the counter. He was surprised that Cass would be involved in this social circle.

“I’m really surprised Jess is here. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“This is really embarrassing,” Calvin said quietly to Janny. “How does your brother know Cass?”

“Oh, they went to high school together. Don’t be embarrassed, she was flattered! Did you know they were a local band?”

“I knew they were local, I just forgot how small this city is, I guess. I honestly love Phonics, I listen to them all the time.”

“Yeah, they’re blowing up. I’m not really into their style of music... but I’m totally happy for them.”

“They’re so good.”

Janny looked at him, waited for more, as if probing for the exact type of obsessive fascination he really held for the band, and for Cass in particular. Calvin looked away to try and hide it. Things were still very new between

the two of them. He didn't want to seem disinterested. She got him a beer from the fridge and he almost downed the whole can in one go.

"Thanks for coming," Janny said.

Calvin smiled and thanked her for inviting him and then a silence fell between them, a silence made louder by the noise around them, the other people talking in the kitchen, and the music audible from the living room. They both swigged their beer with a syncopated rhythm. He wasn't sure what to say. He really just wanted to talk to Cass some more, but felt guilty for thinking this. To push the thought away, he told Janny that he thought it was nice that she and Jon were so close.

"Do you have siblings?" she asked.

"I have one younger sister. But we're not very close."

"That's your fault."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the older sibling's responsibility to maintain the relationship. It just is."

Calvin paused to consider this, to realize it made him a little bit angry, and that she knew nothing about his sister or his family at all.

"You don't know that," he said defensively. But she changed the subject and moved a little bit to her left to transition into the adjacent conversation.

"Hey Tom, have you met Calvin? I met him on Tinder."

Tom introduced himself and Calvin wasn't sure what to add to the introduction Janny gave him. "Yep... Tinder."

"What do you do, Calvin?" Tom asked.

"Oh, looking for jobs right now. Soul searching a little bit, you know."

He had been working at a non-profit in

St. Francis. It was the first non-restaurant job he had gotten out of college and it was very stressful. Everything was so urgent and Calvin had a tendency to lose track of the urgent tasks. He stopped doing what was urgent and then he stopped doing everything. Then they fired him.

"Right on," said Tom, who was a lawyer, incidentally. "Love the shirt."

Calvin said thanks and when the conversation reached a natural conclusion, Janny took them back into the living room where Cass and Jess seemed to be having an intense conversation. Cass broke free and turned towards them when they got closer.

"Whattup Calvin!" she said jovially.

"Calvin the Malvin! What's good, my dude?"

"Having fun," he said. "Meeting cool people. Living the dream."

"We didn't mean to interrupt," said Janny.

"Not interrupting. We were talking about milk. Do either of you drink milk?"

"Like, straight? Ew."

"Yeah, see?" Cass said to Jess. "Janny says *ew*."

"But with a cookie or a brownie?" Jess said, almost too softly to hear. "Yummy."

"Jess, did you just call milk *yummy*? That's the creepiest word you could use to describe milk. *Yummy!* I drank so much milk as a kid. They force it on you as, like, a good little Midwestern American. But then you become vegan or you can't stand the sight of it. I bet Calvin doesn't drink milk. I bet Calvin has never said the word *yummy* in his life."

"I drink milk sometimes."

Cass laughed. "Oh no! Calvin's not as cool as I thought. Calvin's creepy too." she was giggling uncontrollably while speaking.

“Calvin’s, like, sitting at home wearing a picture of my face on his chest and drinking a cold glass of milk and probably just staring at a wall!”

“Well, it’s creepy when you put it like *that*.”

“We should have put a no-milk-clause on those shirts!”

Cass was laughing harder than anyone and losing control of herself. She was trying to suppress it, but she was laughing so hard that she was crying. Janny and Calvin laughed at how hard she was laughing, but Jess wasn’t laughing at all.

“Shit, I have to walk this off. I got the fucking giggles. Anybody need a drink?”

“Yeah, milk if you’ve got it,” said Calvin, and Cass lost it again. She got up and kept chortling and she hit his arm when she passed him. He touched where she hit him.

A month earlier, Calvin was drinking two beers at once. He was with his two roommates at Art Bar and he was trying to convince them to go with him to the Phonics show at Colectivo. He was planning on going either way, but would have preferred not to go alone.

“You listen to sad music, dude,” Trent said. “Is it sad shit?”

“No, it’s happy. It rocks. You’d like it, I think.”

Trent was Calvin’s roommate his freshman year of college and they hadn’t been able to leave each other’s side since. It was mostly inertia and a shared sense of recklessness that sustained their friendship, because they didn’t exactly like each other. The two of them first met Alex at a bar on the East Side their senior year and he became the other factor that kept their friendship alive. They both really loved him. And around the apartment, Alex did most of the cleaning.

“Alex is coming,” said Calvin. “You don’t wanna miss out, dude.”

“I didn’t say I was going, Calvin.”

“Well I’ll get three shots of Fireball and then you’ll both want to go.”

“I’ll walk there with you,” said Alex. “But I don’t want to stand through a whole boring show. Nobody even dances at those indie shows.”

“Sometimes people dance. It depends on who’s playing.”

“Will people dance to this band?”

“No, probably not. But I’ll take the escort.”

“Fuck it, fine,” Alex said. “I’ll go. I’ll fucking stand. Cause I love you, Calvin. And I know you’re still feeling down.”

“Well, I guess it’s your loss, Trent,” Calvin said. “We’re gonna have a blast without you, man.”

“Actually, I’ll walk with you because I’m gonna pick up from Shawn.”

“Weed?”

“Eh. No.”

“Shit. Did you get paid?”

“Fuck yeah, got a fucking bonus too, so I’m buying coke.”

“Calvin, I changed my mind,” said Alex. “I’m gonna hang out with Trent.”

“Whatever, I’m getting Fireball anyway.”

Calvin got up from the table and he walked up the short set of stairs to the bar and ordered three shots. He looked over to where his roommates were sitting, below the elevated platform where he stood, and realized they weren’t watching him. He drank all three shots. Then he went back down the stairs, empty handed, and he sat down again at the table.

“They didn’t have Fireball,” he said.

“Good.”

When they left the bar, it was twelve degrees outside, but they were committed to the mile and a half walk to North Avenue where Shawn lived, just around the corner from the concert. Walking down Humboldt, Alex talked about his toothache and how he hadn’t been able to chew with the right side of his mouth in two weeks.

“You should probably go to the dentist,” Calvin told him.

“Nah,” said Alex. “It usually goes away.”

“You know what’s pretty good for a toothache, I’ve heard?”

“What?”

“An indie rock concert.”

“No way, man. I’ll just be standing there grinding my teeth the whole time.”

When they reached the North Avenue bridge, the freezing wind was whipping their faces, and they moaned and complained for the remainder of the walk. In between gripes, Alex voiced an idea for a brewery that was also a UPS store, and all the beers would be dark beers or brown ales, because that’s the brand. Calvin thought it was stupid, but he didn’t like dark beer anyway. He thought he saw Canis Major through the clouds in the dark cold sky, but he was seeing stars everywhere, so he wasn’t sure if it was a constellation or the Fireball. When they got to Shawn’s, he thought it would be a pretty good idea to try cocaine for the first time.

The apartment was the warmest place Calvin had ever been. Shawn was wearing a KN95 mask and Calvin hadn’t even thought to bring a mask, but Trent and Alex put theirs on.

“Calvin,” Shawn said gravely through his thick mask. “I heard about Penny, and I’m really sorry, man.”

Calvin didn’t want to talk about it, but he said thanks and reciprocated Shawn’s incoming hug. He asked Shawn if he had an extra mask, and Shawn gave him a cloth mask that smelled like an unfamiliar fabric softener and had an awkward head strap.

“Keep it,” he said.

But they all took their masks off anyway once Shawn brought out the product; Shawn and Alex and Trent were pecking at lines on the counter like chickens in slow motion. Calvin tried a little bit and didn’t feel anything. Shawn told them he had to get ready to leave because he was going to his sister’s ballet performance in Mequon. This created a contrast that helped Calvin convince Alex and Trent, after all, to come with him to the Phonics show. Then he tried a little more coke and he definitely felt it a lot.

On the way to the show, Calvin picked up five nips of whiskey at the liquor store, drank two outside on the sidewalk, and put the other three in his pockets. When the band started, he

drank the last three in quick succession. He was trying to stay as close to the stage as possible, but Alex and Trent were off to the side, inconspicuous, so they could swap bumps of coke off a pen cap.

Cass took the stage with her band behind her and Calvin felt immobilized. She wailed on her guitar, sang beautifully, and made the forty people in attendance laugh every time she spoke. Calvin couldn't take his eyes away. He sang along when he knew the words, and said *I love you, I love you, I love you in his head over and over when he didn't*.

After their set, he visited the merch table where the drummer was stationed selling t-shirts and stickers. Calvin bought a t-shirt and talked to the drummer.

"Your set was great, man, it was so great," he slurred. "Cass was really fucking good, man. Is Cass here? I just think she's so good, man. I wanted to tell her."

The drummer widened his eyes and looked Calvin up and down. "Thanks, but uh, Cass is tied up."

"Do you think she noticed me singing along? I know, like, all the words, man. I listen to your shit all the time, dude, I just can't get enough of it. Like honestly, you're one of the best bands right now, and Cass is so good at what she does. Like her songwriting is next level, I think. When's your next local show? Do you think I could get Cass's number, man?"

"No, dude," the drummer said. "I think you should head out."

"What do you mean?"

"You're freaking me out a little bit, my guy."

"Fuck, I'm just a fan, dude. I wanted to meet Cass and tell her. Is she coming out? Is she backstage?"

"Yeah, I think you should go, dude."

The drummer looked around to see if anyone else had eyes on this interaction, and then Alex and Trent noticed what was happening.

"Calvin, Calvin, you're scaring the guy," Alex said, putting his arm around him. "Time to go, Calvin."

"I wanted to meet Cass," Calvin said. "I'm just a fan."

"Course you are, bro."

Alex escorted Calvin out to the sidewalk and talked him down. It didn't feel as cold as it had earlier and Calvin looked upwards into the night to try and find a constellation, but he couldn't see a single star. They walked a couple blocks to a diner where they drank coffee and vaped weed in the booth.

"I can't handle this fucking toothache anymore," Alex said, wincing after a sip of coffee. "Fuck!"

"You really lost it in there, Calvin," Trent said, mocking. "You were acting like a crazy person."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were about to get kicked out, dude. You were harassing the guy."

"I was being nice. I'm a fan."

“I’m about to do something crazy,” Alex said.

“Calvin, you’re obsessed with this band. You were hounding the guy for that chick’s number.”

Alex put a thick winter glove on his hand and put his gloved hand deep into his mouth. Trent and Calvin looked at him and were unable to predict what he was about to do. Trent had already turned to continue pestering Calvin when Alex jerked his hand and grunted loudly. Pinching together the thumb and pointer finger of his glove, removed from his mouth, Alex held his tooth in his hand.

“What the fuck!” Trent said.

“Shit, I’ll get some more napkins,” said Calvin. He got up quickly to avoid looking too closely at anything that would make him more woozy than he already was. He found a napkin dispenser at the counter and grabbed the whole thing. He caught his reflection in the mirror and it almost made him pass out. He forgot what he looked like. Behind his reflection, he saw something else. It wasn’t a constellation, it was a real dog. It was Penny—on a leash held by some old man.

Calvin put the napkin dispenser on the table where Alex and Trent sat and he walked out the door of the diner onto Farwell Avenue, where he saw more clearly his lost dog. The man walking her had headphones in and jaunted south. Penny trotted by his side.

“Hey!” Calvin shouted. But the man didn’t flinch. “Penny!”

Calvin broke into a run and yelled again. The man looked behind him, realized Calvin was running after him, and broke into an awkward run himself, but he wasn’t fast enough.

“That’s my dog! Penny!”

The man stopped running. He backed up against the wall of a building and cowered. The dog barked. Calvin got closer and put his arms out to embrace her. He felt Trent’s hand on his shoulder.

“Calvin. That’s not your *dog, man.*” Trent apologized to the man and repeated to Calvin again and again that this dog was not Penny. “Penny is dead, Calvin. I’m sorry. Penny is dead.”

Calvin was already crying. They went home and he went to bed and he was still crying when he woke up.

Janny got up after Cass did, unable to endure the silence that followed the uncontrollable laughter. When she did, Calvin shared the silence with Jess. They swapped smiles and music played from a nearby speaker and most people seemed to have congregated in the kitchen or were smoking outside.

“Cass can be very dramatic,” Jess said. “I hope you weren’t offended.”

“Oh, not at all. She’s very funny.”

“I drink milk sometimes,” she said softly as if it was a secret. “I don’t think it’s weird.”

Calvin smiled and said he agreed. They shared small talk for a little while and he was

trying to determine the nature of her relationship with Cass without obviously prying. It took nearly fifteen minutes to wonder where Janny or Cass had gone.

“Did they get lost?” Jess asked.

“I’m gonna grab another beer, I guess,” Calvin said. “Can I get you anything?”

“Oh no, I’m not drinking.”

When Calvin got up, he saw the bathroom door open and a dwindled crowd in the kitchen and figured Janny and Cass must have gone outside. He helped himself to a Lakefront beer and peaked back into the living room.

“I think they all went outside,” he told Jess. “So I’m gonna head out there.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “I don’t think I can take the cold. But thank you for the update.”

The backyard was a small plot of fenced in dead grass. It was still too cold for the ground to be muddy and still too cold for the grass to grow, but there hadn’t been fresh snow on the ground in the early days of March. Jon was working very hard to create a fire and it was an uphill battle because he could only use one hand while the other held a beer. Janny was laughing hard at something Tom the lawyer was saying, but she smiled a big toothy smile when she saw Calvin. She broke away from Tom.

“Sorry, I ditched you!” she said. “I just really didn’t know how to talk to Jess, to be honest. I freaked out.” Janny laughed as if Calvin would know why she felt this way.

“What’s the deal with Jess? She seems really nice.”

“Yeah, she’s nice. *But I don’t know what she’s doing here. She’s Cass’s girlfriend but they have the most bizarre relationship. And Jess has barely left her house in two years. Nobody but Cass has even seen her because she’s not vaccinated and she has all these health issues so she’s immunocompromised. So I don’t know why she came tonight.*”

“She has a right to be here if she wants, right?”

“It just seems reckless.”

“Well, that’s not for you to decide.”

“Okay,” Janny said. “Why are you mad?”

“I’m not. I’m just... Jess seems nice. We were talking after you ditched us.”

“Are you mad that I came out here without you?”

“No, I’m not mad.”

“Good to know,” said Janny, narrowing her eyes like she was collecting data that would be used against him very soon. Janny sat down on a lawn chair that was set up in front of the fire pit and Calvin took the seat next to her. When he sat down, she moved to the other side of the oblong circle of chairs to sit next to her brother, who had just finished finessing his configuration of wood to make a significant fire that lit the backyard. Cass sat down where Janny had been sitting. Calvin felt a sudden sensation of freefall.

“So Calvin,” she said. She was already cross-legged, not looking over at him, but sitting in the lawn chair like she’d been there all day. “What do you think?”

“Oh, you don’t want to know what I think.”

Cass laughed slightly through her nose. “Hm, maybe not.”

“It was a complete shock to me that you knew Janny. And that you would be here. I feel kind of embarrassed to be wearing your shirt, but I really am a fan of your music.”

She thanked him and reassured him again, tirelessly. They started talking about some other bands they liked, some other local shows they’d gone to, some things that they’d been listening to lately. Cass seemed to know and love everything that he did.

“What I’ve been listening to the most lately is this sick local band named Phonics,” Calvin joked. “I think they’re about to blow up.”

“Oh, you know? I think they’re overrated.”

“What do you do when you just love a song or an album or a band, like, way too much? What do you *do*? *When you want to listen to the same thing over and over again and nothing else and it’s all you can talk about? How do you deal with that?*”

“Is this hypothetical?”

“Sure.”

“I say lean into it. I wish I had that feeling more often. I miss that feeling.”

“What’s the last time you felt it?”

“Hm. Shit.” Cass stared into the flames in front of them. The circle of lawn chairs was large enough that their conversation was secluded, but in their gaps in speech, they heard stray words from Janny and Jon and Tom the lawyer. Janny laughed at something Tom said. Cass took time to ponder the question, looking deep into the fire for answers. When she came up for air, she shifted her attention toward Calvin. “Have you seen the basement yet?”

Calvin said no he hadn’t. She escorted him inside.

“This is where we used to practice. I actually lived here for a couple years. But it was cleaner then, I swear.”

They had to duck to avoid hanging insulation above the stairs and then they rounded the corner into a mostly tidy unfinished basement with a drumset sitting on an floral patterned rug. Cass procured a guitar from behind the drumset, attached it to her neck and plugged it into a small amplifier.

“Wanna jam?” she asked.

Calvin laughed. “I don’t really play anything.”

“You can keep a beat, I’m sure.” She picked up drumsticks tucked on top of the bass drum and handed them to him. He sat down on the stool behind it and took the sticks from her hand, then whacked the snare and pedaled the bass drum with a slow, primitive rhythm. Cass settled into a bluesy riff and improvised over it. He wanted to play faster but his ability didn’t allow it. In the moments where he was actually synchronized with her guitar playing—her doing, not his—he felt briefly elevated from his grief and his longing. This was it. Cass shredded a solo and then strummed arrhythmically to signal the conclusion of their jam.

She laughed and it made him laugh. But then he kept laughing after she had stopped; his laughing became hysterical and then, quickly, it became sobbing. Cass watched him from across the drums, crying in Janny’s brother’s basement.

“Fuck,” he said, catching his breath. “Sorry.”

“No worries, Calvin,” she said softly. “Let it out, dude.”

The feedback from the amplifier was rattling inside the snare drum and Calvin focused on the sound so he could avoid looking at Cass. When she turned off the amp, he wiped his eyes and said “I think we should go upstairs.”

“Yeah,” said Cass. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.” He stood up and rubbed his eyes. “Thanks, Cass. I really enjoyed this, despite my intense hysterical reaction.”

“We could talk about it, if you want.”

“It’s okay. I came here with Janny. I’m probably being rude.”

“Yeah, well. I came here with Jess. So that makes two of us.”

They walked upstairs much more slowly than they’d walked down, as if procrastinating the reality of the party that awaited their return. There was no one in the kitchen and the living room was quiet, and when they passed through, they saw Jess asleep on the couch. Cass made an exasperated sigh. “I’ll see you out there,” she told him.

Outside, the fire was dimmer but they brought out a space heater and everyone had left besides Janny and Jon and Tom. They were still chatting and making each other laugh. Janny seemed in good spirits, sitting in between the two others.

“Calvin!” she said. “Was that you playing the drums? I didn’t know you could play. It sounded great.”

He shrugged off the compliment but he appreciated it. He sat down next to Tom. They resumed a conversation that Calvin had very little to contribute to and he stopped listening and thought about Cass. He heard one of her songs in his head and he pictured her singing it to him. The images projected onto the fire in front of him and he let them play one after another: the apartment they might share together, the friends they would entertain, and the dog they would fight about whose turn it was to walk.

“I’m gonna grab another drink,” he said to Tom.

Calvin walked with purpose into the living room. Cass was lying with her head on Jess’s shoulder and Jess was still asleep.

“Can I tell you something?” he asked her, quietly.

Cass nodded and stood up slowly, motioned towards the kitchen, and they stood there close together, leaning against the counter.

“It’s this thing, this really sad thing. I got a dog six months ago. She was only a puppy and she fucking died out of nowhere. She got a disease. And I just can’t even think about it without falling apart. I lost my job because of it, basically. It’s like a totally extreme response but I can’t help it. And anyway, despite all that, your music has brought me a lot of joy. I’ve been really enjoying your music. I guess that’s all I had to say.”

Cass put her arms around Calvin, she hugged him fast and firm and he never wanted it to end. The kitchen smelled like chili powder and tomato sauce, but the overwhelming impact of her presence on Calvin’s senses was strong enough to make him forget every other smell and

every other feeling. When she let go, she looked guilty.

“My turn to tell you something,” she said. “I remember you, Calvin. I remember you from the show. Mark said he thought you were on drugs and he thought you were gonna attack me or something.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, shit.”

“I recognized you right away and I wondered if you were somehow stalking me. I wondered if I should be scared of you.”

“Are you?”

She paused, considering the question, but didn’t answer it. “I’m gonna wake up Jess and get going. It was nice to meet you.”

Calvin heard this and thought he might cry again but he couldn’t. There was no life together, there was no shared apartment, she wouldn’t be singing to him anytime soon. He wanted to go back in front of the fire, where in it he could see any future he wanted. He walked outside.

Janny took his hand and he looked at her. There were so many preoccupations of his passion and so many confinements of it too. He wanted Cass, all of her and all at once, but he took Janny’s hand instead. He held it for an hour and watched the fire die down. Calvin held Janny’s hand and then let go to drive her home. In the car, they found things to laugh at. He drove over the Hoan Bridge, the sky holepunched with lights on in empty buildings, and he didn’t crash the car. In Janny’s apartment, Calvin let her touch him and let her take his clothes off. He took her clothes off too, he kissed her pleasantly, held her. Belly up on her bed, he sank deep into his future.

Eric Nasso

A COFFEE SHOP DREAM

I dreamt I was there,
in the window of a coffee shop
with one leg propping me up,
reading in a tilted back chair.

Out the window, I could stare
at the idle, roundabout town square
as twelve mysterious strangers meandered by
on a mission to reach workplaces somewhere near.

“Rush Hour” over, I contented myself
once more to relax with a sip.
A new passerby caught my eye
as steam reached high in the air.

He passed through the square,
with it’s roundabout center as a shadow,
and fixed his hair right in that window
across the way from me there.

As morning light cast upon him,
he appeared through the steam of my drink,
an inexplicable depiction of this town,
I should think.

Wearing his red plaid and blue jeans,
bearing signs of a workman on his hand
and his sleeve. He had
quiet, slow way about him, it would seem.

There as he stood,
I saw in his old, healthy face,
a level of care and concern for
how he ought to traverse the town's empty space.

For while such a place seems empty,
and my tilted back chair but a dream,
I know you are near the roundabout town square,
fresh and giving the future a good chase.

Margarita Buitrago

EIGHTS OF SMOKE

I ask the pipe smoker why he smokes
to think, he replies
so I ask again—when you are not smoking, then, do you think?
aye, he affirms, I think about my pipe.

∞8∞

Hélas!
nothing to be done.
so I leave.

Eric Seger-Pera

AMERIGO

When the space age comes, I'm going to pull an Amerigo Vespucci. Get an entire land mass named after me- the prime part of a planet- just for knowing that Brazil is not China. Well, I would have to make a different distinction I suppose, but I know I can do it. And I've been practicing. These last three years, every chance I get, I've been making my own geographical distinctions. While waiting for coffee, I've whispered under my breath, "this cup was made in Pennsylvania; it only says California for marketing." On my last business trip to Ottawa, I talked to the Canadian flight attendant about how the Northwest Territories are nothing like the Northern Territory. I can now come up with a geographical distinction on demand almost anywhere- and a good one, too. Insightful points that people don't usually think about. I just need to have the right footing when we get to Mars- or to Venus- or to Proxima Centauri. Amerigo was already famous when he professed his grand distinction, otherwise it wouldn't have worked. If I can be where he was, I won't need to do anything else, because culture will take care of it for me. And nobody ever renames continents. Whence it's stuck, the name will last forever.

I desperately want to get to that place.

I'm hoping I'll get multiple shots. If I mess up with Mars, will I be able to try again for the next planet? Or will making my grand distinction take away my relevance- do you only get one? Will the world just ignore my subsequent professions of geography? Amerigo never had to worry about that. He- he's my only precedent. I worry sometimes...

The space age is coming. People will be living in these places. New land gets named carelessly while no one lives there- or no one who abides by that name, if it's only new to some. If the people who lived in a place got to choose, they would never pick me, just like they never would have picked Amerigo. But they won't exist yet, so everyone will just say, -I hope- "Sure. We can call it that, who cares?" But then the migrants will come- the pioneers, the astronauts, the outcasts, the homeless. And they will call the land what they are told it is called, embrace it, make it part of them- never care that it was named for a person. It will simply be their home. And it will be a beautiful land, carved by alien weather to astound in a way unlike anything they have seen on Earth. And the Sun— or whatever star— will rise on their faces, and they will smile at the no-longer-foreign dawn. Life. Space. Home. That's all I want in on.

**ATHENENUEM
MILWAUKEE 1129**



Eric Nassos

ADDICTED AUTHOR

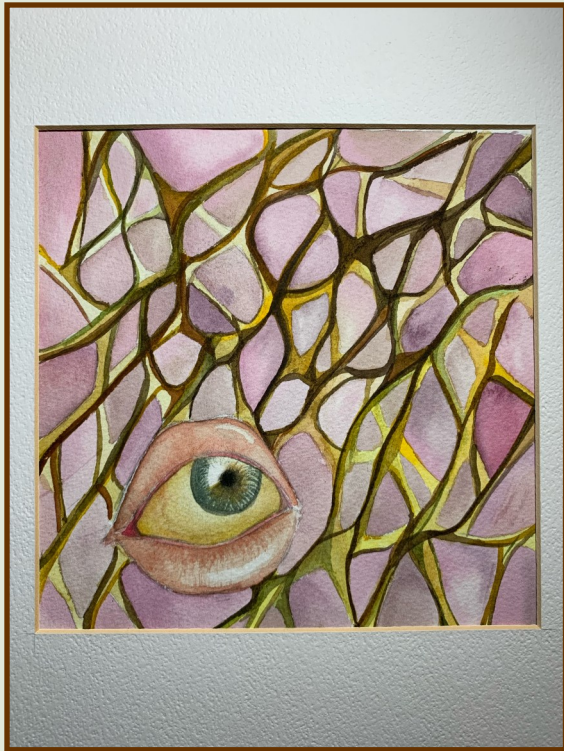
I've got an itch, I need a fix, a pen to breathe in, then expel my words out with.
Puffs of vapor and smoke, letters billowing from the lungs,
coughing vowels and gagging as my body flows too many consonants over my tongue.

I do not want any help, I crave another stanza,
writing with a pent-up urge to scribble and jot fast as a shot of whiskey in Bonanza
dribbling from my lips, so intoxicated I can hardly ask for more.

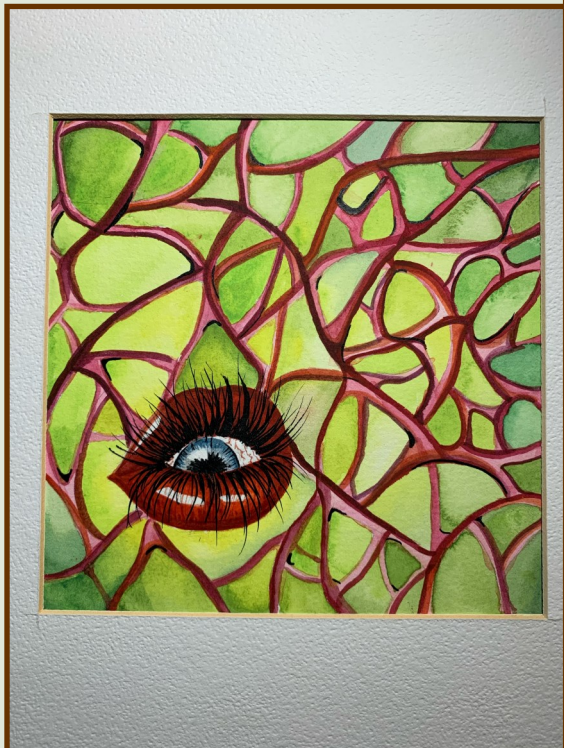
Hands shaking, veins pumping blood which is tainted
with traces of Times New Roman, size twelve, black printer ink.
I lean back in my seat, eyes closed, unable to think.

A nymphomaniac for strong nouns, I long for literature's presence.
I cannot calm down, holding the pen and paper to my heart, intimate to a curse,
sodomizing a large ringed notebook until pages are torn apart.

I do not want help, I crave another verse.



Jaundice
Picture of Health
In Vogue
By Nora Bravos



Timothy Knapp

SESSIONABLE

There's a brewery that just opened
next to the Batteries Plus Bulbs
in the mixed use new development.

Their latest beer is a
Pretzel Pizza Combos Milkshake Stout
and I think it's like thirteen percent.

In the corner next to the bar
there is a TV with an N64
a Goldeneye that you have to blow in.

The owner's name is Greg and
his younger brother tends bar, he
makes some mistakes but he's growing.

Jamie and Mike go on Sundays
to get unbored and a little drunk
before they melt into jobs coming Mon-
day.

Clocked out before last call,
Alex stays for a shift drink and
talks to Greg's brother at the bar.

There's a feeling in his heart,
that Alex wants to get out,
bBut instead he goes on about IBU.

Greg's brother says sure,
feels overwhelmed by closing tasks,
exhausted because he's had a few.

Jamie and Mike are floating from their
fourth beers, but they were half pours
so their floating goes nowhere.

Mike has ideas about their D&D cam-
paign
and Jamie wants to dance,
but not to Bon Iver.

Alex rants about that Bud Lite
commercial, its catchphrase
on the tips of their tongues.

It's a condemnation! he says,
of passion and quality! It calls
everyone a nerd who likes new things!

Jamie stares a hole
into the natural wood table
climbs into it and goes

to a party.

Greg's brother makes the music so
loud that he can't hear Alex, or anyone,
or his apathy.

Mike closes his tab.

With a sip and an exhale,
Alex tastes his whole life.
It laces his tongue with its sadness.

Sour like a lemon, a resinous
bite, again and again
he sips slowly.

Again and again
he sips again.

Eric Nassos

EYEBROWS

Flowing, they shift as the tide in thought.
Surprise!
An upheaval of force,
with clouds of wrinkles multiplying overhead.
Permeable and nervous by nature.

Concern,
waves flatten and pause
for a queue on what emotion may follow.
Perhaps the break of dawn
or merely the calm before the storm

Anger.
The folds of the forehead vanish.
Enthusiasm a non-factor,
as glimmering pearls below the surface
turn dark.

A change of heart,
they perk up at the sight of beauty,
youthful and caressing the arc
above the eye, proclaiming
that innocent joy reigns supreme.

Thus, they forever flow,
even active in a dream,
tumultuous, hairy, restless,
complimenting the facade created
by marvels, models, and mobsters alike.

Their movements mark a cross
between what is tangible and thought.

Rebecca Matthew

DEAR KING

The King never made mistakes. It was an irrefutable fact, an unchangeable truth. So, it was only fitting that when one of His most elite soldiers made a mistake, they were met with the worst of retributions: death.

I suppose it's a cruel irony that August would be one of the first elites to go. He was by far the most dedicated soldier I've ever met, an entire one-man-army crammed into one lithe figure. He had enough loyalty to the King to make someone wonder *what in the world would warrant such a severe allegiance. I'd fought by his side numerous times, and the extent to which he followed the King's orders never ceased to amaze me. His motto was, "If the King wills it, mercy is for the fools and grace for the simple."*

Set a neighboring country's orphanage ablaze for no other reason than to scare its monarchy into submission? If the order came from the King, he'd consider it done.

Shred an entire battalion with nothing more than his sword? August would come back without a single scratch and leave the battlefield littered with corpses.

Raze a city of civilians in search of *one wayward official that couldn't pay his debts to the Valcaster Royal Trust? He'd already done that four times in three different kingdoms.*

Well, as it turned out, it was during one of these escapades where he had committed his fatal mistake. You see, the Crown Prince of our fair Valcaster had happened to be visiting the neighboring kingdom of Ocasta, a city August had been assigned to eviscerate. I'm not sure *why the Crown Prince would have to go there, heaven knew he much preferred gallivanting about the galleries in the palace instead of traipsing around foreign lands, but he had been there. August had come to Ocasta during the day, armed with nothing more than a spear he had pilfered from one of the guards that patrolled the city.*

Now, I wasn't there, but I'd seen August on one of his killing sprees before. He'd get this look in his eyes, something like *pure lust, and annihilate whatever came into his path. Screams of fear never assuaged his flurry, cries for help didn't give him pause. I knew him, so I couldn't be afraid of him, but when the last body hit the floor, the man would be covered from head to toe in blood, not a droplet of it his own.*

To anyone else, he was a monster.

To me? To the rest of the soldiers of the Valcaster Army? He was just August.

Friendly, jovial August.

This wasn't an incorrect assessment on our part. When not rushing the battlefield with an insatiable bloodlust, August was a cheery soul. He was from the southernmost city of Valcaster, Vellalune, near the snowy Brumal Peaks, and he was *always writing home lengthy, joyous letters to his family. When the King sent him out on missions to other countries, one of the first things that he did was collect souvenirs to send back home to his younger siblings, and one of the last things he did before heading to sleep was read the letters his family would send him.*

And when not reminiscing about his home, August ensured that the rest of us in the barracks were not removed from his caring, familial presence. He cooked, he cleaned, he braided hair, he sang songs while doing the laundry—strange things, I thought, but I couldn't help but enjoy them.

All my life, I never did see such merry black eyes, dancing with the mirth of a thousand schoolchildren on break, as his. They were never not shining with excitement, and a new suggestion for amusement, whether it be divertive or productive, was always on his lips.

So, I suppose it was just another cruel irony that the King assigned *me to be August's executioner.*

That day, August and I were riding a pair of horses down from Valcaster City to Vellalune, his hometown. The road to Vellalune was long and snowy, and August hadn't seen his beloved family in months. He had no knowledge of the fatal mistake he had made in killing the Crown Prince, and he couldn't imagine that he had been discharged, soon to be executed for his mistake. As far as he knew, he was simply being reassigned to an army base back home.

Oh, and he was just overjoyed at the prospect that I had decided to come along with him.

For whatever reason.

As our horses' hooves crunched through the brittle snow, August prattled on about his siblings, how his parents had been dying to meet me, how Vellalune looked particularly gorgeous this time of the year since the sun set so early.

I couldn't pay attention.

As he talked, my fingers were curved around the knife in my pocket. The King had ordered August's death in exchange for the murder of the Crown Prince, had ordered *me to execute it.*

The King didn't make mistakes.

And this death warrant certainly couldn't be one.

I watched August, his dark hair flecked with the falling snow, animatedly retell a story of how his eldest brother had gotten his tongue stuck on an icicle and shook my head. I shoved the knife deeper into my pocket: *laterlaterlater.*

Our horses trotted at a steady pace for several hours, but before long, I could see the silhouettes of the Brumal Peaks that ensconced the city of Vellalune.

The houses here were small and quaint, almost like the gingerbread constructions that I sometimes saw children make during winter. Thin veils of frost covered the roofs and delicate icicles dripped off the eaves. Green garlands were draped around terrace posts and the dusting of snow gave the entire village a jolly air.

Many children frolicked in the streets, peeling maple candy from secluded snow mounds and hurling snowballs at each other from behind large ice structures of their own design. There was a general cacophony when the children noticed August's arrival, and they

flocked to him like little birds. I watched as the same man I had once seen bisect a priest on the King's orders, amiably ruffle the heads of the children, and bop the hatted heads. The children ignored me, keeping their eyes fixated on August, who greeted each of them with a thin peppermint stick from his pockets.

As if curious as to what the racket outside was, a few adults suddenly emerged onto their porches, each with a friendly query in August's direction.

"Hey, ol' boy! How's army life treatin' ya?"

"Come to see your Mom and Pops now, huh! Good on you!"

"We missed you at last month's Brightware Fest, August! You'll be there next time, won't you?"

As if feeling as though he wouldn't get a chance to respond to them with the quality of answer he would have liked, August waved off their inquiries with a "Thanks for the warm wishes, everyone, but let me get my friend here home and afterward, we can talk more!"

August led us to one of the cottages that lined the eastern streets of Vellalune. The view behind it was magnificent; you could see the entire landscape created by the Brumal Peaks quite clearly. I imagined that in the evening when the sun went down, the twilight sky would cause those snow-covered mountains to glitter for miles.

A kind of warmth emanated from the house as August walked up to the front door and knocked twice. He bounced on the balls of his feet restlessly, and I could only imagine his excitement at the idea of getting to see his family again.

A woman with the same dark eyes as August opened the door, two toddlers attached to her hips. Her eyes were already bright and merry, but they lit up even further when she saw August.

"Eric?" she called back into the house. "He's home!"

As if on cue, a stampede sounded from the inside of the tiny cottage. August had told me he had a huge family—six siblings, to be exact—and it sounded like all of them were racing to meet him.

As it turned out, though, only three people joined the woman and the two children at the door: a man and two teenaged girls.

August scowled as he took in the scene. I had never seen him make that face before. "Where's everyone else?"

The woman looked apologetic. "Wisteria and Aster have been stuck at the Trepanian port for hours now, and Leonard doesn't think he can get off work until tomorrow."

"I'll kill them," August muttered, but for once, I didn't hear any soldierly promise in his voice, just disappointment. He turned toward me. "Sorry, looks like you won't get a chance to meet everyone, since *apparently my older brothers and sister can't make it. Oh!*" *Suddenly, he wheeled me forward, and only then did the people in the doorway seem to register my presence. "Everyone? This is—"*

"P—prince Troy of House Valcaster," the woman finished, her voice trembling, her eyes flitting nervously between August and myself. With this realization, all of them, save for

August, bent at the waist.

“Prince Roman, actually,” I amended. For a moment, I had considered not correcting them, but I figured I might as well quell their excitement before it was too late; no one ever *really wanted to see me when the Crown Prince existed*.

But even with this revelation, they still didn’t move. However, the man’s face poked upward as he said, mystified, “The army twin?”

August clapped his hand on my shoulder. “The one and only twin brother to the heir to the Valcaster throne, that’s Roman, all right.” His voice turned low as he addressed me, “Forgot to mention you’re the um . . . non-Crown Prince. Sorry about that.”

The man coughed, suddenly looking intensely formal as he stood up straight. “Welcome to our home, Prince Roman. I’m August’s father, Eric of House Rosenbloom, and this is—”

“Eva of House Rosenbloom, nice to meet you,” the woman finished, her face breaking into a welcoming smile that was so *August*. “*I’m August’s mother and these two,*” she gestured toward the wide-eyed toddlers at her waist, “*are Theodore and Amy.*”

A slender girl stepped from behind Eric. “My name’s Lillian of House Rosenbloom, and,” her eyes grew to the size of dinner plates, “have you really stayed at the palace before?”

Even though Eric hissed “Lillian!” in warning, I smiled brittlely and answered, “I have.” It was never fun to tell the story of the “irresponsible” Prince Roman, who had, seven years ago, bored of palace life at thirteen and ran to join his father’s army, so I didn’t bother continuing.

“He may have been born a Prince,” August elaborated, “but he’s one of the Valcaster Army’s most elite soldiers.” He squinted. “Wait a second, where’s Bella?”

A fragile-looking girl stepped out from behind Lillian. Like her brother, she was very pretty, with full dark hair and glittering black eyes, although hers didn’t seem to leave the ground. Her voice was delicate as she whispered, “Here I am.”

“She’s shy, so be nice,” August told me quietly. He turned toward her. “Come on, now, Bella, is that any way to greet your older brother and his friend?”

At this prompt, Bella seemed to lose all her reservations and, with an embarrassed smile, raced toward her brother, enveloping him in an enormous hug. The rest of the family followed, and I soon lost sight of August under a sea of arms.

I didn’t know what to do, so I simply stepped back and took in the sight of how much *love the man seemed to receive from his family. No wonder he was always writing to them.*

I tried to think of the last time I had interacted *at all with the King*.

Ah, yes, just yesterday. When He had written to tell me that August’s existence was no longer tolerated here on His earth. Yes, those were His exact words.

I was once again incredibly aware of the knife in my pocket, but I knew any intent of murder would be squashed by the army of hands that protected August just then.

Not now.

And so, the knife slipped deeper into the folds of my pocket.

A moment later, Eva broke away from the hug and gasped. “Oh, my goodness, we’re leaving you both out in the cold, aren’t we? Come inside, come inside, dinner’s already out.”

Dinner was an interesting affair. None of the viands on my plate were anything short of delicious, and it was easy to see where August had inherited his cooking talent from. But far more intriguing still was the aura that surrounded the dinner table. In the palace, dinner was a solitary meal, taken when one was prepared to dine. At the barracks, dinner was loud but sullen; after a long day of drills and warmongering, most soldiers were tired and ready to bunk down.

But here, in August’s kitchen, dinner was a genial celebration, where food and wine overflowed, and the conversation was in no short supply. The family made many inquiries after August’s affairs in Valcaster, but there was little new information they could glean, considering their near-daily correspondences through the Valcaster Post. It was only a matter of minutes before their questions all turned toward *me*.

Normally, I don’t entertain questions about myself. No matter who I talk to, somehow our conversation ends up boiling down to my past as Prince of Valcaster; that was, as it turned out more interesting than my present as a brave and mighty soldier. Even beyond that, they’d always ask, a kind of malice threaded into their voice: “How does your father feel about your current stint in the Army?”

He was incensed, but you already knew that—next question, please.

Truthfully, incensed wasn’t the proper word. The King’s feelings toward my enlistment were none too happy, to be sure, but could He really condemn me for joining His own army, for being uninterested in the life of a second-rate Prince when the perfect Crown Prince Troy already existed? Perhaps not, but He *could condemn me for leaving my post in the Palace*.

I remember the first letter I received from Him while in the barracks. It was all matter of “Do you not understand how the abandonment of your royal duties appears to the rest of the world?” and “You have brought disgrace upon your own head, Roman; do not expect me to give you a chance to redeem yourself.”

I thought I couldn’t be bothered to deal with such grand censure, but when the nightmares of His Majesty’s face began to creep into my physical world, along with the realization that I had disappointed the King of Kings, the King of *Valcaster*, *I knew that I couldn’t reject His good and perfect will to dispatch of August*.

It’s funny that I say that as if I had a choice.

But when this family asked such questions about my past, they seemed to be so genuine and good-natured that I couldn’t help but answer every single one of them.

After the last serving of steaming vegetable pie and bitter gravy had been consumed, August lingered at the dining table and swiftly began to stack plates one atop the other. “I’ve got the dishes,” he said, pulling out a tub of soapy water and a stool.

“Coming, Prince Roman?” Eric’s voice boomed from the living room, where the rest of the family was piled onto two turquoise sofas. A fireplace blazed cheerfully across from a coffee table and warmed their faces with a cozy glow.

The scene looked like something out of a picture book.

I nodded, replied, “Of course,” and seated myself on one of the couches. I shifted over when I noticed that Eva had gone and was now descending a staircase at the far end of the room. In her hands, she carried a thick book covered in worn leather. Pages spilled out of its side, but it was clear that the book was not so dilapidated out of misuse, but rather from years of hands, both small and large, combing through its pages with exuberant abandon.

Before I could inquire as to what the book was for, Eva grinned, held it up, and said, “*This is August’s childhood scrapbook. We have one for all the children, but since you’re August’s friend, I figured his would be the most interesting to you.*”

The tittering giggles of Theodore and Amy prophesied that the scrapbook held articles nothing short of humiliating.

Shifting in my seat, I began, “I don’t know if August—”

“I have nothing to hide,” August interrupted, laughing as he wiped suds off his wrists. “Do your worst.”

A moment later, he meandered over to the couches, as well, evidently dry, and now holding a steaming sheet of round, golden, buns. He gave one to me before distributing the rest of them to everyone else.

The yeasty smell filled my nose as I stared at August, marveling, “Did you just make these?”

“Nope, this dough freezes really well so I made them a few months ago and wrote to Mom last week, telling her to throw ‘em on the fire before we arrived. Let me know if you like them—the filling is made of frostberries, so it’s probably not something you’ve had before, considering they’re native to Vellalune.”

As I took a tentative bite of the soft bread, surprised to find that the pearly white filling tasted like vanilla and mint, August dropped the pan onto the coffee table and slumped down next to me. I was very aware that as his arm stretched over the back of the couch, his fingertips grazed my shoulder.

Not a moment after he had sat down, Theodore and Amy swarmed to him, excitedly exploring his pockets, where, to their delight, they discovered chocolates and animal figurines, put there expressly by August in hopes they’d find them. Even after he had been thoroughly excavated of trinkets and sweets, the children still clung to him, each finding a throne on one of his legs.

When everyone was situated, August leaned back and, gesturing toward his scrapbook, said, “Alright, let’s have it.”

And so, several hours dissolved as Eva went through every single page of the book, and the family cooed and giggled over the silly entries, many of which consisted of pages of August’s childhood drawings, portraits the family had commissioned of him over the years, and barely legible snippets from when he had first learned how to write.

I couldn’t imagine anyone keeping all these things. I suppose that that was only natural, as my entire childhood revolved around housekeepers and governesses, who I doubt ever bothered to keep an account of anything that would be scrapbook-worthy. Throughout it all,

August laughed along bravely, although he *did blush several times when his mother revealed letters that he had written to his imaginary childhood friend, Hedgeworth.*

“Okay, ha-ha, yes, we all had our fun,” August said, looking only a tiny bit relieved when his mother finally closed the scrapbook. “Let’s do something else, now. Roman’s our guest, and while I’m sure that that was *delightful, let’s have some music.*” He turned toward Bella. “*You’ll play, won’t you?*”

Bella looked unsure for a moment as she bit her lip. However, she finally nodded and, in a hushed voice, said, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to surpass the music played at the palace.”

Suddenly, everyone’s eyes were on me. I shook my head as fast as I could. “I’m sure you’ll do beautifully.”

With that, Bella walked over to the side of the fireplace, where there rested a fiddle case. She retrieved the fiddle and pressed her fingers on the neck lovingly. With a delicate motion, she raised her bow, closed her eyes, and gently brought her arm down.

And suddenly, from the dainty girl, there came a blast of loud, jaunty music. The beat moved quickly, and her body followed it, as the initial short, staccato notes blared through the room. All at once, Eric and Eva rose from their seats and began to dance along, clapping and stomping in time, as they twirled with elation around the couches and furniture.

This can’t be real, I thought, watching in awe as the children and August began to shadow their parents, their feet moving fast as they dance to Bella’s sprightly tune. And even though they looked perfectly synchronous, I could tell just by looking at their joyous faces, each was moving of their own volition, carried along by the brisk sound coming from Bella’s fiddle.

From amidst the fray, August’s black eyes caught mine and he beamed. His gaze beckoned me to join them as he cried, “Come on!”

I had to shake my head. “I’m not interested in anything but ballroom dancing.” Even then, very few of my palace lessons had stayed in my memory, as I hadn’t been to a ball in years.

I thought my voice had been lost in the din, but August’s smile only grew as he replied, “Don’t worry, there’s nothing to it. Here, get up, and I’ll show you. It’ll be fun.”

My mind screamed obstinately at the offer as if it was desperate to remain a spectator. Yet, I felt myself rise off the couch. August reached out his hand toward me, and as I began to stretch out to take it, he leaned forward, grabbed my wrist excitedly, and drew me into the circle of clapping hands and stomping feet.

Bella’s fiddle thundered in my ears like a warcry. Hesitation gripping my every limb, I tentatively followed August’s movements. His encouraging smile pushed me forward to finally close my eyes and simply *listen. The music, then, felt like a brisk stream and I, instead of a soldier, was a droplet of water that composed it. I moved where it moved, followed where it led.*

But before I knew it, I could hear the notes swell even further and I understood that at any moment, the music would come to a grand, glorious halt. When it finally did, my eyes

flew open and I found myself face-to-face with August, who looked pleased.

“See?” he asked, noticing how fast I was panting. “I told you it’d be fun.”

I couldn’t speak for a moment. My thoughts raced and I was breathless; I couldn’t help but feel as if I were on an endless high. “I ... it was ... fine.”

“You’re a beautiful dancer, Prince Roman,” Lillian commented, as she wiped the sweat off her brow.

“I’ve never danced like that before,” I admitted. Somehow, my gaze flitted over to August, and I fingered the blade in my pocket. *And I don’t think I ever will, again. How could I when the person who introduced me to this way of dancing would soon be dead?*

This time, that kind of thought brought on the faintest spray of guilt, but I wiped the feeling away as soon as it came.

August had made a mistake. And the King never made mistakes.

And was there really any other way to live except as a reflection of the King?

Through my coat pocket, I ran a finger down the knife’s blade; this was becoming a habit, it seemed.

Give it time.

My eyes wandered around the room, lingering on each beaming face. No one was looking at me, no, their eyes were glued to August, who had, apparently, made some kind of joke. To me, it looked as if he were their sun, shining bright on them with his warm glow, and I felt warm, too, at the prospect. I couldn’t help but join in their fascination, and he caught me staring. I could feel my cheeks flush.

He laughed. “Roman, Roman, come outside. I want to show you something.”

That was all it took for me to forget the knife. Clearly, now wasn’t the time.

“There’s nothing for him to see out there,” Eric warned, as we walked out to the back porch of the cottage. “The sun’s already gone down.”

Eric was right. The sky was now a deep blue and the stars twinkled like diamonds on midnight-colored velvet. Clouds covered patches of the heavens and blotted out some of the glitter, but in return, fat snowflakes floated down from the sky.

“Damn,” August cursed. “Like I told you earlier, the sky gets *gorgeous in the evening during this time of year. Maybe tomorrow we’ll get to see it.*” He blinked hard at me, clearing the dusting of snowflakes from his eyelashes.

I didn’t say anything, just watched my breath come out in small puffs in the cold air. I looked at the Brumal Peaks before us. They were tall and wide, a huge collection of mountains that served as the border between Vellalune and the city of Verian.

And then: *Now.*

It had to happen at some point, didn’t it? Why not now? Why not in this perfect landscape, where the snow will cover up both of our sins?

As the wind gently blew, sending a plume of snow in our direction, I realized I had never felt more at peace than I had here at August’s home. Even right now, even though my finger was slowly gripping the knife in my pocket, my mind felt calm and easy. The cold had

a slight numbing effect, but the beauty of the scenery served as a reminder of why the inconvenience was worth it.

I could feel August turn to look at me. I think he was waiting for me to look at him, too, but I couldn't—not when I was seconds away from plunging a knife into his chest. This time, my mind didn't argue, *this time, I could hear the King's voice loud and clear, the voice that reminded me that all mistakes demanded restitution.*

I was quick.

Before I had made my move, August had leaned toward me, eyes sparkling, a smile breaking across his face; I'm sure he was trying to point out the shooting star that blazed behind the mountains. And as a soldier like him, I had the experience: I knew exactly how much force was needed for the knife to pierce through his clothes, through his skin, through his flesh, through his heart—I knew exactly how many more seconds he had left to breathe.

And as August choked, for once covered in his *own blood, I swallowed hard and couldn't help but dictate a letter to the King in my mind:*

Dear Father,

I fear I have made a mistake.

Kelsie Paige Kasky

ETTA

“What be a rose by any other name?”
but, what about in any other time
or place? How diff’ the story would have came
to be—and diff’rent fate could be a crime.
the Gardener be-roots the bud of June
and matriarchal artery begins
to birth the generations’ might-have-beens
among the notes that hummed familial tune.
Did germinated babes—who fast did grow
e’r memorize the Rose’s wrinkled gaze?
Or long to flight the air upon the crow
before September’s sickened winds did haze?
All this to say, Let tears of Heaven fall
For life, rain bids the future buds: hear call.

Emma Mueller

NO ONE TO BLAME

Never be ashamed of a scar, it simply means you were stronger than whatever tried to hurt you. I can picture it—this phrase. When I close my eyes, it’s on a poster in one of those stainless-steel-looking frames on a white cinderblock wall. There are other posters next to it. But those don’t matter. This one, this is the only one that still catches my attention all these years later.

The letters are surrounded by colorful dots of different sizes. The author of the quote is listed as unknown. I stare at it from my chair in the frigid, dull hallway in the basement of a hospital in Boston. My feet dangle off the edge of the seat, unable to reach the tile floor. My coloring book nearly slips off of my lap. The hallway is lined with hospital beds and beeping machines. Nurses shuffle through paperwork and speak to patients’ family members in whispering voices. There’s a sense of stress flowing through the hall. It smells like cleaning supplies, and the air conditioning never seems to shut off. The end of the hallway leads to a dark room. After waiting for a few minutes, my family follows a man in a white coat to the doorway. The man speaks to my mom and dad while I talk to my sister Lily about the Build-A-Bear she brought. I’m not really sure where we’re going. A special key is required to enter a space that looks like a big black hole. A freezing burst of cold air raises the hair on my skin as soon as the door is opened. Large, white, powerful machines line the walls of the room. The top part of them spins around and makes a noise like a car engine. Behind them, a large circle on the wall lights up in rainbow colors fading from red to orange and yellow. These are the time machines.

That’s what we called them—or what we were told to call them. When I first visited the room, I was shocked to learn that time machines were real. After talking to my parents, the doctor knelt down to tell Lily and me that the machines were very powerful and unlike anything at any other hospital. Instantly, I wanted more than anything to go to the past, mostly to see my dog, Sammie, again. But I was told that time travel wasn’t for me; apparently, it was only for my dad. I was under the impression that my dad was lucky because he selected his steering wheel and entered the time machine every couple of days for a few months. I sat eagerly outside in the hallway with my mom and Lily on the first day he traveled. I asked the nurses thousands of questions. “Where is he going? What will he see? How long will he be there? Will the people there talk to him?” I hardly got any responses. My mom continued to hush me and say that the nurses were busy helping dad travel. So, I drew where I wanted to travel instead.

It never crossed my mind to ask why time machines exist in a hospital of all places. But we only got to see the room once or twice, and everything went over my head. My dad woke up early on the days he went. And he was only able to go for about a month. While I was at school,

I couldn't help but wonder where he traveled to while he was away. He never told me anywhere specifically. I never got a magical response I was looking for.

"Where did you go today? Did you go back to the night that you met mom? That was one of the best nights of your life, wasn't it?" My dad looks over to my mom with a disappointed expression. I stand eagerly in their bedroom with my pajamas on, my pink toothbrush in one hand and my stuffed bunny in the other.

"I'm not sure where dad went today, but it's time for you to get ready for bed," my mom says, cutting the silence in the room. Unhappy with this response, I leave my parents' room and stop asking about time travel. To distract myself from the disappointment I feel, I pull a few books off my bookshelf and page through them until my mom comes in to kiss me goodnight.

I let it go. I wondered about time travel a lot but gave up on learning anything from my parents about it. And then one day it clicked. I realized that the time machines were in fact, not time machines. When I pieced it all together, I experienced nearly the same amount of disappointment as I did when I realized that Santa was not the one who accidentally left the wrapping paper under our coffee table one year. That was in fact, my mother's fault. My naive six-year-old self would hate to admit it, but time travel was never possible. The individual steering wheels were not steering wheels. The light up wall was not sending my dad to the past.

This was simply the doctor's best effort to explain proton beam therapy to two girls, the youngest only being three years old. And I agree cutting-edge cancer therapies are difficult to explain to children. We went along with it because this treatment did not change the way dad looked like past surgeries or drugs did. Then, it was more difficult to make up excuses. Much less magical than a time machine, the cyclotron in the basement of the Massachusetts General Hospital delivered proton radiation to the side of my dad's head, through the circular metal block (steering wheel) to specifically target one of his numerous tumors. Thirty days was the maximum amount of radiation his body could handle, not the duration of his vacation to the past and future. What a letdown. Sometimes I wish I understood earlier, especially when I think about how emotional I must have made my family. No one wants to have to explain terminal illness treatment to a child, so they accepted the time machine narrative. My grandma called my sister and me the day after we were shown the cyclotron, we told her our dad gained a new superpower. Grandma went along with it. Luckily, my mom must have called her earlier in the day to brace her for this conversation. She knew that seeing our dad come home from numerous surgeries, struggle to eat and speak, and lose all his hair in previous years was enough to confuse us. Mentioning that he had to go through another form of treatment would make the situation worse.

My mom, reluctantly, supported the time machine idea because she was relieved that dad was not losing weight like the chemo caused him to. She was hopeful that this treatment would cause fewer side effects, and she was happy that he was only driving a few minutes from home to downtown Boston to access treatment, instead of across the country to meet with yet

another new surgeon like he had in prior years. When your husband is diagnosed with an extremely rare form of cancer and has surpassed his expected survival rate, a time machine feels like a fantastic way to keep him alive longer. But she felt skeptical withholding information from her daughters. And she caved when I was ten years old, once I was old enough to pick up details on my own.

“Dad is sick again,” my mom says at the dinner table. “We are going to meet with a new doctor tomorrow while the two of you are at school.”

“Would you stop just saying dad is sick!?” I cannot hold it in any longer. “What does that mean his November MRI scans weren’t good?” I get straight to the point. “Lily is old enough now,” I begin to backtrack, “We know that his time traveling was fake. You can stop pretending everything is okay.”

My mother looks stunned. She glances at my dad, and then back to me. I can sense her pent-up fear. She doesn’t know that I’ve been constantly piecing together information from conversations I overhear between my parents in the kitchen, like a puzzle that I only have half of the pieces to. Her dinner announcement caused me to hit a breaking point. It’s her fault that I fear what I don’t know. When I was six, dad *was just sick—plain and simple. He lost his hair he was so sick. He time traveled, but he was also somehow sick. Now that I’m ten, it’s different. My parents prefer to share only the necessary information and I’m tired of it. I’ve heard my dad discussing the treatment plan for when his cancer moves to his brain. He sounds helpless when he talks about it. And I deserve to know more. But my mom just sits speechlessly at the dinner table.*

“Let your mom speak,” my dad interrupts.

“Only if she says it like it is,” I sit back in my chair with a blank look on my face.

“How about we talk it over tomorrow,” my mom says after letting out a long sigh, “This doesn’t seem like a good time to discuss, and I don’t appreciate the way you are speaking to me.”

“Fine. But tomorrow, I want the whole story.”

In retrospect, I was pushing the envelope. But I was tired of being left in the dark. I was worried. It felt like my dad could disappear at any moment. His routine MRI scans freaked me out every time. The bad news was getting old, and it was being brushed over. It felt like my parents had been lying to me about the severity of my dad’s health condition for most of my life and I was sick of it at age ten. But that conversation at dinner was only the beginning of a restless night. Forget a little chat about my dad’s next treatment journey. That wasn’t in the cards. I was frustrated, my mom was upset, and then, at such a perfect time, everything blew up in our faces. Our world was flipped upside down. I can remember the six o’clock news playing in the background while everyone finished dinner silently.

“Essentially, toxic waste is seeping into the earth surrounding the landfill in Carver,

Massachusetts,” the reporter stated with a serious tone.

Dad immediately stands up from the kitchen table and looks over the counter into the living room to watch the TV. The reporter is shown standing in front of the large, green Carver Landfill sign. The footage switches to videos of downtown Carver, the local shops, family-owned grocery stores, and the small businesses. Then the screen flashes to workers at the landfill working in hazmat suits.

“At the moment the hazardous waste experts are unsure what this means for residents living in and around Carver. We do not advise the community to jump to conclusions. However, depending on how long ago the waste was released, it could have been the source of many autoimmune disorders and forms of cancer. Our community may be struggling because of this.”

“Are you hearing this?” My dad looks at my mom in shock. She gets up from the table and goes to look at the TV herself. I walk into the living room and begin to recognize pictures of the Carver Landfill that I toured in first grade. I remember we were taught that the landfill should never cause any worry because it is so strictly regulated.

“What does this mean for us?” I look over to my mom. “What are they talking about?”

“Shh, let me listen,” she leans in closer to the TV and turns the volume up.

“At the present moment, we are unsure whether or not it is safe to remain in Carver. Public health officials are swiftly preparing a plan of action to stop the waste from overtaking our community. We recommended individuals and families do whatever feels best, and we will continue to share updates on this issue as we receive them,” commercials come up on the TV as soon as the reporter finishes his sentence.

“Call you mother,” my dad says urgently to my mom.

“Grandma is coming over?” I ask, confused about what we are going to do next. I walk over to the front window and notice people in their driveways packing up their cars with important belongings. Our small, protected Boston suburb suddenly feels unsafe.

“Maybe this means we’ll finally get an explanation for the cause of Dad’s cancer,” I say as I stare out the window, trying to convince myself there might be something good in this situation.

“Do you really think the likelihood of this mess being the cause of your diagnosis is high?” I hear my mom ask my dad in the other room after she gets off the phone with my grandmother.

“I sure as hell think it’s a possibility. And I think all of us need to get out of here before anything worse happens. You all are still healthy, we need to keep it that way,” my dad raises his voice. With a worried look on her face, my grandma walks through the garage door entrance into our kitchen. She’s holding two duffel bags and a paper grocery bag that is about to rip. It looks like she threw everything she could from her pantry into it.

“Girls go put your pajamas and toothbrushes in a bag. It looks like we need to leave for the night,” my mom says, holding back tears. Feeling nervous now, I put my things in a bag and help Lily find a pair of pajamas and something to wear for tomorrow. I can’t help but wonder if I should pack more than one day’s worth of clothes. We load up mom’s car with our things, in-

cluding my dad's work bag and a stack of important documents. My dad locks up the house and puts the key in his jacket pocket.

As we pulled out of the driveway, all I could think about was the chance that Carver wouldn't be home anymore. My closest friends lived there. My grandma lived two blocks away from me. My first memories were made there. Elementary school, dance lessons, play dates, family barbecues, all of it felt like it was being taken away as my family drove to a hotel downtown that night. I had a bad feeling about not packing all my favorite things from my bedroom and playroom. Even worse, it was possible that this leaking waste the news reporters were talking about was the reason Dad got sick. I don't think I was prepared to accept that. At the hotel that night, nobody could sleep. My mom kept the news on all night long and my dad sat at his computer emailing the Carver Health Department. My grandma called her friends who had health concerns and asked them if they were nervous about the waste. It felt like there was a good chance that we might never call Carver home again.

Sadly, my fear became a reality. Carver could no longer be called home. In the weeks following the initial waste detection, public health officials declared that the neighborhoods around the landfill, including our own, were unsafe. My parents quickly made the decision to stay in Boston but move to a different suburb far away from any landfills. Many of our neighbors moved to entirely different states if they had family somewhere else. We tried to start over. Lily and I could still go to the same school and my dad could still see his doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital, but our new home didn't feel the same. So much tied us to Carver. I missed the annual St. Patrick's Day parades through the neighborhood and the pool we all shared in the summer. I missed walking across the street to my best friends houses and playing in their backyards. I missed home.

To this day, every new side effect my dad endures reminds me of the waste. Part of me wishes I could travel back to a time when nobody knew about it. Or better yet, a time before my dad was diagnosed with an unexplainable disease. Instead, I am faced with a future that is not promised. Many of our neighbors from Carver have become sick, even after moving away from the cause of the problem. My mom's best friend was diagnosed with lung cancer last month. People have even died and there's no stopping it. It has become obvious that exposure to the landfill is negatively affecting people. It could be any day that my mom, grandmother, sister, or even I receive unfortunate news. So, the other part of me wishes I could travel to the future to prepare myself for the worst. But I guess I should not be wishing to time travel at all, since time travel really means advanced cancer treatment for all I know.

Instead, we just have to sit with the consequences. We have to accept there is no one to blame; we can't be angry at an uncontrollable accident. We appreciate the days when dad feels upbeat and less fatigued. And each day that goes by without someone else being affected is a victory. As much as I wish I could control every twist and turn, or visit the past or future, all I can do is appreciate the present. And that's something that no time-traveler would ever understand.



Old Globe by Andy Mayer

Margarita Buitrago

THE CRUSTACEAN HINDRANCE OF LIFE

behind her, orange hills pressed against an inky blue sky.
 she stands in her bathing costume,
 feet sunk deep in the sinking sands of the saline pools,
 in a calm fashion, for the

currents below caress her ankles with feathery fingers

until
 she by themselves
 sudden recoiling
 onto
 revolve

her toe has been bitten by a claw.

hold! she proclaims. *let us inspect what we have here.*

she curves her body and her hand falls beneath

the surface of the saline pools,

and she clenches a carcass of the sea.

she resurfaces it from the aquas into the air,

against those orange hills to inspect the decrepit creature:

¡un cangrejo!

she was not expecting the impromptu intrusion of it until later in the evening,
 nor in nebulous musings nor in the vertigo betwixt solace and discord that flowed around her
 ankles, and the thought that such decrepit,

tenacious nefarious
 vexatious and most crustaceous
 creature!

would pinch and pique her enough to prevent her from *knowing*
 that she can now populate the night, thus her mind, with joyous dreams.

she flicks it away as her skipping stone over the pools, far, until it sinks

but the waxing gibbous does not rise as the salt stupefies her senses

instead,

the parading outline of the crustacean in the sky.

Margarita Buitrago

THE MASQUERADE

In between the carmine and ivory time of the evening, the servants began to light the candelabras lining the stone walls of the ballroom. Rather peculiarly, all the servants possessed the same hauteur and physical likeness of curling mustaches, black hair combed back, and slender noses whose tips seemed to be growing skyward like pine trees. Once their task was completed, they retired at once and allowed the feeble lights to grow into lively flames; guests would most certainly be commenting on their warmth in the moments to come. A look to the heavens would make anyone contemplate the glass dome with a single opening at its zenith that tantalizingly stood between observer and celestial bodies.

A single servant entered the cavernous ballroom, holding in his slender fingers a bottle of the finest merlot the house had to offer. He sought to prepare the first glasses of the evening until Alas! Lo! The servant tripped at once, spilling the *oh my! Not the precious merlot! The wine pirouetted high into the air and leaped through the hole of the glass dome of the ball room. The red stream stained the celestial dome the color of blood and roses. The servant gasped in silence, cupped his slender fingers around his narrow mouth to neglect all sound of distress, and knelt in muted sorrow. The air wrapped around him curled in undulations of woe that turned into jagged and crinkled shards of warped distress. He prayed the moon would not mind the inconvenience of the red sky tonight. His ears perked up at the sound of ruffling skirts—the masqueraders were approaching. The servant abandoned all guilt and misery at once, and scurried to the servant's quarters just as fast.*

It was lavish, that masquerade, especially after the afflicted servant fled the scene and the fest reddened to life. But first, let me tell you of the curious but no less enthralling figures of the evening as I hide behind a velvet curtain.

The Countess stood at the center of it all. Her skirts were four times the width of her slender frame. She was all sapphire fabrics, pearls, and lace. Her coquettish laugh would rise above the din of talk. The trumpets in the orchestra shivered, for they feared their lungs would be reduced to those of flutes if compared to the Countess's harmonious and resounding laugh. The trumpets were not the only ones who worried with green envy, for the same could be said about the candelabras lighted by the servants. For as much as they struggled to remain warm in all their vigor, the flames could not outshine the minute diamonds embroidered in the sapphire fabrics of the gown of the Countess. It inflamed the flames so, that even the wax of the candles feared they would be reduced to a puddle of liquid wax that would only be suitable for envelope seals and such futile purposes. The thought of losing their short lived spot in the masquerade was unfathomable to the candles, so they, like the trumpets, flames, and perhaps some equally vexed masqueraders, were clandestinely piqued by the Countess.

I am afraid to confess I feel no vexation towards the Countess. I admire perhaps even

covet the vivacity she carries about her. Now, one might wonder why I hide behind a curtain. With melancholy I tell you, reader, that I seldom receive invitations to such lavish masquerades or any occasions of that sort, truth be told. Though I am alive I am also without breath—it seems people find that to be a horrifying existence. But upon the knowledge of the Countess's attendance, I polished my bones to a sickly luster and placed a black mask over my cheekbones to dress for the occasion. It is so that I find myself now waiting for the Countess to come my way, but a hunched figure in black brushes past me and I sink deeper into my velvety refuge.

It was the Widow, who did not possess the vivacity of the Countess, but seemed to be alluring even to those who brushed past her. The wild music of the orchestra slithered its way through the crowd merrily, stroking rosy cheeks and shaking gentlemen's hands. The traveling note of a violin screeched in discord when it reached the Widow. Some covered their ears, others looked away in disdain... Perhaps it was not disdain towards the shrill note, but towards the crow perched inside the cage lodged into the Widow's tall white wig instead. The cage was held in its rightful place by some of the Widow's curling strands of hair. It was made of iron and was the color of the Widow's mournful gown. The crow perched inside skipped side to side. When the music of the orchestra would rise with glorious notes the crow would unknowingly have his beak open and close in silence. The morbid bird gaped hopelessly in what seemed to be a desperate attempt to speak or respond to the harmony. The bird, like its wearer, suffered from the same malady: too pained by death to speak, with only the casting of sly eyes on the young left.

The Bard, unlike the crow and the Widow, took pleasure in his own monologues. The man of words stood by one of the numerous gargoyles perched in niches lining the walls. He was slender and clad in silks. The profusion of his golden words interlaced themselves in harmony with the music of the orchestra, and lured those around him like flies to honey on a mid-summer's evening. He spoke of bygone times and poeticized the requests of his audience. It was in this manner that he saw their eyes grow with wonder, until his golden words withered into grim ones when he soliloquized rather crudely the following, "what came first—the chicken or the fool?" Thinking him to be ill-mannered, the crowd dispersed. Some wandered off, some were fortunate enough to stumble upon the Countess in sapphire fabrics and draw their attention to her. The Bard glared at the illuminated room with contempt, curled his lips into a stony smile of faux recognition of wrongdoing, and proceeded to deliver his soliloquies to the unmoving and petrifying gargoyles. They would surely answer his question...

I would like to sketch more of these mesmerizing figures, but the troupe of actors, dancers, musicians, and acrobats have entered the scene, which I shall now paint.

The Countess, Widow, and Bard along with all the masqueraders turned their heads to the stage where the orchestra had once stood. The cessation of music left behind a cavernous void that was much missed by all. That was, of course, until two acrobats dressed in motley somersaulted into the air like ribbons bursting from a canon at a fair. The ballroom became hot with the many gasps of astonishment that escaped from countless mouths. The music the troupe produced tingled the senses with interminable rising notes that would clang to the ground with a melodious yet shrill momentum. Acrobats leaped to and fro while arabesque dancers arched

themselves like gnarled trees or the venous hands of a woodland hag. The Countess' gloved hands applauded the marvelous sight, which was followed by a second wave of claps that threatened to supersede the troupe's concerto.

"Bravo!" exclaimed the Countess with a child-like bliss and delight.

The Widow cast a sly glance to the side as repulsive and impervious as always.

"Bravissimo!" echoed the Bard.

The troupe bid their farewells and the masqueraders resumed their chatter. The masquerade's original orchestra found their rightful places—with much resentment for being obliged to abandon them in the first place—and waited to be acknowledged.

"Música Maestro!" exclaimed the Countess, throwing her gloved hands in the air. At her command, the orchestra filled the great ballroom with their harmony. The masqueraders found themselves under the mutual recognition that the harmony entering their ears was that of a great waltz. And so they responded correspondingly.

The Countess found the closest most handsome gentleman near her, a Marquis of some distant land, she believed. She had not had the pleasure yet. The Widow stepped back next to the gargoyles and stood still, although by doing so, risked looking like one herself. Her unmoving posture let all know she was indeed willing to take that petrifying risk. The Bard danced with a partner made of air—only the man of golden words would ever know how graceful of a dancer she was. What a shame indeed!

The Countess was dazzling under the scarlet glow of the sky, for her sapphire dress flickered between indecisive hues of purple, mauve, and violet. Her cheeks were flushed with the merlot, but not as flushed as the red celestial dome above. Her partner, the Marquis with golden shoulder pads, was reduced to a fleeting shadow as they followed the rising and falling flow of that imposing waltz. The Countess stepped and slid in smooth motions, each time striving to lengthen her steps more than the previous ones. She was the picture of grace and beauty as she moved her shoulders smoothly and parallelly to the marbled floors, all the while maintaining a sweet smile that only youth could harness.

The unimaginable happened next.

The Countess, in all her glory, lost her flawless step and grip on the Marquis' hand. Her skirts flailed around in a whirlwind of sapphire and violet confusion. She looked about the room as the cool ground beneath her brought her some sense of the tragic events.

The orchestra ceased all sound at once. The flute player gulped a note down his throat. The harpist tightened his fists around the still vibrating chords.

"Have

I

fallen

all

by

myself?"

Inquired the pale Countess in the stillness.

“Alas...Pardon me!” interjected the Bard sprawled like carriage-kill right next to her (the masqueraders suddenly took notice of the poet, for they had all been mesmerized by the tragically graceful falling of the Countess). “It is I,” the Bard thundered with an air of eminence. “Who has gotten in your graceful way.” he declared, dusting off his attire. He rose from the ground. “You see, I was dancing with Eudora May, my muse who is only visible to me.” He offered his ink-stained hand to help the Countess rise from the ground as well.

The disgraced Marquis was nowhere to be seen. The crow caged in the Widow’s wig fluttered its wings in nervousness.

The Countess, overcome by crimson rage and embarrassment under the scarlet sky, swatted his hand away. She rose to the ground in spite of her colossal skirts, and slithered her way through the crowd of curious onlookers. *“I could have died!” she cried, and was gone from the ballroom in the blink of an eye.*

“Música Maestro!” exclaimed the Bard, unperturbed by the collision. The flute player spit the note back into his flute. The harpist released his fingers from the chords. All was in harmony again.

I stepped out from behind the curtain and followed the Countess, for I feared for her happiness.

I found the Countess after having ventured into all the rooms, chambers, studies, and drawing rooms that were in the hall adjacent to the ballroom. It was until I twisted the brass handle of an old oak door and entered the semi-darkness of a rather small room, that I first saw the voluminous and glinting ocean of skirts. Half her body was deep into a small opening in the corner of that room. A secret door. What for?

The warning scarlet glow of the sky that spilled into the room cautioned me not to approach the Countess. Should her graceful eye be cast on me, I fear she would see me for the phantasm I am. And yet I found myself compelled by the broken and hushed falsetto of her voice as she sang to her own rhyme:

*In the secret door,
I look and seek!
For what pride tore,
And left as bleak:
It is here I wish to snore
For a day or week
And drink the wine of lore
Until of shame I reek!*

I listened to her words in the stillness. O Countess! How much would I revel to drink the wine of lore for you, for *I reek of misery already. It saddened me to see the Countess seek shelter from her embarrassment. How I wished the secret door were the portal to another realm, but it seemed to have been a vault no longer in use. The Countess kept humming to herself as she curled inside but in the following moments my companion, Time, did me a great injustice. The Countess crawled out of the secret door in one swift motion, possibly out of the looming*

curiosity or sense that she was being watched. I wish to have had a moment to approach her so as to not frighten her.

But the Countess released a maniac and hysterical scream from the depths of her horror upon absorbing the sight of myself. The terror she must have felt! It must have been so great so as to make her forget her embarrassment and run towards the ballroom once again.

I followed the Countess.

As I approached the ballroom I could hear the Countess frantically screaming,
 “With a scythe! I saw it, scythe and all!”

The masqueraders murmured in doubt.

The Countess continued, “It is coming for us this crimson night! No escape! I have seen the fiendish skeleton with my own eyes!”

The Countess’ claims were made flesh as I burst through the great doors of the ballroom. In that haunting instance all believed her to be right. No mask over my cheekbones could hide my facade or assuage their horror.

The crowd cawed its harsh cry maniacally. It finally found its voice at the sight of me. The Widow fainted and fell to the floor limply, the cage in her wig clanging to the ground, making the crowd enter a frenzied panic.

What I saw then, was a night-marish contagion of panic among the masqueraders. All ran to and fro with no direction. Under the scarlet light all was unbridled chaos, but I did not have a care for it. I located the Countess, who ran frantically for the Marquis, whom she found climbing the velvet curtain of a lavish window. Before I could reach the struggling Countess my eye settled over a bizarre specter.

The gargoyles, who had once stood perched in stone, ran about in an ungovernable rampage. They leaped through the air. When they rose high, they would pick the hair on lady’s wigs whenever they plunged only to rise again. The Widow, who seemed to have awoken from her torpid state wailed like a banshee warning of the presence of death. She pointed her gnarled finger at me as she did so, most fittingly.

The Bard usurped the orchestra’s stage and ardently recited the words of a bygone poet amidst the pandemonium.

*To die, to sleep--
 To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause. There's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life.*

He was then interrupted and swept away by some gentleman who scuttled by in utter dread.

This I knew was my cue to exit the scene, to succumb to my departure. I looked up to the heavens, and located the zenith of the glass dome, where the opening lured me to escape through it. And like the specter and phantasm I am, I fled the chaos through that opening.

The melee waned into an organized commotion of murmurs and questions. The orchestra took their rightful places, and exploded into a grand symphony. The masqueraders smiled at each other in an endeavor to hide their apparent nervousness. A mutual understanding was reached—the Countess, lowering the Marquis from the velvet curtain, burst into a dance with him. She would give cursory glances to the side, as though in search of some withered remnants of myself. She smiled no longer but continued to dance. The rest could only follow as the evening matured into a reverie of vigilant bliss.

As for me, my hope was to see the Countess' happiness. But where I desired a glimpse of the vivacity of life, she only fled at the sight of the macabre picture of Death in turn.



Eric Seger-Pera

DARKNESS

Drape me in darkness
Even if you have to lie,
Even if three times you must fold
The straining blanket over my eyes.

Tell me the night has come at last.

Through the window on my right,
The city invades
And I forget what I know about midnight.
Like a fool, I rise,
Set free from Circadian shackles-

And taken on by a new burden:
The Wandering Chains
Chained to stirring, chained to staring.
Locked by a listless key.

Those gray clouds that cast shadows by day,
Like the stars in a child's bedroom,
Light fades back out of them, it pools,
And they begin to drip.

Eric Nassos

EAR

Melting; all-hearing till music blasts
so loud the drum drowns in an audible fog.
Tunnels with the exterior
of rolling hills and valleys
pounded regularly by all which is
profane and soothing in sentiment.

Oozing when soft spoken words
traverse the slopes to reach the heart.
Limitations stand proud as mountains
before weary travelers when evil is spoken.
Once close enough to be heard,
many daredevils conspire to cross them.

Flowing,
finding a rhythm in any sound
and moving the rest of the body
in strange, disconnected dances
to sultry sounds
which remove worry and care.

Eric Nassos

HAND

Gaze down at the five-digit artisan
sitting in the eye's peripheral.
An involuntary reflex, self-determined.
Seemingly capable of a twitch, slam, or caress
without a single human thought to prompt it.
Notice: the motions of each finger hypnotize,
particularly when they sit inconsistently still.
Controlled, but by whom?
And what do they do
when the mind wistfully loses track of time?
A mystery, an entity, an out of body experience.
The consciousness feels no relation
to the nerves signaling it.
Feeling with no structure,
a hand, connected to one,
perceived to be that of another.

Gracie Overstreet

BECAUSE WILD ANIMALS DON'T GET PANIC ATTACKS

Sometimes I wish I were a wolf–
feral,
with blood dripping from its jaws,
eyes like the headlights deer get trapped in just before impact.
It doesn't care how matted its fur is,
or worry about the consequences of its growling
or its whining
or its howling
or the broken twigs it leaves in its wake.
All it has to be concerned about is finding its next meal:
it has no guilt about how it gets it
or how bad its table manners are.

Nora Bravos

FEVER DREAM

When we went to sleep
she said sweet dreams
but then I went to bed and
all that was in this head
was a tangy trip to my subconscious homestead

No saccharine slumbers or fragrant fantasies I don't even know how Freud would
psycho-analyze these

Manufacturing lucidity like a dream factory because you give me more *fever*
than I could ever need. Piquant psychological pictorial purgatory—
future authors outta make allegories outta these

Arson experts claim that's it electric
and as just a precaution my pillow is asbestos because a fire in the
mind
can ignite the solar plexus

But it's better to dream in *fever*
than it is to dream in ice
because it's within these little dreams that we

Nora Bravos

**SHOES THAT I'LL USE TO STOMP
ON YOU**

Put that there clock on snooze,
cause it's time to peruse all the
pews of shoes
that I'll use
when I stomp you.

I've got slippers soft as petal
or stilettos soft as metal.
Putting gas to this here pedal
as I stomp on you.

I can do Birkenstocks or rubber
Crocs.
Sandals, but I'm keeping on the
socks.
Tell your family to change the
locks,
entering unannounced like Goldi-
locks.

You'll be greeted by my cleats,
be made nauseous by my galosh-
es,
as they connect with that little
soft bit right above your esopha -
gus.

Kicking that spot where your

knees interlock,
ripped apart by the force of my
beloved pair of Docs.

The force of my heel
Is almost surreal.
Nothing about this stomp
Resembles genteel.
So, say your prayers.
I suggest you kneel
as you'll be pulverized into something
akin to veal.

You can make a meal of my heel
or my prize boots toed in steel.

Cuz
I'll bash your teeth
with the tip of my cleat.
Truely a shoe buffet,
and it's all you can eat.
Your mouth will be plugged
with my fuzziest ugg, filled
to the brim like a pumpkin
spiced mug.

And
the stockings will remain,
but you'll never be the same
when you've been crushed by butt of
my beloved
Mary-Janes.

These pumas
Gonna ruin ya.

These jordans
bruise your organs.
These chanclas
gonna haunt ya.
I'll leave lumps with these pumps.
Flipping you with these flops.
Be made flat by my flats.
Free your soul with my sole.
Make a chin strap with the thin strap
of my louies with the red backs.

You may freely choose
which pretty shoe,
perhaps you'd like my Jimmy Choos?
Not to confuse
and not bemuse,
make no mistake I wish to abuse,
my foot is ready.
My kick is acute,
I've tighten the laces of my heaviest
boot.
The time is now,
The choices profuse,
Stop your dawdling - what is the use?
Cuz any which one has the power to
bruise.

So, put your clock on snooze be-
cause it's time to choose the shoe
that I'll use when I stomp you!

Timothy Knapp

LAMP

Past the vacant pit
burned into parched prairie,
the parking lot chock full
of pick-ups and half-SUVs,
each one not a color just a sheen,
I bought a lamp for eight dollars
plus two hours of infuriating assembly.

When I put it together I shouted
to the Swedish spirit of the manufacturer
that you can't call something a lamp
if it's simply not a lamp.

This object carved space out of my
living room in the shape of its alleged title
and it even lit the bulb.
But it was awkward and wobbly and held no proof
that someone ever loved it or even wanted it to exist.

In thirty years, when the object
is sitting undecayed, tucked as if for bed
in an overflowing landfill of its kin,
each of us will share similar stories:

Assembling scraps of nothing into nothing,
guided by pictorial scripture
that we screamed at like our fathers.
Some fondness will arise then, at the table,
in the fermentation of remembering.
And then we'll all get up
and we'll throw away the table.

Margarita Buitrago

WHEN I REACH DELPHINIUM STATION

maybe I have wasted the hours looking between a yes and a no,
or spent them in the wheat fields with crows of van Gogh.

but what if I learn to remove the daft seconds from time?
and kiss the sound of twenty red suns instead:
they perpetually melt over the ephemeral melancholy waters of Neptune,
but their last rays resonate like cymbals of glee that tingle the senses,
and their breaths—
 enchant to take mine away.

so I etch the face of a steam train on my time, mind, and heart,
and I ride it with the knowledge I'll find those twenty red suns,
when I reach Delphinium Station.

Ben Lash

SOUTH OF OLD TOWN

When I parked in the structure at 320 S. Capitol Street
at 3:12, an hour later than I hoped to arrive,
a week later than I meant to be in the state of Michigan in the first place, I smiled.
The ice in Milwaukee had postponed my arrival, as did the porcupines and lemurs
and emus
at the Potter Park Zoo whose curious eyes froze mine in place for longer than I
thought possible.

The unfamiliar snowcapped grid of streets in Lansing sing the directions
to downtown, south of Old Town, on Washington Street.
I stop by the frost-framed window of Linn and Owen Jewelers
to look at the glistening necklaces and earrings in the window
but I continue past them, following my nose until I reach the salty scent of The
Peanut Shop.

I look through the homemade green apple hard candies and chocolate-covered
popcorn
and though I am on vacation, my mandatory nutritionist-dictated diet is not,
and neither is the exhausted debit card that resides permanently in my yellow can-
vas wallet.

So I call to the cashier, whose name is probably something like Julia or Amelia,
something with an -ia at the end of it,
and pick out a half-pound bag of salted peanuts before heading on my way.
It's called The Peanut Shop after all
and what else should you buy at The Peanut Shop if not peanuts?

Further down the street, my wallet keeps me from the Insty-Prints print shop,
and the Cigar Connoisseur, and the Grand Traverse Pie Company,
but the sign at the Nelson Gallery beckons me inside.

I can't afford anything here either except for a tiny green magnet made by
Leanne Schnepf,

but the friendly, crooked grin of the gallery attendant, Steven (or so his nametag
said),

reminded me that it was a good purchase nonetheless.

I stepped out of the Nelson Gallery and was reminded of the brightness
of a snowy, February Michigan afternoon

and remembered that there was still another side of the street to explore.

There'd always be another side of the street to explore.

*Editors***Jenna Koch, General Editor**

Jenna Koch is a sophomore studying Education and English. Her poetry has been published in The Daily Herald and she is the recipient of the 2022 Undergraduate Poetry Award. She hopes to continue writing while teaching at the high school or collegiate level.

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Claire Carlson is a junior at Marquette University with a major in Writing-Intensive English. She has a strong interest in the arts and writing, and so was elated to join the MLR staff as a fiction editor. Claire plans to graduate in 2023 and pursue a career in writing and editing.

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