

Red Wheelbarrow

Student Edition
2022



Published with the generous assistance of the
De Anza Student Body

Life in the Pandemic

Charles Haiwen



God's Handiwork

John Dorrance

Editor's Note: Don't miss the *Red Wheelbarrow* YouTube Channel. Hear poems read passionately aloud, see John Dorrance's kinetic sculptures move and make noise at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC980qm90ayt0M31To546GSA?>

The channel is also linked at the *Red Wheelbarrow* Student Edition website.



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From 1976 to 1999 this magazine was known as *Bottomfish*, a name that referred to neglected, overlooked writing that had (metaphorically) fallen to the bottom of the sea. We hope that *Red Wheelbarrow* also signifies unpretentiousness and the casting of a wide net in search of new, exciting young writers as well as an ongoing commitment to originality, courage, and craft.

Red Wheelbarrow publishes twice a year. The National Edition publishes literary and artistic works from all over the country and the world. The Student Edition is open to De Anza students. We welcome submissions of all kinds, and we seek to publish a diverse range of styles and voices. We accept student submissions from September to mid-May and publish by the end of spring quarter.

Poetry: submit up to five poems

Fiction: submit one short story (up to 5,000 words) or up to three flash fiction pieces

Drama: submit one play or screenplay (up to 5,000 words)

Creative Nonfiction: submit one personal essay (up to 5,000 words)

Photographs and Drawings: submit up to five b/w prints or digital files (.jpg, .tiff, or .psd format); please do not send originals.

Comics: submit one b/w strip

Other: submit one!

Preferably please submit text files in MS Word (.doc or .docx) format.

Keep your name and contact information separate from the actual submission.

All *Red Wheelbarrow* submissions are judged anonymously.

Judges for all contests make their decisions independently.

Red Wheelbarrow

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Back Cover: "Orchestrate," Bethany Forman

Frontispiece #2: "Life in the Pandemic," Charles Haiwen

Frontispiece #3 "God's Handiwork," John Dorrance

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Study for De Anza Student Mural, 2022 | Audra O'Reilly, Bethany Forman, Jeffery Smith, Charles Haiwen, Sabina Garcia-Fernandez
 (*See p. 22 for image of completed mural)

Cover & Frontispiece Art:

- Front Cover & Frontispiece: "Misunderstand Bedroom," Sean Nguyen
- Back Cover: "Orchestrate," Bethany Forman
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End

Alex Jordy



The Passenger

Amanda Bonhoff

There is no road.

There is nothing beneath the tires of your car, and you cannot remember where you are going. The cabin is full, and cramped, and stagnant—other bodies take up the seats around you, swaying with the hum of the motor and the churning motion of the car and the static that pours steadily out of the radio. Something is rattling, so softly that you're not sure that it's really there at all, and you spend some odd amount of time trying to decide whether the rattling is in the engine or in your head.

The sky is dark and flat and grey, and you think it might be dusk, but the thought dissolves in your head. It's been dusk for an awfully long time.

There are trees. You've decided they're trees, because all you can see from the windows as you stretch to look over the shoulders of the other passengers are long masses trembling together, stretching up into the flat grey sky, blurring and twisting and writhing in clumps.

None of you speak. The faces of the others are darkened, scratched out like pencil drawings, downturned and featureless in the dim light. None of them look at you, and you realize that you must look the same to them, like a forgotten swathe of pencil on rough paper.

There is a driver in the front seat, but when you look at him your vision blurs and your head swims, and his shoulders seem to bristle, so you look the other way and decide not to pay him any more attention. You don't remember waking up that morning, or getting into the car, or even deciding to travel at all. You still have your distant memories; they're a comfort in this place, their colors vivid and pristine against the grey interior and the grey sky and the dark twisting bodies that you've decided must be trees. Any recency is lost on you. You don't remember why you're here.

Why are you here?

The question sends your head spinning again, and you decide

that you're just sleepy, that the reasons will come and the colors will bleed back into the world once you've had a good night's rest.

The car goes on for what feels like hours, and the sky does not change, but your back develops a slight ache, and you grow tired of the same shade of grey, tired of the dusk.

There is a sound outside the car. Far, far outside the car.

It could be wind, or an animal, or something else entirely, but it hangs over you, and the others, and the driver too. You think that it must be hanging over the entire world, the way that single, howling note settles into your ears like a hollow siren.

Minutes pass, or maybe hours—time marches forward at a speed you can't quite parse—and the sound surely must have stopped by now; no living thing could possibly sustain a single cry for so long, but it still rings in your ears, and you find yourself doubting your own senses. The howling joins the rattling, and exists neither here nor there.

There is no road, but the car's path curves and bends severely, and the sky finally grows darker all at once, as though it had been ripped suddenly from the hold of that unnatural dusk.

You dare another glance frontward, careful not to look too closely at the driver. You notice that twin beams of yellowy, dim light stream forward, useless as you try to make out shapes or details in your surroundings. There is no road to be illumined, you remember. No road. Before you turn away, you catch a glimpse of a sign coming up at you from out of the black, all peeling letters and fractured wood and curled nails.

You hate it. You hate the way the letters have chipped away, you hate the way the cream-colored border has melted into a muddy gray that seems to curdle under the horrible, yellow headlights. The sign makes your stomach clench and so you look away, and your eyes find the driver again and the feeling doubles, and your heart quickens and your skin crawls so potently that you fear that if you look down, you will see it melting off your bones—but you can't look down, because your eyes are stuck to the driver, whose shoulders are bristling again like the lines of a polygraph, like your gaze is killing him, erasing him.

You can't breathe, you can't breathe and the weight is terrible, bearing down on you like the air has run out of the cabin, like the metal and leather and glass have all crunched inwards so that you and the others are all occupying the same too-small space, pressed together in the dark, pressed together in the cold.

You will die, you think, crushed like this. Nameless, faceless. You are muttering to yourself, unintelligible even to your own ears. The headlights go out, and the car stops, and the last thing you see before you squeeze your eyes shut is your breath in the cold air, curling outwards with nowhere to go.

The car doors release and the metal lets out a heaving sigh, and when your eyes open you are upright in your seat, your hands folded neatly in your lap, the other passengers shifting and murmuring words you can't quite make out. Your heart beats steadily, the air comes easily to your lungs, the cabin seems spacious now that the doors hang open.

Eagerly, you exit the car, and are surprised when the ground beneath your feet is solid and smells of earth.

Two Haiku

Vera Czernichowska

Hurricane

The sea, all-encompassing
She is fierce, untamed
Salty hugs drift me away

*

Forest

Moonlight beams
Endless wooded paths;
Let's get lost.

Donner Abandoned #1

Jordan Almaguer



Untitled

Benjamin Lete



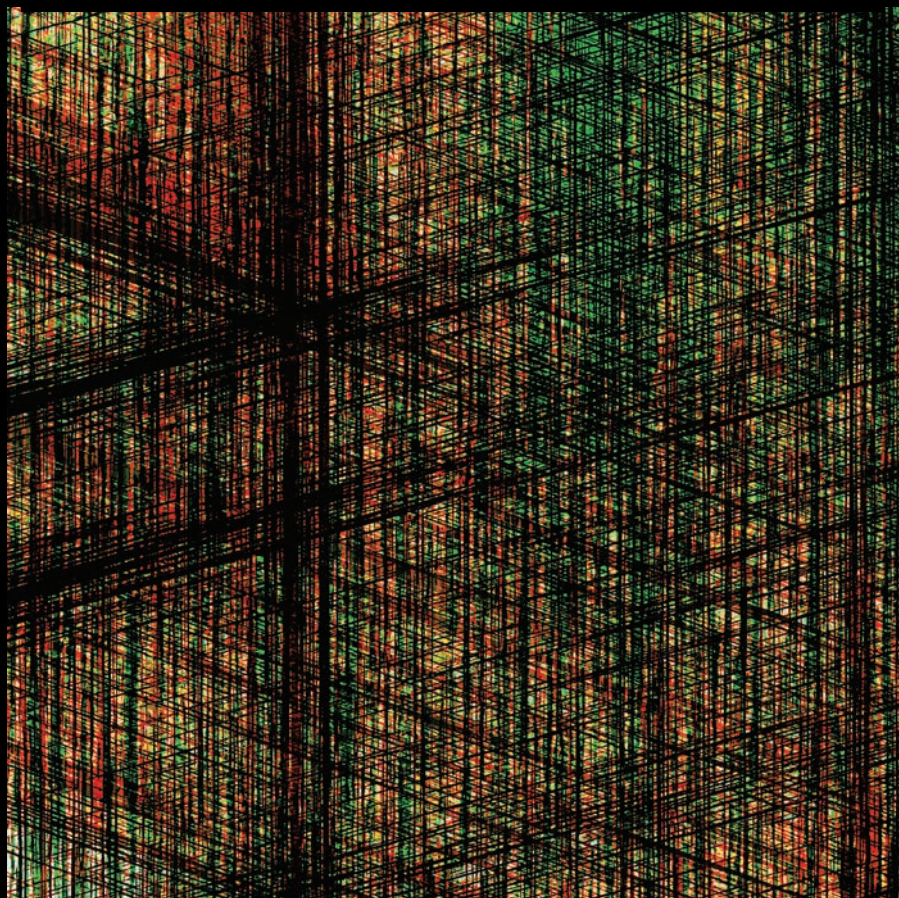
The Clot

Jordan Almaguer



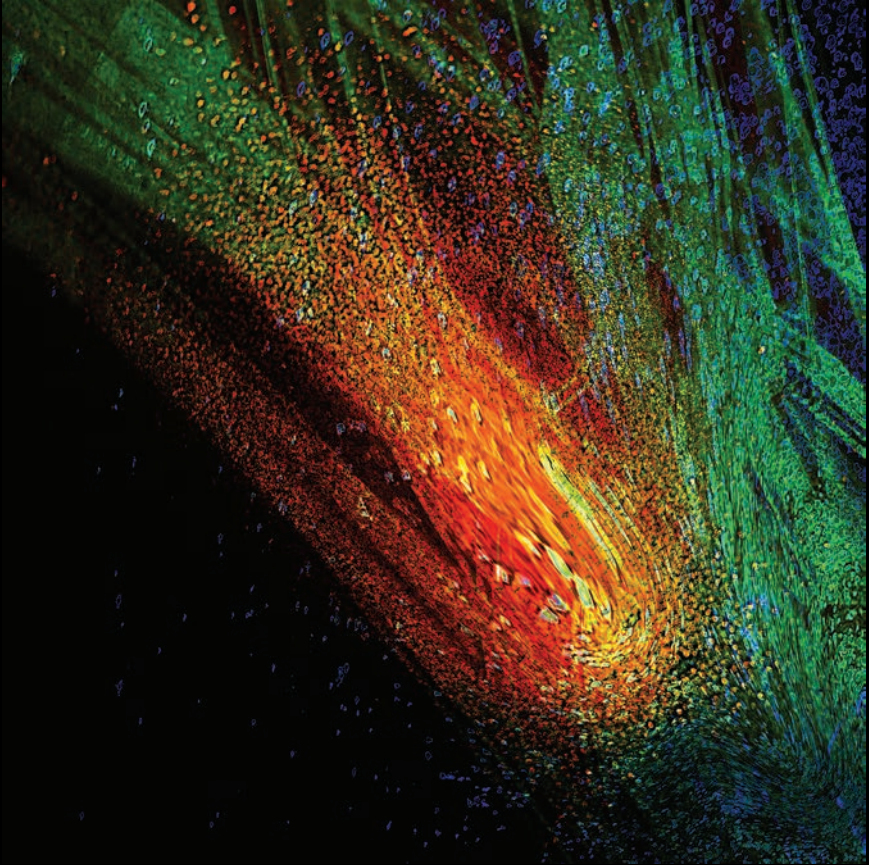
Deconstruction Reconstruction

Jay Gall



The Steal

Jay Gall



Nopal en la Frente

Pedro Calderon



Dreaming of a City

Pedro Calderon



One Short Life

Kenia Vanegas



Marks of Kindness

Kenia Vanegas



Mural: The World As It Is and the World We Want To See

Audra O'Reilly, Bethany Forman, Jeffery Smith, Charles Haiwen,
Sabina Garcia-Fernandez





Grisaille Kitchen

Audra O'Reilly



Morning Glory III

Samera Fatima Zaidi



Untitled

Benjamin Lete



The Bone Chime

H.S. Tobias

The skeleton down at the chapel's mausoleum
rose from its stone bed, suddenly aware;
it had a hollow head, in stead of eyes there
were two holes, to fill anew. It desired to build a house for two.
Free from life, the skeleton's newfound freedom.

It shilly shallied up the stairs and saw that it was spring.
It scavenged for seeds, and to build a birdhouse cut wood from a tree.
Birdfeed and sunlight in its view, with hues of daffodils and skies of blue.
Within its empty ribcage, birds sang what its lungs could never sing.
Like maracas, it shook stones within its bony palms, and sang its
happiest elegy.



A Note from the Mannequin to the Sculptor

Taylor L. Miller

Dear Sculptor,

We resolved long ago to abjure our allegiance to individuality.

To soften and shroud our identities.

You

are guilty of having one.

You insist

on ceaselessly hammering
at those crude uncut hemispheres.

Chunks of stone cascading
as they make loud introduction
to
the
ground
beneath.

What does this useless craft bequeath?

You say you are searching.

Searching...

for a vein of truth awaiting your chisels cultivation.

You laugh madly and invite us to watch the spectacle.

But this ruckus is reprehensible

How your infernal noise shatters the glass that insulates us.

Exposed to cold realizations

we find ourselves naked and feeling

Feeling feelings

Feeling craven

feeling like maybe if we stepped out
from behind the glass

We could
be iMpeRFecT
niche
and **Brazen**

But we aren't meant for nakedness

The day we lay bare is the day we are cast aside.
No purpose
no pride

We wear what they tell us.
Them outside

looking inside

this cheap

lexiglass

Never utter a syllable

Our mouths glaze over

Cerebral foreclosure

When our tutelage is complete
We will no longer be weighed down with introspective thought

The world will fade into the corners of a blank page
and we'll never have to ponder again
about that
which we
ought

Your LOUDNESS
It disrupts at first at least.

But once you find your rhythm see
it lulls us into perilous contemplation

The lucky few
are just torsos.

The Divine
The Notorious
The Ultimate
Castration

They haven't thought a thought since the factory yawned them out
A
Single
beam
holds
them
up

So in conclusion
without regret...
and little consideration....
we must inform you...
who is both hand and chisel and stone.

To Cease and Desist.

I have no reservations saying
that

You won't
be sorely
missed—

Signed, X

Apall-ogy from the Heart

Coann Lin

Dear Dad,

I know the steam is probably coming out of your ears by the gallons now. I really am so sorry that your car was a casualty in my latest experiment, but you have to understand that there is something more important: I have finally built a working time machine! Yes, after all those months toiling away, all those years you insisted I should be spending on “something worthwhile,” I have accomplished what no one ever has. And it was the first time it worked, so of course it was a teeeeeny bit hard to control when I was coming back. Not that I don’t know my equipment, but when entering the coordinates for my return, I forgot that your car used to sit right there in the driveway, and that my room was right above it, which is why my machine crashed through my bedroom window and onto your car.

You see, in the future, you don’t live here anymore. Mom said she had divorced you years ago and kicked you out, and had given me your master bedroom because she couldn’t stand even the memories of you. She was getting madder by the minute just explaining this, so of course I immediately went to find future you and see what this was all about. With the help of high-tech future search engines, I was able to find your address, and I took a jet motorcycle there (patented by yours truly). It was a dingy place, worn down with peeling paint and a moldy smell. You were too furious at the sight of me once you opened the door to even listen to me explain that I’m from the past. You might wanna look into some Rogaine, by the way.

Now, while I don’t normally condone changing major things in our time that affect the future, seeing what the future has in store for my beloved dad simply broke my heart, and in my rush to get back and warn you, I forgot that our present home would have a different layout than our future home with all the renovations. And I’m sorry for leaving so quickly after landing on your car, but I realized I had to learn the root of your problems in the future so we could avoid it now, and went to fix my machine as soon as possible. Don’t fret, dear old Dad, for I am sending this from the future and I have discovered the answers to save you.

Apparently, Mom got mad at you for how you were treating me, and the fights just escalated until she couldn't stand you anymore. She seems happier now, though, and since she no longer has to work because of all the government checks for my scientific discoveries, she spends her time partying with Kevin and their friends. Yes, your best friend Kevin. I was surprised as well, but they must've really hit it off after the divorce.

Now, luckily for us, it seems that the root of the problem is right in front of us. The reason you got mad at me, which is why Mom got mad at you, was because my machine wrecked your car. How lucky are we that I figured out how to navigate the space time continuum right at the time we need to be to fix this?

All we have to do now, is make sure you don't get mad at me, show Mom what a loving father-son duo we are, and perhaps avoid inviting Kevin over for barbecues so much. Let me know what you think of this plan, and if you agree, I will return from the future, safely this time, and go back to living in my much smaller bedroom with a much less comfy mattress. I am willing to make the sacrifice for you. Write back soon; time is of the essence.

Linus

Meet the Alphabets

By Pedro Calderon

The name's A,
My brothers are B, and C
My first cousin is D but I don't really talk to E.
I still fuck it up with my cousin F,
And I'm cool with their sister G, She's the only OG in this family.
No one hangs with H, cuz that bitch a hoe,
And I can suck it for being the selfish one just like
J who doesn't talk to us any more.
Sending love and respect for my uncle k rest his soul in peace for he
was killed by the police.

humbling enough I'm grateful the family business has been up and
running again, shout out to L,M,N,O,P for supporting the family.

Now I'm going to let you in on a family secret, rumor has it that Q shot
R and threw S under the bus for a crime they did not commit.
but no one knows the truth other than T, but that bitch is suspicious
for not talking in weeks.

As for the twins U and V they're always up in the clubs being the
baddest bitches they were born to be.

Unlike Our oldest uncle W who likes to pull up every now and then
Always flexing those war stories he fought back in the day.

X she got married to a big number out west and
Her sister Y graduated top of her class last week Saturday.
Finally as for my cousin Z they're still just figuring themselves out so
we like to make sure they
know she has a home to fall back on.

Dear Brother,

Coann Lin

At first sight, you loved me for me,
But I grew up wanting to be you.
It's impossible—we're just too different, you and I,
(except that we are vowels)

You're the pages stuck together in a book left untouched, I'm
the crinkled edges of a book read too much

You're the sweet, shy rhythm of calm autumn rain, I'm
the boisterous splashing in puddles that drives Mom insane

You're the whisper of an old leaf swaying to the ground, I'm
The loud chatter of crunches when I stomp my boot down

You're one-worded responses that feel incomplete and I'm
essay-length texts that people skim, not willing to read

You have magic in your hands that flows through your art
I have... eczema? But I'll give you my toy shopping cart!

Out of a symphony of scents in a busy cafe,
You're the small matcha latte sniffed out with ease

And despite my love for October (your birthday!) I'm afraid,
I'm just the dreaded waft of spring pollen that always makes you sneeze

All along you wanted me to stop worrying about keeping up with you;
It turns out I should have listened—even at odds we come in twos

You're Christopher Robin climbing home through the tree
I'm Pooh Bear at his thinking spot, waiting patiently

Sincerely, and with love, And some cookie butter smudges (sorry)
Your grown-up baby sister:
Me

What I Want

Coann Lin

I. Want. That. Notebook.

I want it, I want it, I want it!

The cover is pink and the pages, too

Oh, the pages! How soft and pretty

With their purple lines and cherries in the corner

I want to write for ages and ages on those purple lines

I have the perfect glitter pen to use already! And

The glitter, oh the feel of the glitter on the cover

The pretty pink glitter on Hello Kitty's bow and nose and eyes

I want to trace my fingers over the glitter forever

Feel the rough scratch forever

I want to bring it to school tomorrow in my pink Jansport

I want to hold it in my hands when I walk to my desk

So everyone can see

But very casually because I'm not a show-off

And place it importantly on my desk

Next to my polka-dot name tag

So all the girls come to ask about it

I want to humbly answer their questions and generously let them touch it

Except Katrina with her snotty attitude and pretty dresses

She thinks she is so fancy with her bright blonde hair and her

three-pocket Elsa bag

Not letting anyone touch it, well,

I want to see Katrina stand there with her arms crossed all huffy

Because I won't let her touch it

And did I mention the best part?

It has a lock! A little Hello Kitty lock with a little key on a string

I want to keep my extremely secret notes in there

I want to lock it up with my incredibly important key

I want to look ever so grown-up and mysterious with my locked notebook

I want the cool high school girls at the library to see me and wonder,

"Whatever is she hiding in that secret book?"

I want to smile a secret smile to myself and pretend I don't see
 their eyes on me,
Too lost in my very grown-up world of secrets to notice
Their childish desires to peek into my thoughts

I want to choose one very best friend from Room 9
To be allowed to write in it as well,
So we can pass secret messages
And not let anyone else read them
Especially not Katrina
I want to do best friend things
I want to giggle together at the dusty red lunch tables
And I'll have someone to trade my goldfish with
And Ms Jennifer the lunch duty lady won't feel like
She has to keep me company the whole lunch
Although I will miss her warm voice
And the kind crinkles at the corners of her eyes that appear
 when she laughs at my jokes and
Playing with her pretty brown hair

I want that special notebook
I want everyone to know how special I am
I want to write carefully and neatly inside and
I won't let it go to waste, I promise!
Yes, I know I have other notebooks but
I want this one! I don't have other notebooks with
glitter on the covers! and a lock! and a key!
I want this one to be mine.

Looking in My Mothers' Eyes

Thomas Hesketh

I

It would take fifty years before she
acknowledged the carefully nurtured,
unspoken story of premature birth
was not true, and by then she was dead,
buried as ashes, with an odd bone shard or
two, befittingly decent poured, in an instant;

a trice of trepidation, through light whispers
of wind into metal mouth, a spout down to eternal
darkness inside a communal fifty-gallon drum,
sequestered in a church basement, without a name,
where she knew no one, her lips stilled, sealed
against gossip, damnation, and all-quiescent

Yet the marriage certificate retrieved from
the shoebox on the top shelf at the back of her
bedroom closet stated dates clearly; "You
bastard!" she must have thought daily, as she claimed
to all who dared to ask or listen, to herself,
alone in shame of her past, she was innocent

II

A new country, a new school, a new friend,
we played with his wooden blocks, as
if brothers; a friend whose mother become
my mother, too; number two, with her smidgen
of Native American, indigenous blood;
I was learning to count, in a sense

She'd become, with my father, the mother
of my half-brother, whose twin sister died
in number two's womb, ironically, she still
termed stillborn, while my half-brother,

blind and deaf, lacked any sense, brain scrambled;
he died in a bathtub, I heard—innocent

Mother two would leave my father, remarry
a gambler, with his own system, move to
Las Vegas, where better luck was said to live
in the desert, having survived atmospheric
atomic testing, but assured by Lake Mead
of a perpetual water supply, and guiltless cents

III

A recent letter from another mother, the third,
married to my stepfather (who are these people?),
reported in clinical tone, as befit her profession,
as he had earlier shared both the diagnosis and his
prognosis, he was in decline; now sedated, prone
to outbursts, “sunsetting”; no cloaked innocence

Their marriage, for each a second, merged two
menageries imperfectly; frayed, fraught with failed
past potential, real estate-tinged pension packages,
yet eyes wide open at narrowing options, romance
negotiated at arms’ length, no tattooed excesses, no
blush of Homeric dawn’s rosy fingered exuberance

Present at three mothers’ weddings; one when
viable beyond any future ruling or judicial fidgeting,
within a woman’s womb; no doubt kicking to emerge;
a second time when the groom wore his gun at the altar;
and the third time, acting as my Father’s best man, as if
a block of dust incarnate, coherent, independent, buoyant.

Here Kitty Kitty

Elisabeth Halliday

Susan looked forward to the week of looking after the cats of her friends Tom and Megan while they went on their honeymoon. The cats, Mandu and Atomic, cuddled intensely, and Susan enjoyed playing with them. Tom and Megan loved those cats fiercely, and considered them like their children. They called them their “fur babies.” The cats were really Tom’s. He had them for years and Megan fell in love with them. Sometimes Susan wondered if Megan married Tom more for the cats.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Megan asked Susan at the wedding, showing her concern, again, about leaving her fur babies alone for a week.

“I told you it’s not a problem! Your place is just a few minutes from work. I’ll nip in there at lunchtime and after work every day. I’ll spend lots of time with them,” she assured Megan.

“But you’ve never had your own pet. Please be responsible.”

“What am I, twelve?” Susan felt a bit slighted. It’s true that she never had pets, but being reminded of this made her feel pretty bad. Susan’s landlord didn’t allow pets. She always wanted a cat, but her mother was afraid she’d be allergic. Her parents always treated her like a fragile little doll. She’d moved out of her parents’ home recently and was trying so hard to establish herself as an independent, responsible adult. She couldn’t understand why her friends, who she’d met through her work, didn’t seem to see her as an equal. She hoped that by taking care of the cats, Megan and their group of friends would see that she was responsible. “Really, I am excited to do this. I love cats! I won’t let you down. I’ve got this! Enjoy Aruba and don’t worry!”

Susan practically had to beg to take care of the cats. They couldn’t find anyone else who could do the job, but she tried not to feel bad about being their last choice. None of her friends ever asked her to pet sit, or even babysit. She felt bad that it seemed that her friends treated her differently than each other. She felt like an outsider in this group, even though she spent her free time and outings with them. She even flew to Vegas with them for Megan’s bachelorette party. Although, she pretended to feel unwell so she could do some of her own things, rather than go with them to the strip club. They were

all a few years older and the strip club made her feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. Besides, she found other entertainment.

Megan and Tom celebrated their nuptials on Saturday, and Susan dutifully checked on the cats on Sunday morning, despite her hangover. They lived in a second floor apartment, but the front door was on an outside landing with a small patio. She was surprised that only the deadbolt was locked when she arrived at the apartment; the doorknob lock was disengaged.

Everything seemed in order, just as it was when Megan showed her around to show where she kept the cat food, litter, and toys. She found a long note on the table with all of the instructions for taking care of the cats. She laughed about it since it seemed like a small handbook rather than quick notes. There were pictures of the cats along with little silly speech bubbles, like the cats gave the instructions rather than their hypervigilant “parents.” Susan wondered what Megan and Tom would be like when they actually had human children, or maybe they’ll only be parents of cats.

“Psst psst psst. Here kitties. Psst psst psst!” The kitties came running, full of purrs, right to their food bowls. “Here you go, a can for each of you, and a little top up of your kibble,” Susan said in a sing-song voice. Mandu ate a little and started walking around Susan’s ankles, purring loudly. Susan picked him up and took him to the couch. She turned on the TV and tried to find something to watch. The guide looked strange to her, but she found HBO. She wanted to spend time watching *Game of Thrones* since she didn’t have HBO at home. Susan couldn’t afford the premium channels. She used the search function to find *Game of Thrones* and chose an episode. A parental control screen popped up and asked for a passcode.

“What the hell?!” Susan exclaimed. She wondered why they even had parental controls on their TV. They didn’t have human children to worry about. They lived alone, just the two of them and their cats. She looked at Mandu. “Are you a mischievous cat? Do you play with the TV?” She pushed the home button on the remote and went to try something else. Maybe Megan put the controls on the TV so that Tom wouldn’t be able to see naked women.

After some scrolling, she found a nice movie in the guide, something pretty mild, an old Hitchcock. Again, she was asked for a secret passcode. Susan tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, but deep down she knew that they did this on purpose and for some reason didn't want her watching their TV. Just to be sure, she found *Sesame Street* and clicked to watch. Ernie and Bert were having some argument involving bananas. Well, shit. The parental controls didn't stop children's programming. Is that how they saw her? She turned off the TV and spent the next hour petting the cats while trying to detect ghosts with her ghost detector app on her phone. No paranormal activity here, she thought, a little disappointed. Before leaving she cleaned the litter box and made sure the water dishes were refreshed. As she left, she manually engaged the lock on the doorknob and pulled the door closed behind her, making sure to lock the deadbolt, as well. She checked the door to make sure it was securely locked, and she went on her way home.

The following day she went to check on the cats during her lunch hour, just as she promised Megan. The door was locked just as she left it, so she put the key into the deadbolt first and disengaged the lock. Then she put the key into the doorknob, but it only went in half-way. It didn't fit. Megan gave her only the one key and Susan assumed it worked for both locks. No wonder the doorknob lock wasn't engaged yesterday. They intended her to only use the deadbolt. Susan thought back to when they gave her the keys and showed her around. They definitely didn't say anything about the door locks. Oh crap!

Susan tried the doors to the neighboring apartments, but nobody answered. This was a fourplex, with no management office. Megan didn't leave instructions about how to contact the landlord. That entire handbook about the cats, not one word about the landlord. Well, shit.

She looked around. About three feet from the landing there was a window that led to Megan and Tom's kitchen. It was open about three inches to allow some fresh air into the apartment. A window AC unit was directly under the window. Susan took a deep breath and leaned as far as she could over to the window. She man-

aged to touch the window and push enough to see that it could be opened wider. She knew it was crazy, but she climbed over the railing on the landing and stretched her right leg out as far as she could, while bracing herself with her left hand on the railing. She pushed her right foot into the small space in the window and nudged the window wider open. She curled her ankle around so that her toes were in the window and her ankle touched on the AC unit. Thank goodness for her childhood gymnastics and her yoga classes. She felt like she was doing the splits. She carefully reached her right arm to the window frame and slowly let go of the railing with her left arm. She breathed slowly while she felt her heart pounding heavily in her chest. The worst that could happen would be for her to fall from this height, or maybe break the AC unit. Megan would be pissed if she broke the AC unit. Stretched out with most of her body now closer to the window than the ledge, she reached her arm in through the window and hugged the wall. She simultaneously pushed off the ledge with her left foot and pulled herself into the kitchen. She fell on the floor out of breath and near tears.

She took a few minutes to regain her composure, then she looked out the window. Nobody was around. She just broke into the apartment in a very obvious way and nobody noticed. She decided that while the open window was not her idea and it was helpful for her to break in, she didn't think it wise to leave it open when she left. The thought of Megan and Tom being burgled on their honeymoon frightened her. They would blame her. She put her hands on the AC unit and gave it a small tug to see if she loosened it. It was still sturdy, thank God.

"Psst psst psst! Here kitties!" The kitties came running and rubbing around her ankles. "There you are! Some guard kitties you are!" She laughed to herself. She fed them and freshened up the water bowls, dutifully scooped the litter box, and then she left to go back to work, making sure to engage only the deadbolt this time, and leaving the doorknob unlocked. Before leaving she also made sure to secure the kitchen window, vowing to tell Megan and Tom that they should be more careful. She was not going to tell them how she came to this

little tidbit of wisdom.

She brought her dinner with her after work. She had a box from KFC, thinking that the kitties might enjoy a little chicken as a treat. She entered the apartment with much more ease than at lunch-time. She brought her iPad so that she could watch a movie, since the TV was pretty useless. She had downloaded *Interview with a Vampire* through the wifi at work since Megan neglected to give her the wifi password at the apartment. Susan now felt this was intentional and not just a matter of forgetfulness. Oh well, she still got to cuddle the cats and she decided to prove her worth to Megan and Tom. She spent two hours with the cats while watching the movie, then went home to the apartment she shared with her roommate, Aubie.

“How are the moggies?” asked Aubie. She liked to call cats “moggies” in an effort to sound British, though Aubie had never been to the UK. She watched a lot of Britcoms.

“They’re good.”

“You sure?” Aubie gave her a little side-eye.

“What? Of course I’m sure!”

“Sorry. It’s just that, you can sometimes be a bit forgetful and preoccupied with ghosty stuff,” said Aubie.

“Ghosts are real, Aubie. Don’t you ever watch *Ghost Hunters*?” Susan was irritated. Her friends seldom took her seriously.

“Okay then.” Aubie rolled her eyes and giggled, then went off to bed.

The next day Susan spent an uneventful lunch hour with the cats, and what was starting to feel like another uneventful evening. She started finding the task a little boring, especially since she couldn’t access anything good on their TV, and the place just didn’t feel comfortable to her like her own home. She texted her boyfriend, Brett.

“Meow,” she wrote.

“Meow back,” came the reply from Brett.

“I’m at Megan and Tom’s. I’m bored,” Susan wrote

“Want some company?” Brett texted back.

“I only like cats. ^-^” she wrote while giggling.

“MEOW,” he replied.

Fifteen minutes later there was a scratching sound from the door. Susan jumped from the couch with a giggle and opened the front door. Brett was on his hands and knees, lifting one hand as if to scratch at the door again. On his head he wore a headband with cat ears. He wore a fuzzy scarf, and it looked like he'd drawn whiskers on his cheeks with eyeliner.

"Meow," he said.

"Oooh, kitty! You should come inside! It's not safe for kitties outside! You might get run over by a car or killed by a coyote!"

Brett crawled inside. He rubbed around Susan's legs, like a giant cat looking for some cuddles. The other cats, Mandu and Atomic hissed and ran under the couch to hide.

"Hiss!" Brett hissed and pretended to swat in the direction of the real cats.

"Oooh kitty!" Susan purred. "Let's get you into the bedroom!" She led Brett to the hallway and then opened the door to Tom and Megan's bedroom. Something about having sex in their bed, made pristine with clean bedding so that they could enjoy it when they returned, excited her. She knew it was wrong, but at the same time, it served them right for putting the parental codes on the TV and treating her with distrust. She jumped onto the bed and Brett jumped up to join her. They bounced a little, playfully, then started making out. They did it like kitties, very loudly.

Susan invited Brett over every evening after that night, taking full advantage of having a place to herself for the week. She loved that she and Brett could play freely without disturbing roommates. Megan and Tom were not due to return until Sunday night, so Susan planned to spend the weekend cleaning up the place and washing the bedding so that they would never even guess that their bedroom was a feline funhouse.

The washing machines finished and she transferred the bedding to the large tumble dryers. The sheets didn't look as white as she remembered, but she figured it was just because they were wet. According to her ghost detector app, there were no ghosts at the laundromat so she read while she waited. When the dryers stopped, she checked to make

sure everything was fully dry, then she folded it all carefully so that nothing would wrinkle. The white sheets were definitely not so white anymore, but she was determined to play this off if they asked about it. She knew nothing.

She drove back to their apartment and hauled the laundry basket up to the landing. She had to set it down to unlock and open the door, then reloaded her arms and made her way to the bedroom. The bedroom door was left open. Oh no. She didn't intend to allow the cats inside the bedroom. The note told her to keep the door closed. And there was a terrible smell. She put the laundry basket down.

On the bed, right smack in the middle on the bare mattress was a big cat turd surrounded by a puddle. Oh crap, she thought, literally. She didn't quite know how to handle this situation. You can't just launder a mattress. The protective mattress pad sat in the laundry basket freshly laundered. She opened a window to let the room air out. Susan took a deep breath and went to the hall cupboard for rags and cleaning supplies. She cleaned up the poop the best that she could and set to work on the urine. She knew, however, that no matter how hard you scrub, there is nothing that can clean cat pee. That smell was permanent. She found some Febreze and sprayed it heavily on the cat pee spot. Then she found some of Megan's perfume and sprayed that, too. She also sprinkled the area with baking soda. Nothing helped. Despite the cleansers, Febreze, perfume, and baking soda, all Susan smelled was cat pee.

On her own she flipped the mattress, hoping that Megan and Tom would never discover the mess in the middle. She nearly broke the lamp on the bedside table, knocking it over when turning the mattress. She got it squared away, but was out of breath and exhausted. She still had to make up the bed.

She shrugged her shoulders and started to put the bedding back onto the bed. She made the bed as nicely as she could, smoothed down the wrinkles, and fluffed the pillows. The bedspread looked smaller. She could have sworn that it draped almost to the floor, but now it showed a little bit of the box spring. Megan and Tom ought to invest in a dust ruffle. Otherwise, it looked pretty good, hopefully as

nice as Megan and Tom remember it. She closed the window, checked under the bed to make sure the cats weren't there, and she backed out of the room, closing the door on her way out.

She felt a breeze. Her heart froze. She turned and saw that she'd left the front door wide open.

"PSST PSST PSST! Here kitties! Here kitty kitty! Here Atomic! Here Mandu! Oh please come!" She felt tears welling up. She couldn't breathe. She squatted on the floor, unable to function. She hugged herself and rocked back and forth. "Oh no no no, this can't be happening. I've got to find them." She looked at her watch. She still had about two hours to find the cats. She called Brett.

"Meow!" he answered.

"Hey babe. Not now."

"You mean, 'not meow!'" he said.

"Please stop with the meow stuff. I can't find the cats."

"I'm your cat!"

"Will you please stop?!" she shouted into the phone. "I'm serious! I lost the cats! Can you please come right away and help me?"

"Oh! I see. I'll be right there."

She went outside to look around. She walked around the building, looking into bushes and under all the cars in the lot. She saw a kid walking down the sidewalk.

"Hey kid. Um, hi sweetie. Um. Want to make five bucks?"

The kid was about ten years old. He looked really nervous, stepping side to side, looking behind Susan. She was blocking his path forward. He looked like he was considering running back the way he had come.

"I need help. Can you help? I lost two kitties. You like kitties don't you? Will you come with me and help me look for them?"

The kid jolted to her left, ran around, and kept running.

"Oh crap," Susan muttered. She went back toward the apartment and went inside to see if maybe the cats were there. She looked under the couch, in all the closets, the bathroom, and made another thorough check of the bedroom. She carefully shut every door after checking, so that she knew the areas were clear.

“Hey babe! I’m here!” Brett walked inside.

“I feel just sick about this, Brett! We’ve got to find them.”

He hugged her tight and assured her that things would be okay. The cats would return.

“I know,” he said, “we can open a can of cat food outside. Hopefully they’ll hear the sound and come running.”

“That’s a great idea!” She grabbed a can of cat food and stepped out onto the landing. She played with the lid noisily, slowly opening the can, calling for the cats.

While she was outside a police car pulled up and an officer stepped out, talking on his radio.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Mind if I ask you some questions?” he called up to her from below.

“What’s this about, officer?”

“We had a report of an attempted kidnapping at this location. Do you know anything about it?”

She looked nervously toward the sidewalk as another police car pulled up. Back up.

“What’s up, babe?” Brett stepped out of the apartment.

“Come on down to the car, please. We need to talk. Sir, are you together with her?”

“Yes. What’s this about?”

“Just come down to the vehicle and we will talk. Sir, I want you to go talk to my partner. I would like to speak to the lady alone. Put the cat food down, ma’am, then rise slowly, and come downstairs, showing me your hands the whole time.”

Susan nervously followed the officer’s instructions.

“Have a seat right here on the curb,” he instructed her. Brett walked over to speak with the other officer.

“Were you here about a half hour ago?” he asked.

“Yes, I was,” she answered.

“Did you offer a child money?”

“Yes, but just five bucks. I thought maybe he would want to earn some money. Kids need money, right?” She was speaking quickly, showing her nervousness. Her knees shook and she hugged herself

again to stop the shaking.

“Just what did you expect him to do for the money, ma’am?”

“I lost some cats. I wanted him to help me find them.”

“Is this your home, ma’am?”

“No. My friends live here. I’m watching their cats.”

“The cats you wanted him to help find?”

“Yes. Can you help me find the cats? I need to find the cats!”

“Stay right here ma’am.”

The officer walked over to his partner. They spoke. They laughed. One of them spoke on his radio, then he was on his phone. He laughed some more. Then he walked back over to Susan.

“Ma’am, you scared that kid to death. It’s not okay to just offer kids money. The kid knows all about ‘stranger danger’ and he told his mother that you tried to kidnap him.”

“Oh fuck!”

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I see the cats! Right there, behind the bushes! See?”

The officer walked over to the bushes. The cats ran out and away from the officer. They ran up the stairs to the apartment and inside through the open door.

“Oh thank God!”

“You’d better shut that door before you lose them again.”

Susan stood up and walked up the stairs. She shut the door and turned back to the officer, who had joined her on the landing.

“One other thing, ma’am. Do you know anything about a potential breaking and entering at this location? This would have been on Monday. We had a witness call in to report a woman climbing through this second-story window. We didn’t believe it was true, since nobody called to report a burglary, but you fit the description, and well, you seem like, um, well, was it you?”

She sighed heavily. “Yes, it was me. I’d locked myself out and got in through that window.”

The officer walked to the edge of the landing and leaned over a little. He laughed and turned back to her. “I’m impressed, but I

recommend that you don't try that again."

A taxi pulled up. Megan and Tom got out and looked confused, then angry. Tom retrieved their luggage and paid the driver while Megan ran upstairs to Susan.

"What did you do?! I knew we shouldn't have trusted you!" Megan yelled at Susan. Susan started to cry.

"Oh, it's okay ma'am. We were just here to ask your friend a few questions about something that she might have witnessed. We'll be on our way. I hope you had a nice trip." He winked at Susan and went back to his patrol car.

"So everything is okay?" Megan asked. Susan nodded.

Megan looked down. "Why is there cat food out here?"

"Oh, um, I thought I saw some stray cats and I wanted to feed them."

Megan looked at her questioningly, raising one eyebrow. After a pause she said, "Gross."

"Brett, are you ready to go?" Susan asked, eager to leave.

"Yeah babe. Let's get some dinner," Brett replied.

Tom brought the luggage up the stairs. "Everything okay?"

Megan still looked at Susan suspiciously. "I think so."

"I just need to get my purse." Susan went inside and came back out with her purse. "Welcome back, love birds!" She bounded down the stairs and ran toward her car. Brett got into his own car. The two drove off in the same direction.

"Why did they have separate cars?" Tom asked.

"Why was he even here?" Megan answered.

They entered the apartment and immediately picked up the cats, petting them and cooing about how much they missed them. After seeing to the cats they went to their bedroom to unpack.

"What's that smell?" Megan asked.

Dinner Table

Shay Williams

I know how to stir without thinking
pushing mushrooms around a pan
with a wooden spatula,
until it's something others can enjoy

I know their preferences—lists and lists
of what they can bear to eat

In the outdoor pantry, I know where to find the cumin
unground, in little seeds,
how to dig through the loose legumes box,
until my hands are full of urad dal,
like little ants

I know the smell of burning olive oil,
and rancid panko crumbs
that lingers in my nostrils,
long after they were thrown out

I know the sound of “I’m not hungry”
through a bedroom door,
and the empty dining room chair

I know when to lower a flame,
creeping words minced, sauteed, and softened
I know the click click click of a burner that won't light.

I don't quite know how to let things simmer,
stepping away while it bubbles
and trusting that it won't boil over.

The Feast

Stephen Poirier

I want a jumbo juicy steak to satisfy a fiendish craving
I want it red, rare, and rank with a taste that leaves me raving

I want to toss aside my fork and knife and claw right into the grease
I want to lick away the pink and red juices then tear off another piece

I want to sink my teeth into the gore, through the tendons and the strings
I want to dive into this man-sized meal and swim through all the grisly things

I want the scent to storm the air and stir the neighbors into a frenzy
I want them to hound after that curious flavor possessed by hunger, lust, and envy

I want to embrace the man who sells shoes with hands washed in reddened water
I want to hoard in all the school kids as I turn the grill up hotter

I want to hear that sweet sizzle as I sear through guts and bile
I want to suck the juices from the carcasses before I toss them on the pile

I want the smoke to reach the sky and pollute the air into a haze
I want their souls to infect the clouds as they are drowned in red and gray

I want to inhale the crimson vapors that choke the sunlight overhead
I want to drink in the heavens bleeding through as we all start seeing red

I want the fumes to shroud the world, blending man, meat, and beast
I want to lose myself in the fog and surrender to the feast

A Clown at Dinner

Benjamin Lete

The freezing breeze is killing the warmth
of the once bright, candlelight above this white-clothed table.
The red convulsions dance and sing with the swinging silverware.
Yet my dull knife and dirty plate lay dead in the same place.
I brought my best jacket, knowing it will keep you warm over your lace,
and moments ago I took a blade to my face.
Please, come, please.
The flowers are dying.
Yet, I'll still wait.

Dandelion

Shay Williams

I yanked up
dandelions
by the handful
this morning,
a bouquet
of
weeds.
Their hands,
tangle,
with mine—
and their manes
brush
my nose.
They clamber between
ceiling tiles
between
the gaps
in
my teeth.
whimpering
like a dog
mangy and thin
when I pluck it from
the earth—
neglected
by those that
used to love it.

I tell
my father
over dinner
that lawns used to be
a sign of wealth,
swaths of nothing
but
whispering
grass.
A monoculture of
appearances.
To be loved,
was to be poor.

Godot

Katelyn Zou

The kitchen was a mess. The granules of sugar that made their way from her shaky grasp of the measuring cup crunched underneath her slippers and a thin layer of flour covered the surface of every counter. It was the closest it'd get to a white Christmas in this part of Arizona.

It's a funny thing how a face never itches until the hands are slightly sticky from handling dough. The old woman tried to push the hair out of her face with her arm, rubbing her cheek against a fuzzy sleeve. Yet, the strands that had slipped out of a tight but slouching bun persisted until she eventually welcomed their company. Out of the corner of her eye, grey little ribbons danced their way up, dispersing upon contact with the roof and drifting out of the kitchen and out to the world.

The granite island from which she was working faced a red corduroy couch with its overlay taut on the frame, leaving the vertical lines mostly undisturbed. She took great care to alternate her seating, making her way across the couch from left to right throughout the day with her hands clasped in her lap. She sat frequently because there was nothing much to do in such a big empty house. But the couch remained plush and the weight of her hunched frame left little proof anybody even used it at all. Some days she would lose track of which spot had been sat in, but she would never forget to sit on the right seat next to the phone. The calls had stopped coming years ago, but when the clock hit four she would make her way down to the little red couch just in case, staring out into the street through the window with a hand on the receiver and the other in her lap. Who she was waiting for became lost to her as the years went by, but she knew she missed whoever it was dearly.

It wasn't time to wait yet today, so the old woman hummed to herself as she massaged the lumpy mound on the cutting board, pressing down with both hands and tipping her toes again and again with each motion. As she worked, she looked out the window and admired the way it framed the world outside, turning everything within its corners into something beautiful. Something worth looking at. Perhaps the mailman would finally come inside for tea today. The itch started to spread to her throat, interrupting her tune. She pushed

a single hand into a pocket, so that the dough would still be attended to, rustling past little wrapped disks until she reached the one at the very bottom, unwrapping it with only her thumb. As if it was rehearsed. As if she had done so a million times before. She popped the Ricola into her mouth, swishing it around and smiling to herself at how smooth and cold it felt before swallowing it whole. The ribbons continued to dance.

“Oh good heavens!” she exclaimed; the thick smell was what finally brought a crust that desperately needed to be rescued to her attention. Sticky hands swiped twice across the dirty pink apron before slipping into a pair of oven mitts to cradle a darkened, cracked pie crust that warmed her palms through the thick, quilted fabric. As she suspected, the poor thing had been in there too long. She could’ve sworn she set the timer for only fifteen minutes, but she never heard it ring. The crust had shriveled in the heat and hissed contentedly upon contact with the kitchen air. The woman couldn’t help but feel sorry for the pie crust and how pathetic and defeated it looked.

“I must have forgotten about the darn thing,” she tsked.

The warmth seemed to spread and with a loud yelp, she dropped the failed pastry and the now cracked pan it was in in front of the woman’s feet. She allowed the oven mitts to quickly join the charred crust as she assessed the damage. Strangely, her palms and fingers looked as they did last time she saw them—pink and raw—only now they were matted with a few of the fibers from inside the gloves. She stood looking down at her hands, perplexed. She mulled it over, gnawing at a cough drop that was long gone, the sound of grinding teeth never reaching her ears. Few things these days did. She had grown accustomed to the silence, until she couldn’t recognize when it wasn’t even there.

Oh yes, that’s right. In her excitement, she accidentally took the last pie out without the oven mitts. Wait a minute, where exactly did that pie go? Careful to step around the mess on the floor, with her hands still held out like a surgeon ready for the OR, she inspected the tops of the counters. Nothing. She leaned from left to right to get a better view. Nothing. No! She didn’t have time for this. The kids would be over soon and now she had to start from scratch.

Ready to operate, she grabbed a new mixing bowl and men-

tally applauded herself for her forgetfulness, as the slabs of butter and various bags were still gathered together, open and all. It was much more convenient that way. She grabbed a measuring cup, filling it with pristine white powder and using a paring knife to flatten the mountains to a smooth plain with one precise, practiced motion. She loved making pies. She had in all of her years as a daughter, sister, mother, and now grandmother. At least, she thought she did. She smiled at herself, thinking about the warmth that would rise in her chest when gooey rhubarb smiles appeared and forks clinked against little plates. The faces the smiles belonged to weren't fuzzy but they were certainly smudged and textured. With age, that's how she saw a lot of things. It's how most things looked when she reminisced about nothing. In the years of remembering empty nothings, she could only remember how things felt. And she would cling to the memory of how it felt so she wouldn't forget. She remembered pies made her happy. She repeated the action one more time. And then two more. Then three. Soon, the entire bag of flour sat in her bowl.

"Now, that isn't right," she muttered to herself, placing both hands on either side of the bowl, with the hand still clutching the measuring cup resting against the counter graphite-smearing side down, "we only need—" She couldn't finish her thought. How many cups of flour did we need? She tilted her head in contemplation until her eyes wandered to the paintings hanging on the wall and the flat metal handle suddenly felt foreign between her thumb and her finger. Never mind that. There wasn't any more time to lose. She'd compensate for the extra flour by putting in more—what was the next ingredient again? Her palm found her way to her forehead, gently trying to smack the memory back in.

"Edith, come on now. Stop being silly," she nervously chastised herself, eyes darting rapidly back and forth between nothing in particular. "Now isn't the time to forget! This recipe has been with the family for so long now." She took a deep breath to steady herself. She was making the crust, right? She couldn't get the crust wrong. Everybody loves the crust. Edith loved the way she could barely tell where the dough began and when her hands ended when she kneaded, and

how when it was baked its pleats matched the hands that had shaped them. Come to think it, she couldn't quite remember when was the last time she had a bite of her own pie. But what came next? Butter? Eggs? Eggs! That's right. The order shouldn't matter anyway. She lifted one to crack, exposing a shiny golden yolk as it slid down into the bowl and the viscous whites followed. As the round little sun sat in the bowl, she stepped without looking on the pedal of the trashcan next to her to dispose of the now empty shells. The lid opened in sync with her step, but a familiar sweet scent caught her attention. A blend of smokey and sour aromas enough to make your jaw ache followed. The shells fell onto the floor.

"Mrs. Radley! Mrs. Radley!" a pleading voice called, "Mrs. Radley are you okay? What are you doing on the floor?" A frantic man in a dress shirt, slacks, and oxfords rushed into the kitchen with a suit jacket draped over one arm. "My wife said she heard a scream coming from your house earlier and told me to see what was going on after work when she realized nobody else came to check on you. I've been knocking and ringing the bell for almost an hour now. Is everything alright? My God! Mrs. Radley what happened to your hands!" The man examined the crumpled woman sitting on the kitchen floor with her back against the dishwasher, a tiny shrunken thing, with flour and soot smeared on her face like an old child.

Mrs. Radley couldn't bring herself to speak. Her eyes lingered on the bin and the neighbor's followed. He couldn't take his eyes off of what must've been eight or nine burned pies in the trash. His mind raced to the white trash bags that lined the curb on his way in. They were out of sight from the Radley's residence, teetering close enough to the invisible line between the two houses to be the subject of his wife's complaints before bed. An eyesore for the whole neighborhood, she had called it. Or rather she had called Mrs. Radley.

"Forgive me," Mrs. Radley laughed suddenly, pushing loose strands behind her ears, "I've been such a bad hostess. Thank you for stopping by, Nigel. What do you think of the place? I'm terribly sorry for the mess."

The man shifted his weight to one leg as he shook his head in disbelief, keeping his eyes on the bin. Here Mrs. Radley was sitting on the kitchen floor, surrounded by broken glass and food everywhere, hands raw and oozing from lack of attention, and she asks what he thinks of the place? “I don’t know who Nigel is, but Mrs. Radley, please let’s get you cleaned up.”

“But Nigel, dear,” her intonation rose, “what do you think of the place?” She shook her head as she spoke. Her face was still fixed in the direction of the trash can, but her eyes were glazed over in a way that indicated she was looking at nothing in particular.

“I don’t know, Mrs. Radley!” The man ran his hand through his hair, exasperated, “Cozy? I suppose? I’m worri—”

“Huh. Cozy,” she muttered, “who would’ve thought. Anyway, would you care for something to drink? Iced tea perhaps? I think there’s some in the fridge. Help yourself. Go on now. Don’t leave an old woman hanging.”

The neighbor tore his gaze off the pies in the trash and the scene of the kitchen. “We’ll get you cleaned up and then I can give someone a call. What in God’s good name are you doing at this hour anyway?”

Mrs. Radley nodded towards the fridge again. The neighbor sighed as he walked towards the fridge, decorated with old photos yellowing at the corners. The only thing keeping them there were big block letter magnets pressing against the edges as they curled outward slightly. White powdery fingerprints were placed on top of the faces, as if someone had caressed the photographs.

He wrapped his hand around the curved bar of the fridge door and lightly tugged as his fingers slid a little bit against its sticky surface. With the dim light shining on his face, he looked in horror at its contents. He stood there for a couple minutes, mouth agape before turning to look at Mrs. Radley, who was now sitting on the red couch with one hand on the receiver that sat to her right. “Mrs. Radley wh—”

“Will they ever come visit me?”

Two Cups of Rice

J. Gibson Davis

2 cups of rice. Maybe a little more....Come on, we're not feeding babies here, real scoops. Alright, there we go. A pinch of salt. Yes, a pinch. Well that's what it says. I don't know, just grab some salt and put it in. No, not a handful—here, just let me do it. Anyway, next, chop up some onion. I know you like a lot, so dice up as much as you want. And some pepper—hey I said some! Not an air supply, Jesus. You're the only one who likes it that hot, my god. Whatever. Next, some shredded cheese, we should have a bag of some already in the fridge. Yes it's in the middle drawer. Yes, right there, are you serious? Alright...here! Would you look at that, it was right where I said. Okay so just sprinkle some of that in with the rest of the stuff. What? No, we're not ordering a pizza, we're going to finish this. Now, it also says a dash of basil and rosemary, which, I think after the whole "pinch" fiasco, we might just skip. Also, after how much pepper you put in, I don't think it really makes sense to put it in anyway. Alright finally, it says a tablespoon of milk. I don't know, I guess it's some sort of creamy rice. I don't know, I didn't make the recipe! We've had this a dozen times, don't pretend like this is new territory for you. And there we go, doesn't that look nice? And thanks to this guy for helping me make it! ... No mom, we're not going to just order pizza.

Crab

Sasha Syrevych

My shell is the shield I built to protect,
to cover my back on a deserted beach.
I crawl up inside and none can object,
unable to land a soul-cracking breach.

My claws snap away at those who intrude,
with words, I make their reaching hands bleed.
I'm tired of playing the solo etude
my wish for company, a perennial need.

I don't have the grace of a cat or a horse,
my name synonymic for a scary disease.
At least I'm presented as the main course,
the wish for my body is now to please.

A shell, strolling sideways and hoping someday
the merciful ocean will sweep me away.

The Year of the Tiger

Sky Ward

I thought it might just be me
Running on caffeine and spite
But my dad says the whole world is angry
And it keeps us all awake
Like fireworks for the new year
The year of the tiger

I am not an angry person
But I wonder on occasion
If I'm lying
Tension in my shoulder blades
Unspoken curses
Un-thrown punches

Or maybe it's the world
I drink the angst like tea
Stained daily by the tannins
A gauze pad on an open wound
Trying to staunch the flood
Until I can no longer separate
Their swelling madness from mine

the panther

Sabrina Bee Buzas

the panther skulks quietly in the shadows,
careful not to tip off to their prey
their presence shrouded,
weaving in and out between the gingkos.

the panther is alone.
their prey, mistakenly marooned
the rest of its group oblivious,
the panther strikes the cartilage, bone,
satiating itself.
until it grows nauseated at the idea.

the panther leaves half of the carcass
a meal for a scavenger, perhaps,
the panther returns to her home
nestled in the branches,
cool and damp to the touch.

maybe tomorrow will be the day
the panther will stomach it all.

Titanus Mosura

Vanessa Lund

I follow the light and hope it guides me,
In that same streetlamp a moth thwacks the bulb.
It looks confused but flutters by
They seem to get lost quite often,
Do they enjoy it like me?
Or are they simply afraid of the dark?

It's a shame a cocoon is thought ugly,
And a chrysalis beautiful,
Even the names devote hierarchy.

We all start out as squishy and lumpy,
In kindergarten we read the Very Hungry Caterpillar,
He makes a cocoon but becomes a butterfly,
In the same vein I make chrysalis,
And come out a fluffy moth.
It seems to confuse everyone,
Do you really wanna be less pretty?
Yes, I like being comfortable.
Now let me snack on your clothes.

I like being warm and having layers,
So what if a little friend made a hole in my sweater?
The silk we wear is those cocoons,
They boil the future moths alive,
But it's a sustainable farm,
It's woven into something soft,
With beauty rivalling the butterfly's wings
Maybe it's why I enjoy sewing.

The antennae are spread out and fringed,
My bangs sit in odd directions in the morning.
Their body is fluffier and suited for the winter,
I only shave my legs for family pictures,

They disguise themselves like leaves,
And then sit on the wrong plant,
I dress in checkers and leave the kitchen,
Maybe we both like to stand out as we please.
Both moths and butterflies can be invasive,
Yet only one is killed almost immediately,
By a newspaper at home,
If I'm a pest as well,
Then you should try harder to squish me.

Anger, suffocating me

Nyah Marcus

Anger, suffocating me
Get out of my face
Get out of my headspace
Don't talk to me
Don't even mention it,
Just leave it alone, leave it at peace,
Oh but you won't because it's not what you eat.
We swallowed it down
But you keep regurgitating those arguments.
You try to push us down,
Trying to make us drown
We've forgiven you but we haven't forgotten
It hurts too much to leave it stuck and unforgotten.

Unending dread of uncreativity

Nyah Marcus

I feel like I'm losing myself
The person who I once was is lost to the void
My creativity spills out of my head like an oozing cartridge of thick ink
As time continues it gradually drips out of my head
All sense of who I was starting to drown in the black
I can't take it anymore
Maybe I should let myself drown, get swallowed up in the void
There's no way for me to escape this feeling
There's no help for me once I accept this fate

Danse Macabre

Lillian Duenas

I met my lover at a bar
His name he told me not.
His hand brushed up against mine,
Scooting closer with each shot.
My curiosity burned more,
Than the alcohol we bought.

I looked for answers in his eyes,
So comforting yet cold.
I could not help but want to touch,
His hourglass of gold.
From his hand, a cigarette.
The taste was harsh and bold.

From his sleeve, he drew a fiddle,
And we danced the night away.
But just before my lover left,
He leaned in close to say,
“To flirt all night with me, my dear,
Is a game one should not play.”

Dolly

Taylor L. Miller

When I was four years old I went to visit my family in Tehran, Iran. I was finally going to meet my grandparents in person. Up until then they had just been voices emerging from the receiver of an old corded telephone. Then there was the rest of my extended family. Faces that shared such familiarity where there was yet none established. My inability to speak the language was a sore spot for me. I felt like an outsider, a fraud, but then some relative of mine would just look at me and smile, turning to some distant relation of mine twice removed. I could feel the warmth of their words emanating from them as they spoke; I didn't need my mother's translations to hear the love in each syllable. My grandmother especially would just look at me and sigh. Look at me and exhale. "You are so beautiful." Another exhale, "I love you so much. What do you want? Another serving?" She said these things so much, they became the only words I knew with any certainty in the mother tongue.

Among my family was an aunt who lived on the outskirts of the city. One day in particular we went to pay our respects. She lived in a big house that was about as colorful on the inside as it was on the outside. The backyard was nothing but a bleak stretch of cement. While spacious, it had no special features to boast. The grass that dared to grow in the cracks was perpetually and silently choked by the dead gray sediment straddling either end. Everything was muted here, but many parts of the city could be characterized the same way. The mosques were the one true exception. When you walked in, it was easy to forget that the dingy outside was fashioned to prostrate itself in rags. This in contrast to the dazzling glamor of the mosque's colorful geometric patterns and impressive vaulted arch-ways.

Not long after our arrival and formal introductions had been made, and no sooner had the dull hum of adults conversing begun, than I shot for the backyard. I was accustomed to making my own fun. It was no different here. I began kneeling and looking for rocks in every corner. I liked to play geologist. Given the chance to brush stones out of the dirt I would, but I had no brush so I made peace

with primitively prying them from the earth. I made sure to fill in the little pock marks left behind by my fists' furious excavations. When I was satisfied with my loot, I hunched over to evaluate the pile I'd accrued. I set aside the cement fragments to be discarded later, washed clean several smooth gray pebbles, but the prettiest of my current collection were a smattering of decorative stones that had been conservatively spread out to adorn the ugliest patches of compacted dirt. Unfortunately, like many ignorant explorers before me, I didn't grasp that they had been placed there for this express purpose, so I appropriated them as souvenirs. To most they would just see some common lawn fodder, but to me and my wild imagination they were magical gems.

I looked up from my daydreams and saw in the distance a man fast approaching with a woolly lamb. I stirred with glee at the sight of an animal. Finally some compelling company. I asked to pet her. The man seemed to understand the nature of my request. I knew nothing of the morbid plans ahead for this poor beast. After several minutes my aunt came out to greet the man. She affectionately bade me to go inside. I slowly slunk back to the house, but not long before crossing the threshold I turned back on my heels and holed up behind the cement railing. I soaked in her every movement. They are such funny things with their knobby little knees, and yet incredibly agile when necessary. My dad was a science nerd, so of course I named her "Dolly" after the first mammal to be cloned. The butcher and my aunt passed pleasantries while he started to shear the wool off her. I wondered naively what my aunt could intend to make from Dolly's wool. I giggled silently as I bore witness to the absurdity of her denudement. The lamb seemed unperturbed by this change of events. It let out several meek protestations, before being awarded some choice grass.

No sooner had this labor been completed than the real undertaking started. I wish I could forget. A well timed blink could have saved me the nightmare of watching that animal breathe her last breath. Seconds made the difference between life and death. I'll never forget the shade of crimson that spilled out from the nape of her neck, like thick pomegranate juice. It splattered over the dull cement,

exsanguinating her as branches formed and flowed out slowly from the bloody base, like they were being guided by the steady hand of a cartographer. I stared in horror as this morbid map of rivers shaped itself in real time.

Rage set into my bones and sent my limbs flying. I hailed stone after stone that I had collected at my aunt and the butcher. My aim had never been much, but sheer quantity made up for that now. As I rained hellfire I screamed obscenities at them in “four year old,” Burns like—“You are evil, EVIL MEAN BAD person, you hurt baby lamb.” Your standard menacing war cries. I said all of this in English so, of course, my aunt had no idea what I was saying. Just that I was assaulting them without mercy and had the upper ground. They were completely exposed. Before I could exact any more revenge on them I realized my aunt was calling for my mother. She had already moved into action at the start of our imbroglio. My mother flanked me, sweeping me up from my cement barricade, while I thrashed and spit more unintelligible venom. Tears streamed down my face. That night everyone ate lamb stew but me.

Anathema

Amanda Bohnhoff

She couldn't tell what was real anymore.
The blood had been streaming from her ears for days now—
 pooling in the ear
canal and tickling the insides of her head.
It flowed down her neck, forging hot and itching
trails across her skin and into her clothes.
She could *feel it*, burning at her skin,
but when her hand went to wipe it
away, to try and quell the bleeding,
her fingertips came away dry.
Her tongue was scorched and cracked,
and scraped against the back of her
throat with each swallow.
Alleyways swirled around her,
never ending,
always changing.
Each step she took towards a distant, murky
light only drew her further into darkness.

With each turn, she was affronted by more pathways,
and the cobblestone beneath her
feet grew wild
and more jagged.
She could taste the moisture in the air, and the foul stench of sewage
waxed and waned as she stumbled
aimlessly through the labyrinth.

She'd been here for hours.
For days.
For an eternity.

She couldn't feel it anymore.
Shards of glass that had been stuck in her skin for
days were now bound to her
by thick globs of congealed blood.
Some were already buried beneath scabs,

and others were now lodged into epicenters of festering sores
as her body struggled
with what little vitality it had
left to push the foreign bodies
out of her flesh.

She could still see the rats in her
periphery, little white masses
that taunted her
at the frayed edges of her vision,
then disappeared when she turned their way.
She had stopped trying to silence them,
and the hissing and shrieking
had taken on an almost rhythmic
presence in her mind.
They whispered his name to her,
and she repeated it back to them,
as though it might lead her to
him.

She searched for him
the way a wounded animal searches for
water in the desert,
the way that same
animal searches for light
even as its mind is wasting away
cell by cell.

She imagined first
her chapped lips against his,
her palms pressing against his chest,
memorizing the geography of his
body before settling over his heartbeat.
They would sink into him,
into his chest,
between the tendons and the sinew and

muscle, until she was inside of him,
until her fingers were
stretched around his very life.
Her chapped lips against his,
her teeth sinking into his tongue
his heartbeat smothered between her palms.

The agony would abate.
Her mind would return to her.

She murmured his name,
stumbling forward as her foot

caught on

a jagged stone,
and she went careening
into another unsteady, spinning
center of mortar and mold and mice.

The stone was hard against her
knees, and this time,
when she reached to feel the
blood, it was hot
and thick on her hands.
She brought it to her mouth
and with it, she wet her
tongue, sucking it from her
skin
before dragging herself
back to her feet.

His name echoed once
more against the stone.

The Dread, The Dread, The Dread

Steven Chuong

What comes in? It's the dread.
The heart races, never stops—never ends.
I wish I was dead.

I know, I know. It's all in my head.
I keep my worries from my friends.
What comes in? It's the dread.

The body mimics earthquakes and continues to spread.
Overthinking grows and ascends.
I wish I was dead.

Eyes are watering—tears are shed.
I don't accept the hand she extends.
What comes in? It's the dread.

Abort mission. I can't do this. Yes, I fled.
That's me—the kid with anxiety. He worries over every message he sends.
I wish I was dead.

Social interaction comes tomorrow. Should I just drop dead?
Will I have fun? That depends.
What comes in? It's the dread.
I wish I was dead.

What We Used to Be

The Rat Race

H.S. Tobias

Every first Sunday of the month did Birdy, Bart and Joel gather at one of their shoddy lit garages or at the local tavern to play bets. Blackjack, Baccarat, Craps and Slap a Cat. They'd play until their pockets were turned inside out, with empty stomachs. What had been a pastime with buddies transfigured into addiction; at home and at work these men had dice, cards and coins in mind. Sometimes they'd play with other men who quit when ahead of the game. And not too long ago did they run out of games to play, did they start to make up their own. Games where only one could win. Birdy, more than the rest, lost. He felt cursed by a bad streak. He thought his pockets must've been lined up with holes. As he walked home, back from playing, the street pavement was lined up with holes. Manholes went uncovered and from them vermin sprout. He feared something would sprout out of his own. So much did holes bother Birdy, he began betting more money to heighten his chances of winning. And still, every Sunday he walked home with empty pockets. All the extra money did was have him play for longer and walk home later at night, darker, darker. One night, the most he'd ever bet until that one night was seventy dollars. That night he bet one hundred and thirty dollars and returned home so tired, so dark he tripped on a hole and four teeth knocked off. If he were a kid that would've been a quarter per tooth with the fairy and he'd have one dollar more than he had now, to stave off the plague. Teeth don't grow back at the age of thirty-eight.

It was morning. Birdy sat at the television, one eye on the PBS rat maze documentary and the other at his baby blue, speckled in bird poo mailbox. Then, the mailman arrived and Birdy sprung from his seat with the excitement of a child on Christmas morning after Santa's shift was over. It arrived! it arrived! His eight hundred and sixty-three-dollar check had arrived. Without even socks to cover his happy dancing feet did Birdy shilly-shally across the barren, glass-shard and oodles-of-pebble yard.

Birdy sat at the television, with envelopes in hand. Shaking, rapidly flipping through adverts, coupons and job offers better than his own. Birdy worked as a school janitor, no shame in it but the

shame he felt. Thought he should feel it. Thought it would go away when he won it big, somehow. And with the leaving of shame arrive fortune and even a beautiful marriage. With flattering children all come riding within a golden carriage. They'd sing that dreams come true, and if Birdy smiled wouldn't they smile too?

Some envelopes had quips like "The Beach Boys and the Bee-Gees are having a party in your pockets, WALKMAN!" "Buckets so BIG, chicken so TASTY it's not fingerlicking good, it's elbow sucking DELICIOUS," "We are EXTERMINATE! Rodents and cockroaches have met their fate!" And, voila! His hard-earned money. Now, Birdy had been watching the lab coat talking heads all morning that Saturday. Had he any children they would have been watching cartoons, he'd be preparing breakfast or fixing the crawling in the pipes, but he would not have come up with his latest game: *The Rat Race*, title of the documentary he'd been watching. The television scientists had been training a rat's senses to solve mazes. They argued that, more than sight and memory, a rat's sense of smell was the most efficient way a rat could solve the mazes; rats could even detect changes in weather before they happened. They argued as well, that if a rat were to lose its sight, its sense of smell would develop to make up for its blindness and the rat would be even more effective at solving mazes. As a side note to their experiments, the scientists found that the rats with better solving capabilities were treated as dominant members of their colonies, as if they returned from the maze champions.

Birdy ran to the hardware store for a hundred dollars of wood, then built a small rat maze in his yard. Marvelous. Birdy puff his chest, his lip curled. Tee-hee, he sneered. Birdy walked to the nearest payphone and did call Bart and Joel.

"I've a new game, Rat Race, we're racing rats and yerr gonna need to find a rat and some cheese, gouda or some nefarious smelling cheese."

"What? Why? No."

"We're racing rats, how about, you put down a hundred or two on it. I'm putting down six hundred dollars, no, seven hundred dollars on mine rat."

“You’re serious? You’ll pay seven hundred? To the winner? Birdy, is your head ok?”

“I’m feeling my luck, c’mon. Bring a rat tomorrow, my place. Don’t forget the cheese.”

“Very well, Birdy.”

You have to imagine the call went that way, because the next day Bart, Bart Jr., Joel and Joel Jr. showed up at Birdy’s. Birdy and Bart happened upon their rats by dumpsters. Bart’s rat had a chewed ear, just like him, so he named it Jr. Joel had the decency of getting a prim, combed and fluffed rat from a pet shop. Joel paid for his rat, so it’s either his offspring or a meal. He named it Jr.

Birdy came from within his home, holding a bottle of liquid detergent, hands soaked and dancing his steps while whistling the famous trumpet fanfare they play at horse races.

“Welcome to the Rat Race!”

“Have you been drinking that?” Joel asked.

“It’s for my rat, little on the, err, windshield and they get going real nice!”

No way you’re paying seven hundred,” said Bart.

Birdy dried his hands on his jean’s backside, then retrieved from his pocket the seven hundred dollars. He shook the wad at them, to show he had the money.

“Listen man, he wants us to bet about a hundred or two. That’s a lot to lose, what if he’s tricking us?” Bart whispered to Joel.

“I don’t know, I think he’s lost it. Look at him, something’s not right with him. We should call it quits.” Joel answered.

“It’s not worth it, Birdy. We’re going home!” Bart exclaimed.

Birdy signaled with his hands for them to stop; he scurried in and carried out a cardboard box. Then did he twinkle his fingers and as if a magician’s act, pulled out from the box a pale-eyed rat. And presented it to Bart and Joel.

“A blind, is it blind? A blind rat? Birdy, what the hell is wrong with you?” Joel scoffed. Shaking his head, he left Birdy’s lawn and drove away.

“So uh, is the bet still on? Racing some rats?” Bart asked, barely holding back an impossible grin.

“Yerr on, man,” said Birdy.

The race began. Birdy’s rat, like a soldier in a minefield, scrutinized every inch of maze wall it ran into and made its snail-paced way through the maze. Every time its paws would touch a shard of glass, or a fragment of bird poop it would study its smell. The rat lingered longer than the rats on the television; Birdy was not happy. Birdy had just now realized that his rat’s guiding star was well in his tawdry, gimcrack, open air lawn. The many times he pissed on this lawn, all the trash bags he lazily dragged across it tore and left a humid snail trail of bathroom sludge. Those pretty, pampered television rats in their white foam, clear and well-ventilated mazes had it easy. And did Birdy bet seven hundred dollars on this rat. This rat that sniffed urine and thought of rat soda, Ratorade and Rat-Cola; but licked the ground and tasted dirt.

Bart Jr. claimed the cheese, and Bart fell on his knees crying tears of joy. Birdy stood there, not an inch of child-like excitement remained in his body and he realized Santa Claus is not real and if he is real he works as a tax collector.

Bart claimed his prize, closed his eyes and sniffed the money, then drove away.

Birdy stood there, looking down at the poor rat’s pale eyes. Not a blink, quivering, showing it had no teeth. If that rat were a kid, that would’ve been a quarter per tooth with the fairy and he’d have... well, something.

Ode to My Flesh

Sabrina Bee Buzas

it has taken
so long
for me to accept,
let alone
love
this vessel that carries
me.
my worth
does not begin
nor does it end
in the corporeal.
it is not even
within the top 5
maybe even 10
list of things that
define me best.
it has taken
so long
for me to outgrow
the hate
the derision
which i held
for the body
which i reside in.
i was too
lanky.
i was, then,
too round.
my mother
had not seen me
for several months—
the longest we'd
ever been apart—
and, quietly, she remarked
“you've put on some weight.”

she showed me online searches
about birth control
about thyroid problems
but did she not see a problem
when i ate like a bird?
when the circumference
of my wrists
was akin to that of
a popsicle stick?
she cried
when she found my
binder.
“why would you want
to do that
to your body?”
she asked me.
i would tell my best friend,
how much i wished i could be
an android.
take the spirit of the soul
and place it in a tin can.
when i wanted breasts,
i could.
when i didn’t,
i could do that, too.
for years
i wanted a nose job.
the bumpy terrain would look
right back at me
reflecting.
pretty girls had button noses.
pretty girls had flat stomachs.
pretty girls had thin, long legs.
pretty girls had lithe, delicate arms.
i had a Jew nose.

i had a belly pouch.
i had thick legs from muscle.
i had flabby arms.
it has taken
so long.
lithe, delicate arms.
it has taken
so long.
to love my precious little Jew nose.
to love my belly pouch.
to show off my legs
to wear a tank top.
i have my mother's nose.
she has her father's nose,
and so on.
my father's eyes look back at me in the camera,
i grew curves like my mother and her mother
before her.
when the fabric of my shirt
lifts
my lover's eyes gaze tenderly
at my little pouch.
he loves my broken body.
the collagen damaged,
the joints,
tendons,
sinew,
is fatigued
from holding me all together.
when i was a little girl,
i was a ballerina.
supple skin,
rosy cheeks.
today,
in whichever way i can.

i've grown to love my body
in spite of those
who have told me not to.
i wrap myself up with
athletic tape
to keep myself from
falling apart.
i choose a pink one,
to cheer myself up.
it works.
i balance myself on
a pink cane.
i surround myself with joy
in whichever way i can.
i've grown to love my body
in spite of those
who have told me not to.
i have a body
meant to rear the children of Ardeal.
i have a body
that looks like everyone
who came before me.
I cover my frame with
drawings
of things that make me
happy.
on my arm,
the life stages of a strawberry
in bloom
no matter the season.

An Ode to My Arms

Sara Malik

My average arms
pretty skinny and bony
might not look like much
but these arms
I owe so much too

Thank you for holding those in need
thank you for making sure they felt safe
Thank you for making me also feel safe

These arms have hugged
so many moments into my brain
these arms have made me feel
like I am loved and safe
these arms let those people know
that I love them as well
these arms convey emotion
my words never could

After “My Father’s Carving,” by Julian Parayno-Stoll

Katherine Gathright



Body of Evidence

Sam Altman

Alexander crouched on his haunches, the denim of his jacket bunching up against the tree he was leaning on.

Ian, his work partner, was hovering, staring directly at Alexander's face even though Alexander was too preoccupied to Display Emotions like Normal People.

His partner's stomach-curdling guilt (blood on Ian's tan hands and face, mud on the knees of his normally impeccable work pants) and the emotion behind his mumbling, voice-cracked "help me" could wait, he had to cover this up for his friend. He was the poster boy of the police force, a genius consultant-turned-detective at barely nineteen, with several years of experience now; he knew how people got caught.

How could he hide the evidence well enough that only someone on his level, someone who saw everything differently, could find it?

Burning the body was not on the table. They were in a state park, for god's sake, trees were everywhere.

Alexander straightened, ignoring how Ian flinched at the sudden movement, and walked over the thick trunk of the tree to lean over the body.

Hm. This was certainly not good.

Ian's blood (a nearly bone-breaking punch to his nose that had just now stopped bleeding) was on the body's hands, mixing with that of the body's on split knuckles. That could be removed quite easily. The mud on all of their shoes, Ian's pants, all over the corpse's clothes, could near definitely be identified to the local area, or at least the state park as a whole. And it wouldn't be terribly long before the body began to decompose.

There was the incredibly simple-minded idea of burying the body, but the mounds of dirt from the burial, from the body expanding and releasing gases, would be far too obvious.

Then Alexander looked back at the tree, behind which Ian appeared to be hiding, and it snapped into place in his mind. They didn't have any possible material in order to follow through, but he would make do. Ian could be trusted to fetch materials, but that was it. He was the one to get himself into this in the first place, he could only

make things worse.

Alexander walked back around the tree to Ian, who was still hiding from the body (it was his fault, shouldn't he see what he'd done?), and put both hands on Ian's shoulders, commanding his full attention.

"Leave the panicking for later. Right now is the time for problem solving."

Ian nodded. Alexander noted the tears in Ian's eyes, the snot running over the dried blood under his nose.

"You have exorbitant amounts of hand sanitizer and large plastic bags in your car, and for once they're actually going to be useful. Go get them. You didn't park far away."

Ian nodded again, sniffing snot back up his nose.

Alexander added, trying his best to look and sound sincere, "It'll all be fine if you just do this right."

Ian managed a gargled "okay" before turning and scurrying up the hill, slipping on dead leaves.

Alexander circled back around to the body, tilting his head as he stared down at it.

The man's face had been screwed up in anger moments before he died, breathlessly growling insults—even as he was rapidly losing air—at Ian, who had both arms wrapped around him from behind. Ian's face had been similarly contorted until he spotted Alexander, watching from a good distance away. Ian had dropped the man almost immediately, but it had been too late. The man's air pipe had been crushed, he couldn't breathe, and he had already lost all his air.

Ian had tried to resuscitate the man, but there was nothing he could really do. At that point Alexander had approached, offering to call an ambulance, but Ian turned on him then, shouting an order to do no such thing. He was several years older, he was a higher rank, et cetera. But he was stepping away from Alexander and the body, keeping his distance.

Alexander had noticed, then, that the man's face had relaxed. He looked almost peaceful, despite the signs of a fight all over him.

He still looked peaceful now.

He kept staring down at the man's face even after he heard Ian

approach. Alexander didn't look up until Ian was right beside him. He turned, making direct eye contact with Ian. He wouldn't do that at all normally, but given the circumstances it seemed important enough to do so now.

Ian stared right back at him, unresponsive. His eyes were still tearing up.

Ian was the first one to break eye contact. Alexander took one of the giant plastic bags and set it on the ground, crouching over the body and rolling up the sleeves of his jacket. "We'll put his clothes and shoes in here. Help me remove them."

Ian made a sound comparable to a whimper and kneeled down on the body's opposite side.

They made quick work of it, Ian supporting the body while Alexander removed, folded, and stored away each article of clothing. Alexander opted to leave the underwear on the body. It maintained the slightest amount of dignity, and there was no blood on it.

Before he put away the pants, he dug around in the pockets, pulling out a wallet and keys. The man's ID was visible in a clear window.

"Olson Hawke, twenty-four." Alexander scanned Ian's face for any form of recognition. There was none. "You didn't know his name?"

Ian shook his head.

Alexander dug around further in the wallet. There were no pictures, just a few dollars and a couple of smoothie bar punch cards. He was one punch away from a free pretzel.

Wordlessly, Alexander took a wipe from the packet Ian had brought over and wiped down both the wallet and keys, tossing them down on top of the body.

Ian protested, "What are you—"

"What, you don't want any theoretical family to have a chance of finding him, do you?"

Ian was immediately silenced.

"That's what I thought."

Alexander took the (honestly far too large) container of hand sanitizer and dumped it over the body's arms and face.

“Did you bring a bottle of water?”

Ian handed it to him.

Alexander began to scrub off the blood. When he was done, he used the leftover hand sanitizer on himself. He ushered Ian away, then, spotting bits of mud in the surrounding area uncovered by leaves, pressed the man's boots over any other footprints.

He stuffed the boots in the bag, closed it, and tossed it at Ian. “Burn these as soon as possible. Don't step in any uncovered dirt until we get to one of the regular paths. And clean yourself off.”

Briefly checking that Ian was following his directions, Alexander hoisted the body up and over his shoulder, tucking the wallet and keys into the band of the body's underwear.

He made careful, weighted steps to the edge of the cliff they were near (the sound of the nearby waterfall had been very distracting) and threw the body over.

Ian squawked. The body made a faint thumping sound as it landed.

Alexander dusted himself off. “You'll need to get rid of your boots and pants when you get home. I will do the same with my shoes.”

He turned, trying to remember which way he'd come from, and made careful steps back to the path leading to his car.

Alexander was glad that if he kept himself distracted, he could compartmentalize for a little bit. On his way home, he blared electronic music as loud as his sensitive ears could handle, not allowing his mind to stray away from either the music or his driving.

About a third of the way home, he stopped and threw out his shoes in a dumpster behind a restaurant.

He continued this strategy when he got home to his apartment, taking off his jacket and shoving headphones over his ears, playing similarly energetic music. Just in case, he also turned on the TV in the living room, playing a show he liked. He couldn't hear it over the music, but he had every goddamn line of the show memorized so it didn't matter.

It was almost ready. Alexander stared at the TV for a moment, mouthing the lines the characters were saying, before spinning around

and beelining for his bathroom.

He had an as-needed sleep medication for when everything was a bit too much for him to fall unconscious. It would make him pass out not long after he took it, so he put one into his pocket, arranging his living room into a makeshift sleeping area.

The moment he was satisfied, he flopped down on the couch, headphones still on but set at a slightly lower volume. He wrestled his shirt over his headphones and tossed it to the side, taking the medicine dry and curling up under his favorite blanket, watching the TV until his eyes fell closed.

The sleep medication kept him from dreaming, but the dead man's face was still the first image in his mind as he woke.

(Fine. Just in case.) Alexander found a spare piece of paper and closed his eyes with a grimace. He wrote down everything he knew about the man, a visual description (don't think about the blood on his hands) as well as his name. He couldn't remember the man's address. He added a description of what he had seen Ian do, making careful note that Ian did not seem to intend to kill. He skipped a few lines and wrote everything they had done to alter the area, even the name of the restaurant where he had tossed his shoes.

Alexander stared down at the paper when he was done. Writing it all down didn't help. Images of the night before were still flickering in his mind, showing no signs of stopping. Something in his chest was clenched, pulling and twisting on itself until Alexander found it difficult to breathe.

He folded the paper and stuffed it in his pocket.

Not showing up to work would have been an incredibly obvious mistake to make, so Alexander showed up on time as he always did, despite the thoughts rattling around in his head refusing to stop.

Ian was almost fifteen minutes late. Alexander had to wait around at his desk, reading over paperwork and twiddling his thumbs and forcing it into an emotionless blank. It felt unnatural to do that, for once.

Ian had been late only once before in their years of working together, when he'd gotten in a car accident on his way to work and showed up with a broken arm. He'd had to be forced by the police captain to take a taxi to the hospital.

Fifteen minutes late was a sign.

The moment the door opened, Alexander's eyes locked onto him, not moving to go talk to him and waiting for him to approach instead.

Ian was ducking his head, eyes on the ground as he wove through desks to get to Alexander. His head was soaked by the rain outside, dark hair plastered to his face, and he had his raincoat draped over one arm.

Alexander, completely dry because he had the sense to use an umbrella, folded his arms and waited for Ian to explain himself.

"I didn't sleep. Lost track of time." Ian's voice was gravelly, weak with disuse. He hadn't shaved, there were still impressions on his face from a pillow, there were pronounced bags under his eyes. He looked like human garbage compared to his usual self.

Alexander, hoping that his voice was flat and didn't display his thoughts, said, "You're not doing a very good job with this so far."

Ian shook his head minutely. "No."

"If you still insist on following through with this, you'll still need my help, and you need to get a handle on yourself. You still haven't changed your mind?" Alexander's voice was showing more emotion than he would have liked, but at least he was keeping his voice down.

Ian shook his head, eyes trained on the floor.

Alexander huffed a small breath out his nose, looking out the nearest rain-coated window. It was stupid to hope that Ian would give himself up. Ian was his only friend, here at work or anywhere else in his life. Ian was the only one whom he got along with. He wouldn't have anything if Ian was gone.

"Well, we still have our work to do." Alexander stood, his legs wobbling a little. He steadied himself with one hand on his desk. He had to stay composed. Under no circumstances should he allow this to affect him.

Alexander had conveniently forgotten that they worked for the Homicide part of the department. So, of course, the first thing they had to do was drive for thirty minutes to a cabin on the city's border to stare down at a dead body.

Alexander hadn't touched anything yet, so he deemed it sanitary to stuff his gloved hands into his jacket pockets as he blinked lazily at the body of a dead woman in her mid-fifties.

Forensics people were scurrying about around them, taking pictures, carefully taking samples from the body and the surrounding area. The usual.

Ian had almost immediately excused himself to go back outside upon seeing the woman, and he had been gone for several minutes.

Alexander, aside from the brief rush of nausea at the rotting smell that filled the main room of the cabin, was unwilling to let this affect him. It was almost a facet of his reputation among his coworkers that he was unaffected by the presence of the dead, and he wasn't going to let that change now.

Alexander kneeled down over the woman (oh god it was just like yesterday) using his gloved hands to gently move aside the torn remnants of her shirt. She'd been stabbed, in the most general sense of the word, but something rough, a serrated edge, had clawed at a significant portion of her stomach, like these rougher wounds were meant to cover the cleaner, more neat wound that reached deeper, farther down into her organs and scraped against her spine.

Alexander felt nausea bubble back up in his throat, but he gritted his teeth and swallowed it right back down. He now understood why Ian had gone back outside. He stood, picking his way back out of the cabin without disturbing any of the evidence markers, dropping off his soiled gloves at the trash bag at the front entrance. He exchanged a brief nod with the forensics person monitoring who came in and out, and darted out the door.

Police vehicles and an evidence collection van surrounded the cabin, but nobody else was in sight outside. Alexander spotted a cluster of bushes not far away and ran toward it, circling around it and dropping to the ground out of sight of the cabin.

The urge to vomit was back in full force now, and he just let it happen, doubling over and grimacing at the sour acidic taste when he was done.

Shaking, he stood back up and made his way to his car, slamming the driver's side closed, lying curled up in a ball in the backseat.

He had to admit, he hadn't prepared for this part. He couldn't just methodically cover up his own guilt. He didn't have any prepared coping mechanisms for this.

Alexander curled his body tighter, wrapping one arm around his bent legs and the other around his head, painfully pulling on his hair. He was distantly aware of his breath rattling, his face wet with tears.

He closed his eyes, shivering against the unheated leather of the seats, shaking his head as if that could just dismiss the conclusion he'd come to.

There was one horribly obvious way to stop feeling like this, at least as badly. There was no way he could continue, Ian's friendship be damned. Nothing else could stop the roil of guilt in his chest, the inherent wrongness of the entirety of yesterday's events.

He had to tell someone.

Alexander sat up, wiping stray tears from his face, and climbed awkwardly into the front seat, starting the engine and pulling onto the dirt road that led back to the city.

Ian would have to find his own way back.

By the time Alexander stepped through the door to the police station, heading toward the Captain's office, his legs were hardly strong enough to support him. He nearly collided with someone on his unsteady march through the office, mumbling an apology as he dug the piece of paper out of his pocket. He skimmed over it, ensuring it was the right one, then looked up to discover he'd already reached the door of the police Captain's office. His boss. Alexander's hand was frozen on the doorknob.

Wait, would he get fired for this? It wasn't like he'd waited long at all to report it, and he didn't kill anyone, but he still helped Ian to get rid of a lot of the evidence.

And—

The office door opened, almost pulling Alexander along with it until he let go of the doorknob.

Captain Warner, a woman with severe facial features and impeccably arranged dark hair, was towering over him, brows raised and pushed together in concern. Ah, so she'd started wearing heels again.

"Alex? Did you need something?"

Alexander had to crane his neck to properly look at her face. "I wanted to report something."

Warner's expression morphed to that of confusion. "Sure, come in."

Alexander shuffled around her, sitting in one of the smaller chairs in front of her desk. The folded paper was crumpling in his hand.

Warner shut the door gently, sitting on the opposite side of the desk. She let out a small sigh. "Were some of the new officers being ableist again? I really—"

"No, no." Alexander interrupted. "It's about Ian. I, um."

Alexander's throat threatened to close itself off, so instead he just gave the crumpled note to Warner.

She unfolded it, even more concerned, and began to read it over.

Alexander couldn't seem to lift his head to look at her, so he just stared down at his lap. His fingers were picking at the palms of his hands again. He forced himself to pick at a stray piece of string on the chair instead.

Alexander looked up only when Warner spoke. "Do you know why Ian got into that fight?"

Alexander scanned Warner's face. She was showing clear signs of anger, of course, but the way her eyebrows were raised indicated what must have been some form of sadness or pity.

"Um, no. Ian never explained it. He was in the forest in the first place because he was trying to track down one of the park rangers, but I don't think the man was a park ranger. I think they got into an argument, at first, then it got...worse."

Warner nodded. "Okay. Do you know where he is?"

"Ian?"

"Yes."

"No. We were at a crime scene earlier and he just ran off. I don't know where he went."

"Okay." Warner reached across the table, and Alexander almost flinched, but she just patted the one hand he'd placed on the desk.

"Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry you got into this."

"I think I'll call Ian, try to get him back here without him thinking he's in trouble."

Warner shook her head, withdrawing her hand. "I think you've dealt with enough." She folded up the note, sticking it in her desk.

"You'll need to come back in a day or two to clarify your statement, but for now just go home. I don't think it would be good for you to interact with Ian again if you can help it."

Alexander nodded.

He stood, leaving the office and shutting the door softly behind him.

And he ran right into Ian.

"Oh."

Ian was staring, wide-eyed. His eye-bags were even more pronounced. "What was that about?"

Alexander stared at Ian for a long moment. "Oh, Warner was just asking how the new officers were treating me. She wanted to ask you about it, too, in case I missed anything." Alexander smiled ever so slightly as Ian flinched, creeping around him into Warner's office. Alexander waited, frozen still, until the moment the door clicked shut, and took off running toward the exit.

What I Wish I Didn't Know, But Maybe I'm Glad I Do

Holly Bayly

I know a lot of things I wish I didn't know, like many other people do.
I know innocence, left like trash.
I know how to breathe in a target over sights.
I know what it is to pull the pin and feel the violent rush,
at least the first few times and then, where did it go?
That I am only just now learning.
I know what it is like to not die and ask why.
I know what it is to spend my days considering those who did.
Three now come to mind
stains on the sidewalk.
Like screams.
I know that after a few weeks everyone stops noticing.
I know the fragility of life, and only sometimes I wish I didn't.
What I know colors everything around me
the precious gold-leaf on the pages of my life
I know it is miraculous to live, if even for moments
to draw breath without trying, to open my eyes and see.
I know how precious it is to hear the sound of a beloved speak
to see beyond the surfaces of indignation.
I know it is important to understand this
in order to know how miraculous the rising sun.
I know that life is fleeting and yet, somehow, I've already lived a hundred years.

Remembrance

Emily Land

It was light. Much lighter than any other picture I have held before. It felt delicate, as if one wrong move could tear it in two. The film was clearly darkened by the passage of time. It had that tint, the one in which you knew that the people within the photos are completely changed. A memoir from both a past and current life, I balanced it between my index and thumb, framing the photo with my other hand. My fingers traced the edge along the photo. They were soft, fringed, each thread reminding me of the beginning of a soft frayed blanket. My eyes floated to the center of the image, where three small, smiling girls, ordered by height, were beaming towards someone to their left. Clearly siblings, they shared familiar features, their smiles only slightly changing from sister to sister. My eyes wandered to the shortest of the three. Dark curly hair, and a familiar face so full of wonder. My mother still has that same glimmer in her eyes, that familiar warmth, only now that glimmer seemed happier and brighter when seen in the proper light. My thumb grazed the border of the photo, slowly moving closer to the glossy center. I angled the photo and watched the light dance from corner to corner. The gloss was smooth and cool, and for a second I believed I could slide my finger right across the picture's surface with no consequences, but then I suddenly felt pressure, as if something attached itself to my finger. I lost my focus, distracted imagining a time I'll never know. I lifted my finger, desperate not to cause more damage, but the image followed, clinging for dear life. Until it, like everything else, got tired and breathlessly let go, carefully returning to its place on the dresser. I peered over the image, eyes wide as I saw my fingerprint on the darkest part of the photo. My fingertip felt tacky, and when held up to the light I noticed a grid of gloss ever so slightly wrapped around my finger. I gazed at the image one more time, being careful to remember every detail as I took a step back, turned off the light, and gently closed the door.

What Am I

Raymond Schneider

What am I?
My face is too round,
And my nose too small.
My hair is too dark,
And my skin too yellow.
So if I can't be white,
What am I?

My nose has a bridge,
And is too big.
My hair is too thick,
And my skin burns.
So if I can't be Asian,
What am I?

I'm too white to be Asian,
I'm too Asian to be white.
I can't be both nor neither;
Pulled into predetermined parts.
So if I can't be mixed,
What am I?

People are like the forms I dread,
It's always "ethnicity: pick one"
With my name, I'm lying if I pick Asian.
But I'm lying if I say I'm not Asian either.
Born with *bao*, *hakao* and *lo mai gao*.
So if on paper, I'm an "other,"
What am I?

"You're not really Asian,"
My mother said to me,
As casual as reporting the weather.
But I'll never forget that night.
When I asked the mirror a riddle,
"What am I?"
Cause I'm no longer 'me'.

Haiku

Aaron Loss

Webs for prey
cold days between meals,
lie in wait

Identities

Sara Malik

MUSLIM

My faith is everything
my religion stands for peace
it teaches love

TERRORIST

We're claimed to be dangerous
because of a piece of cloth on her head
or a beard a man grows
or speaking the mother-tongue
America is where we lost our freedom

WOMAN

I am a lady
I am a sister, daughter, mother, friend and wife
I go through pain every month
I am known to withstand
the greatest pain in the world; childbirth
yet I have no respect in society's eyes

I am an object
I am a toy for men
I am a servant
I should not be educated
but I am powerful and strong
because I am woman

Respiratory Repertory

Marie Morley

I skip down the trickster traveler's steps
Find my row and slide down the scratchy red buzzcut velvet
Of the numbered throne whose gilded nameplate
Speaks to the ticket giddily grasped in hand

Curtain keeping all secrets save the promise of wonderment
The house lights dim to soft warm glow
And I glance to share the magic with the love beside me

But they're gone.
In greeting instead upon the stranger's face
Bare for all the world and all the stage
Are tongue and teeth and exhalation

Whipping head to each degree
The same grinning fate leers from all sides
From gaping maws and greedy noses
My palms reach up and up and

Self suffocating hands clamp down
On nose and mouth unmasked
If only to be unmade

And the floor within me falls away
Leaving my inner me to tumble down
Bumping over collar bone and
Richotecting through ribcage
Catching myself on vertebrae on vertebrae on breath

But the breath reminds that the air is unsafe

And the inner plunge begins anew
Hands like magicians scarves in reverse
Phalanges cracking jaw and crawling down esophagus

To plug up the drain
To snuff out the pilot light
To deflate the ever rising lung balloons for good

Til I wake on gasp
On ever persistent air
Unwilling to go quietly
Unwilling to go at all

Abort Thy Freedom

Sasha Syrevych

They overturned
Roe v Wade.
They overlooked
the danger they put us in.
They overrode
the fact that our bodies are ours to command.

They think they can belittle
the risks and death rate of childbirth.
They think they can control
the who, why, when, and where we give birth.
They think they need to secure
the “domestic supply of infants.”

Some men, choosing between
4 weeks, 6 weeks, 8 weeks.
Some men, telling the
victims of rape to just “have the baby.”
Some men, claiming that
the life of a cluster of nerves is more important
than the life of a woman, or even a girl.

Ma, Is It OK?

Arisa Ventura

i asked her yesterday
when i made her nightly coffee
but she couldn't hear me
for her eyes were on my grandmother,
wearing the new shoes she had bought her,
and she is asking, as she's done every day,
ma, is it okay?

Obsolete Adolescence

Vanessa Lund

I'm too young to be of use but too old to forget,
The hospital lobbies I sat in every week,
Playing a game to distract myself,
It didn't work and tears were left unshed,
The memories are clear I was too old to forget,

I'm too young to truly understand in the adult way,
Mom wanted to hide me from it but I knew better,
My aunt drove us a lot and delivered food,
Mom couldn't cook a lot due to pain.

I'm too old to forget her sobs and restraint,
The hair and burns were the worst,
Hair is such a detrimental part of her image and creativity,
I'm too young to understand loss of the self,

I'm too old to forget the pinks, blacks, and reds,
Skin should never be that colour ever,
The aloe vera bottle at home couldn't help,
She just had to bear it, and I had to watch.

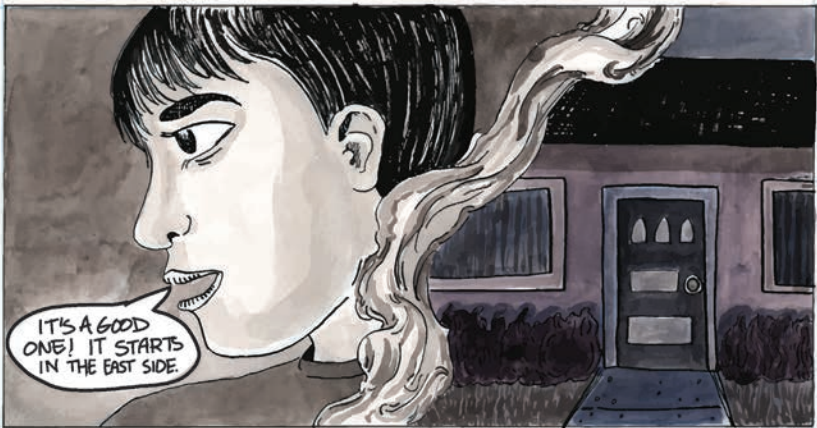
I'm too young to drive then and stop the overuse,
Of tired arms overworking even in illness,
My tears for her and myself, unable to help,
I'm too old to ignore it and be selfish.

I'm too old now to reminisce,
It's been ten years since those fateful days,
I saw her fear, pain, depression, stubbornness, and frustration,
The weight of useless adolescence will never be gone,
But I'm too old to focus on myself now,
I'm too young to be fully independent,
But the burns are healed now,
I can aid in ways that matter more than tears
Because I'm not too old to be without her.

Medicina

Julie Cardenas









WHEN WE TELL THIS STORY, WE START BY SAYING:



THIS WAS A REALLY GOOD IDEA.

IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TIMES WE FELT LIKE WE COULD DO SOMETHING FOR OUR PARENTS.



MY FAVORITE SWEET THING IS THE PINK ONE.

ME, TOO.

WE FOUND EVERY SINGLE "SWEET" MEDICATION WE COULD FIND.



WE DECIDED TO DRINK FOR TASTE



I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH WE HAD BEFORE WE PASSED OUT.



MY FATHER FOUND US LIKE THIS.



Arlo and Celene

Marie Morley

Bunnies burrow. This is what Arlo has always been told. Bunnies burrow and foxes sneak and water flows and this is the way it is and will be. All Arlo's sisters burrow and all Arlo's little cousins burrow and all Arlo's great grandmother's great great grandmothers burrowed. And Arlo cannot stand burrowing.

When Arlo burrows the ground feels too tight, the air too still, the sound too heavy. She gets itchy when she burrows. The itches start in her whiskers and scurry over her fur and squidge all the way up into the folds of her mind. In the burrow Arlo is always hot and always cold and never comfortable. With every paw Arlo descends into the burrow she can feel it guzzling her up whole, closeting her away into the dry din and damp dim of a world without sky. And Arlo cannot stand burrowing.

"It's so cozy," chimes Arlo's littlest sister, snuggling in for the night.

"It's so peaceful," hums Arlo's biggest sister, easing into her nook.

"It's so practical," reassures Mama, nuzzling Arlo's forehead. "Remember, my little stargazer: safe and sound, under the ground, home and family will be found. Bunnies burrow."

Arlo puts on her smile, nods along to the resolute refrain, and knows that her family wants the best for her. She kisses Mama on the cheek and slips away to her hollow and swallows the truth she can never say. Bunnies may burrow, but Arlos do not.

As twilight dons her ever-blackening cloak and slow breathing, soft snores, and subconsciously twitching ears once again fill the space, Arlo gently pads to the burrow's entrance. Without a glance behind at her crepuscularly clustered family Arlo cannot help but hasten her pace as she nears and nears the grassy opening, ascending the entryway whose passage narrows unbearably as it approaches, as if in the ground's final attempt to lay its claim, firm its grasp, keep her—
Free!

As soon as her nose greets the fresh, crisp air, every trace of tension melts from Arlo's body. She drinks in gulp after gulp of moonlit air, bathing her lungs in the attuned clarity she can never

find below the earth. Eyes closed, heart open, Arlo tilts her face towards the sky and takes a deliciously expansive moment to just be. And be. And be.

Then she is off, zooming through the calmly caressing grasses, hopping over lichen-kissed rocks, exulting down the tree-lined trail she treads each night. Untethered from entombing tunnels, when Arlo jumps she soars, when Arlo laughs she sings, when Arlo smiles she gleams bright enough to hail the stars. Arlo comes upon her favorite oak, with the broad, well dispersed branches and, in a series of practiced, surefooted bounds, she soon reaches the top of the tree.

The moon is a crescent tonight. Arlo imagines how it might feel to be held in the crook of that sweeping, swooning arc, to lie against that exquisite, swelling glow. Eager not to miss a single moment of beauty, Arlo resists the persistent droop of her eyelids, counting stars until finally drifting off into the sound, steady sleep of a being at peace.

“Wake up.”

Arlo’s nose tickles, and ears twitch.”

“Wake up, sweet one.”

“Hmmm?” Arlo lazes, still coiled in comfort.

“Your family will soon be awake, the burrow is already starting to stir.”

This jolts Arlo awake, throwing her into sudden, jarring awareness only to lose it again upon finding herself in conversation with the moon. “M—, you’re—, I...”

“Call me Celene,” chuckles the moon.

“I—but you—wow. Celene. I’m Arlo.”

“I know, sweet one, but go now! I promise you’ll know where to find me tomorrow night.” Celene laughs, and Arlo laughs, and then begins the journey home, body unwilling, obligation beckoning, and “sweet one” echoing in her heart.

That morning is the longest of Arlo’s life, and it must have conspired with the day, for that too takes all its leisurely time, stretching on and on unbearably. When evening graciously slips away

at last, Arlo runs as Arlo has never run before, hurtling unerringly towards the oak, up the branches, breath held, hope held, scarcely able to speak, she whispers, “Celene?”

“Good night, Arlo,” greets Celene with a luminous smile.

And so begins the endless conversation, what feels to Arlo to be the only true exchange she has ever known. Each day, they await. Each night, they talk. They talk in words, they talk in silence. They talk of everything, of anything, of nothing. They talk of Arlo’s sisters, the big and the small, and of Celene’s sisters, the stars and the suns. They talk of how light feels on fur and of how shadow feels on rock. They talk of bubbles. They talk of dreams. They talk of waxing and waning and of all the secrets we burrow away within ourselves. They talk and talk and talk and could go on forever talking, and one night when Celene is full and Arlo is full of wanting she says, “I’d like to touch you.”

“I’m touching you now,” beams Celene, gazing on the pool of moonlight embracing Arlo.

“I’d like to hold your hand.”

“I don’t have any, my love.”

“I’d like to rest my body against yours, and eat jam with you, and hear the forest’s music and smell strawberries and leap and laugh and dance with you, and I’d like it to always, always be night.”

“Come to the pond, Arlo.”

So Arlo does, because Celene has asked it. At the pond’s edge, crickets chirp and frogs mingle, but everything fades to background because there in the water, in the very center of the pool, rippling and bright lies Celene. “Come touch me, sweet one.”

There in a world beyond time, Arlo swims forward to circle Celene. There two souls dance. There, while the stars spin on and the earth twirls below, the lovers meet, alone and together, in a resounding rejoice.

My Lover is Right-Handed

Arisa Ventura

she'd clutch my hand under the table.
and laugh as she spilled and splattered
her left, so unused to all this strife

you can let go, i told her
her clothes, her skin—all stained
such a mess we've made

i don't mind it, she said
and she smiled as i cleaned her face
with the corner of my thumb

my lover is right-handed
and she keeps me here with her
this is the love we hold on to

On Eve's Grave

Arissa Ventura

sits an apple tree
to remind, to warn
of how at the core of it all
is a woman in love

and at this unholy shrine,
i pick from her branches
and bite into her skin
i swallow her seeds
and feel it take root inside me

and on eve's grave,
i lay and thank the first sinner
for even if i am outside
the garden, i still have her

Violets

Katrina Poulter

Purple blooms of beauty
Dew drips on Violets in the cold, grey mist of the morning.
I shiver.
Violets are lonely.

Violet, I am utterly alone.
I am a flower of love, of gentle kisses and intimate touches,
I want not to be watched, but seen

To burn violet, violent, sapphic love
Flames that lick molten hot at my soul and spark and tingle sharply in
my veins

To feel the gentleness of the breeze in my petals and smell the sweet
pillowy softness of your perfume.

Yet, I hide my petals as I do my loneliness.
And as much as I long to be seen, I fear it.

The Violet in me dies as she lives,
Utterly alone, waiting for the sunshine of a maiden to quench her thirst,
To pick her up with delicate fingers and give her a kiss.

—The Loneliness of Violets

The Rose

Jjesus Magana

So wild, so lush, and so velvety.
A thorny spell of spring.

Of wild yellows, pinks, reds, and whites.
Of marbled nature's geometrical design.
Of verdant descending vines.
Of multi-spectral warmth divine.
Of silk spun petals from dirt encrusted diamonds.
Of radiant unfolding presence.
Of thorny deceit in bloom.
Of uncontrollable passions sprung forth.
Of opulence that rivals the crystals of the earth.
Of love rebirthed,
Of Aphrodite's hearth.

The soil underneath you and me

Isaiah Jeremiah Reyes

Houses the living
And stores the life
Death to it is a blessing
Spreading the life of the dead
Underneath it is a city teeming with beauty
Little networks that work together for the greater good
That all work together
To explode when it reaches the top
Explode into beauty
Explode into necessities
Explode into life

It's Wanderlust

Sky Ward

One thing behind
One thing ahead
Caught
In the doorway
Running from
The notion of being still

Left my coat on the chair
So I am forced to come
Back and get it
It's an inside joke
It's wanderlust

House on the Strand

Holly Bayly

Late last night from my open window
a mournful breeze
softly fell upon me
my name quietly upon this breath
and with it all things familiar and unknown
cool tears running a course along the unseeing side of me.
I just began to hear the song within your roar
without a sail I plunged into the sea
into the wind I pretended was not there
and you let me be
to fill the depths with sorrow,
seduced by the sky
the cry that followed
echoed across the horizon and in, to me
where I turned to look out on emptiness
the clouds shielding
your soul, bright despite
obscurity
shimmering the tossing waters as the breaking foam
calls me home
me...this curtain caught in the wind of the open window
concealing what and who I am
lost in the folds of this fabric
living for an instant only because the breath of the sea
illuminates my mortal threads
where I have found the edges of my soul.

touching you is my love song

Mizha

“Hey,” Cameron says while he turns over in the darkness, facing Alex. Their legs are tangled with the single sheet covering them, summer air too hot for a full-fledged blanket. He shuffles closer even though his back is damp with sweat, finding Alex’s bare shoulder. Alex grunts a little in acknowledgment and Cameron grins, continuing, “You’ve never told me your favorite color.”

Cameron is met with silence for a couple of seconds before he hears Alex scoff, and feels Alex squeeze his waist gently. “Are you telling me you don’t know my favorite color, baby?” Alex asks, and Cameron shivers, laughs a little. “Sort of sounds like you don’t know it.”

“I do,” Cameron replies insistently, licking his lips for a second. “I swear I do.”

Alex chuckles softly and asks, “Yeah?” He moves closer and kisses Cameron’s shoulder, nosing at his cheek afterwards. Even with the relentless heat, Cameron can’t imagine not being so close to Alex. Having his hands and body near enough to hold, to touch, to take care of. Alex moves his lips near Cameron’s ear, and whispers, “What’s my favorite color then?”

Cameron huffs through his nose. “What’s mine?” he asks instead of answering the question. He knows what Alex’s favorite color is, but really, that’s not the point. The thought had simply occurred to him as they were getting ready for bed, and it stayed even after they lied down to sleep. Alex has never explicitly told Cameron his favorite color. Cameron can practically feel Alex rolling his eyes. “Come on.”

The sheets on the bed shuffle and Cameron feels Alex’s body heat leave him, clammy hand no longer sitting on his side. Cameron lifts his head a little and narrows his eyes into the darkness, seeing Alex’s figure with his legs over the edge of the bed. “Alex,” he says, and Alex looks over his shoulder, moonlight in his eyes where it falls delicately over his face. Cameron smiles softly. “My favorite color?”

“Black,” Alex replies and Cameron props his elbow into his pillow, watching Alex attentively. Cameron keeps smiling—he knows Alex will explain. “You like it because it’s versatile, especially with clothes. Goes with anything. Matches any occasion. You exclusively use

black pens for work. You—” Alex stops, clears his throat, and lowers his voice. “You like it when my hair is black.”

Alex turns his body towards Cameron again and leans forward, planting a kiss on his lips. Cameron smiles a little before Alex pulls away. The dull lighting still makes him glow. “Now mine,” Alex says and teasingly bumps their noses together.

Sitting up, Cameron puffs his chest out proudly and says, “I know it.”

“What’re you waiting for then?” Alex asks and climbs off the bed. Cameron watches with a frown, and Alex laughs. “Relax, I’m just thirsty. It sounds like you need to think about my favorite color anyway.”

Cameron makes an offended sound. “No, I do not,” he protests. Alex brushes away his shaggy hair, putting on his slippers. “Are you not sleepy?”

“Not really. You?”

“No. I’ll come too,” he says. Cameron climbs off their bed, stretching his arms above his head before trailing after Alex. The kitchen is brighter, a lamppost right outside the window that illuminates the entire apartment space. They live on the ground floor, but it’s still unforgivably bright. Well, at least Cameron can see the faint pinkness of Alex’s pale skin as he fills himself a glass of water.

Cameron hoists himself onto the kitchen counter and sighs in relief at the coolness that greets the back of his knees. Alex fills up a second glass with ice water and passes it to Cameron, who chugs half of it gratefully. He places the glass in the counter to his right and swings his legs a little, waiting for Alex’s attention again.

It takes a while because Alex’s deliberately stalling as he works on drinking his glass of water. He sips it achingly slowly, sending Cameron brief glances over the top of the glass, eyelashes fluttering. He probably knows full well that he’s getting on Cameron’s nerves a little, especially when Cameron pokes his stomach with his toe. Alex simply grins around his glass and finishes it in one more go.

“So,” Alex says and places his hands on the counter, bracketing Cameron’s legs in. The expanse of Alex’s chest is on display. Cameron

runs his finger down Alex's throat and the center of his chest, pinching lightly his soft stomach. His body is small, not in a bad way, just naturally so. The average size of a man, whereas Cameron is a little taller and bulkier—but they fit well together.

“So,” Cameron echoes when Alex doesn't say anything for a handful of seconds.

Alex stands straight again, pushing Cameron's knees apart to stand between them. “My favorite color is...” He prompts and ghosts his hands over Cameron's hips. Both their bodies are radiating heat, but Cameron still guides Alex's hands to rest against his skin.

Cameron sticks his nose in the air and says, “You don't know your own favorite color?”

“Of course I do, but do you know what it is?” Alex asks and presses his mouth against Cameron's, a little smirk across his lips after he pulls back. “You're the one who started this.”

Finally, Cameron relents—leans close and catches Alex's lower lip between his own as he says, “Blue.”

Alex kisses him back softly, with his hands still holding his hips, caressing the skin above the waistband of his underwear. He always touches Cameron with the utmost care and caution. “I was beginning to wonder if you actually knew or if you were trying to coax it out of me for some reason,” he says against Cameron's mouth, who just sort of laughs at that.

Of course he knows what Alex's favorite color is.

“Blue because—it's a bit melancholy,” Cameron says after he pulls away and brushes Alex's hair aside, tucking the longer pieces behind his ear. Alex is watching him with a small smile on his face. “I know it reminds you of sadness, of bittersweetness. Reminds you of things that are deep and dark, like the ocean or the sky.” Alex's smile grows. “It reminds you of the unknown. Of things like... love.”

Alex's mouth twitches. “How'd you know that last part?”

Cameron scoffs and asks, “Boyfriend of over two years and you think I haven't caught on to the way you write about love?”

“I mean—”

“You asked me, once, if you could read me this poem you wrote. I said yes, of course, and I listened and got emotional, because I usually do when you read your writing to me,” Cameron says and Alex falls silent, his hands having moved to the part of Cameron’s thighs that are showing, warm palms against him, nails sinking into his flesh. “I asked you why you thought of love as blue.”

Cameron takes a deep breath and continues, “And you said to me, ‘Love is always a little sad, isn’t it?’ And I—” His voice catches, cracks for a second. Alex’s eyes are glittering, and Cameron thinks maybe it’s a little strange that he finds Alex absolutely stunning even when he cries. The tip of his nose is a harsh pink, cheeks something softer, the shell of his ears redder than the rest. “I thought about that often, especially after you told me—”

“Baby...”

“—that you love me, but—but Alex.”

Full stop.

“Do you think loving me is sad?”

Cameron doesn’t realize he’s crying too until Alex is wiping his cheeks with the soft pad of his thumb. His expression is fond. It’s not so much that he isn’t concerned, but they both know how to deal with each other when they’re feeling overly emotional. It was difficult, in the beginning. Cameron fresh out of university and still navigating the world, meeting a beautiful man he never would have guessed would become the love of his life.

Meeting Alex almost came to him like culture shock. He was so alluringly different from all the people Cameron met in university, no one quite sticking after he graduated. Alex was in tune with himself—his feelings and emotions. He always made it seem like he had his life together but was honest about how he didn’t whenever anyone would ask. Alex was straightforward. When he started to catch feelings, he told Cameron just that.

And on the other hand, Cameron had been a complete mess about it. He wasn’t ready for that, for someone to be so shamelessly interested in him. Alex willingly waited on the sidelines, never quite

leaving Cameron alone, but not exactly sticking so close. He vaguely guided Cameron into choosing the right path for himself—it ended up being the one where he would find Alex along the way, waiting with open arms.

Cameron grew into himself as he grew around their relationship. Alex eased him into his friends, now their friends—a lovely bunch of five others, who can be loving and quiet and yet so chaotic. It took him a while before he too, fell into the same wavelength with his own emotions. Slowly became able to identify a feeling—to talk about it, accept it, find a solution. To be able to feel it through if needed.

Coming into himself made being with Alex significantly easier. Their first couple months were rough because Cameron would pick meaningless fights that only ended in them both being hurt. And rather than that, he now knows they should sit and talk it out instead. That way no one leaves angry or hurt or upset. He used to be jealous of Alex and how calmly he behaved sometimes, before realizing that they were completely different people, with completely different behaviors.

Cameron's relationship with Alex made him learn a lot of things. Not just about himself or Alex, but about the world too.

"No, baby," Alex says in a whisper, consoling a hiccupping Cameron with another gentle kiss. "It's not sad at all. Loving you, Cam... I can never put words to it. I can never write about how it feels to love you because I'm afraid of getting it wrong. I'm afraid of not explaining it right. Our love is so—so indescribable to me. I can only say it lives inside of me forever, even if you leave me."

"I'll never leave you."

"You don't know that."

Cameron laughs and looks at Alex, with his angelic face and wet eyelashes and sweaty bangs that fall across his acne-dotted forehead. Soft, pink lips that are slowly forming a pout. Cameron lifts his hand and grasps Alex's face, wiping his wet cheeks. Alex's expression reads as doubtful, as hesitant. He's scared—he's genuinely afraid Cameron will leave him someday.

“Alex,” Cameron mumbles and kisses Alex softly, pressing his tongue into the seams of his lips to pry them open. They don’t kiss deeply, but it’s passionate and careful and deliberate. Cameron wants Alex to know he’s not going anywhere. He sighs into the kiss and breathes Alex in, dragging his fingertips along his cheeks. “I love you, okay? I don’t want to be anywhere else, with anyone else.”

Alex nods a little and moves to rest his head on Cameron’s shoulder, bringing his arms around Cameron’s waist. “Okay. Okay, I know,” he replies and Cameron sighs again, trailing his fingers up and down Alex’s back. “Just get scared sometimes. There’s so many people out there.”

“It’s cliché, I know, but not one of them is the man who is standing in my arms right now, are they?” Cameron laughs as Alex does too, though always a little softer. “No one’s replacing you, Alex. I promise you that much.”

“I love you,” Alex says into Cameron’s neck.

Cameron smiles and replies, “I love you too.”

They stay in the kitchen for a while, listening to the city that still lies awake with them. Soaking in sweat, in fleeting and gentle kisses, in the bright artificial light cast by the lamppost outside the window, in the distant sirens heard ringing through their neighborhood. In Alex’s heart-beat, slow and steady. In Alex’s fingers massaging Cameron’s thighs, in Alex’s eyes which are bright—always, always bright.

Eventually though, Alex pulls back from where his sticky body was leaning into Cameron’s equally sticky body. Alex sniffs—grimaces, then: “Wanna take a shower?”

Cameron perks up at the thought. “Together?” he asks, and Alex grins a little cheekily.

“Sure,” he says and steps back, letting Cameron slide off the counter.

They walk hand-in-hand back towards their bedroom, finally giving in to turning on the lights to be able to see in the shower. It’s a foggy shower, one taken to get rid of the blistering humidity that

lingers even in the nighttime. Cameron blow dries his hair first, and Alex looks so tired now that he ends up making Alex sit on the toilet seat so he can dry Alex's hair too.

Ten minutes later, Cameron in a clean pair of boxers and Alex in the same (but a thin white t-shirt over his chest, too), they crawl back onto their bed with the sheet draped over them. Cameron sinks comfortably into the mattress, keeping his distance from Alex so they can ward off the heat this time. Either way, he knows they'll end up glued together in the morning.

As Cameron gets closer to sleep, he murmurs, "Alex."

"Baby, don't you dare ask me about colors again."

Cameron whines incoherently and kicks Alex in the shin. It makes a hollow sound, and when Alex kicks him back, the sound is much louder. Cameron hisses and rubs the spot with a pout on his face. Alex is watching him with hooded eyes, face squished into his pillow, lips pulled into a sleepy smile.

"I just wanted to say goodnight, asshole."

Alex yawns into his pillow. "Okay, get on with it. I'm pretty tired now."

Cameron places his lips over Alex's, and Alex kisses back lazily. "Goodnight," he says and settles back on his side of the bed.

There are few quiet seconds before he adds, "Say it back to me?"

When he looks over at Alex's face shrouded in darkness, he finds his boyfriend is fast asleep. But he's asleep with the most precious little smile on his face, and Cameron smiles to himself too, curling his hand around Alex's as he drifts off.

What Does It Mean?

Ever Keep

What does it mean
when I want
to hold your hand?
People say
it means I have
romantic feelings
for you,
but I'm not so sure.
I think it just means
I like the feeling
of your hand
in mine.

What does it mean
when I like
looking at
your body?
People say
it means I'm
sexually attracted
to you,
but I'm not so sure.
I think you're pretty
the way the clouds
are pretty;
I think
I just want
to look.

Dear Alex Claremont-Diaz

Ever Keep

Though I long for actual sunlight contact between us, I miss you like a home. Shine back honey and think of me.

Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky (1958)

I listened
to your story
In less than
a day.
I became
intimately familiar
with the bug stain
on the wall
across from
my beanbag chair.

*“Have I told you
lately that
you’re brave?”*

I have that written down
on the front page
of my planner,
so I can remind myself
that I can be brave,
that I am brave.

*He remembers
when he was a kid,
freckly and blissfully unafraid,
when the world
seemed like
it was blissfully
endless.*

You gave me
a world
to be a part of,
even if
just for
a dozen hours.
I reread and underline
your words
and smile.

*“On purpose,
I love him
On purpose”*

I love you
on purpose
too.

Shutout

Shay Williams

“Yo Anna, are you even awake?” Anna’s friend Bernie, short for Bernadette, was poking her repeatedly in the arm. She was tempted to ignore her on principle, but she finally relinquished her silence long enough for a single syllable.

“Mhm.”

“I get the sense that you’re ignoring me.” Bernie said teasingly.

Truthfully, Anna had a lot on her mind, she’d never been more uneasy about breaking good news to someone. Or at least partly good news.

Anna shook her head side to side, feeling her ponytail of pink hair swish back and forth with the motion. She couldn’t help but note the sound of the coach’s whistle, something in her hardwired to be hyper-aware of the noise after ten years of playing soccer. The awareness quickly slipped away alongside the rest of the sounds of play.

She honestly wasn’t even sure if she liked soccer anymore, or if it was just another expectation. She was sure she did at some point. Right? Who knows, maybe her eight-year-old self was just as convinced this was the only way to her parents, heart as eighteen-year-old Anna.

Or maybe she just liked soccer.

Yeah probably not.

At least Bernie seemed to have given up on trying to get her attention. She should have been out practicing with the rest of the team anyways. Bad enough that Anna was sitting it out. At least that’s what their coach probably would be thinking.

Her fingers keep finding their way into the cropped blades of grass, pulling them out one by one with the kind of unintentional violence found only in the distracted and distressed. She pulls her teeth over her chapped lips, feeling the tug of the dry skin. Practice was winding down, the rote repetition of good game, and hey work on your defense Margaret passing right by Anna’s ears.

Her mom was waiting in the parking lot to pick her up. Anna already had her license, but her mom liked to drive her to and from practice anyways. Anything for her future little athlete. A heavy sigh found its way out of Anna’s mouth as she tried to buckle the seatbelt and take off her cleats at the same time.

“Hey honey, how was practice?” Anna’s mom’s eyes were trained on the road.

“Okay I guess.”

“Did you see any recruiters recently?”

“...no, not today.” Anna’s mom frowned a smidge at Anna’s hesitation, though only her eyes were visible in the rearview mirror.

Anna stared out the window at the rolling scenery, which mostly consisted of the local suburbs, which she was secretly convinced looked identical to every other suburb on earth. She half-missed when it used to feel like home. She was distracted from her thoughts by the appearance of her actual home, a carefully crafted lawn, seasonal decorations, and notably, a different number on the front than all the other houses. She certainly counted herself as the only individual thing in the neighborhood.

Slinging her sports duffel over her shoulder, Anna made a bee-line through the front lawn, determined to go lie down in the dim safety of her room as soon as possible. Her mom took longer, stepping out of the car just as Anna managed to open the front door.

Oh.

Her father was waiting for her, his arms crossed, and mouth the kind of horizontal slash that it only ever was when he was beyond angry. She froze in her tracks, feeling all her momentum drain into a puddle around her feet.

Anna’s father used to be kinder. She thought. Faded memories of her childhood had managed to convince her of this. She remembered the feeling of safety in his arms, the kind of hugs you almost have to be small to truly appreciate. Or maybe it was how he’d always buy her bandaids in her favorite color, patching the tiny cuts and bruises that an even clumsier Anna seemed to collect like the sky collects scars. She was not quite sure when that changed, when her success meant more to them than her happiness. It was like a fungus, growing over both her parents until all they could see was their image of accomplishment. And not their daughter.

Anna’s dad didn’t seem pleased by the silence provided by her internal reflection, running a hand through his light brown hair in frustration.

He and Anna needed to talk.

She nodded weakly, moving to take a seat on the couch, the cushions giving way under her body. It didn't alleviate her discomfort at all.

Her dad didn't sit.

He'd gone through her computer. She didn't even know he could do that.

"And do you know what I found?"

She shook her head in the negative, even though she knew exactly what email in her inbox would have prompted this whole conversation.

"I sure would have liked to know that my daughter had apparently been offered a full-ride scholarship at the local university. And not just that—"

"Dad please just listen to me—"

"No." He wasn't yelling, and that made it so much worse, the coldness in his eyes—she felt like a stranger.

"No, I won't listen to you Anna, I think you missed your opportunity to explain yourself two weeks ago, after you failed to tell us about this."

Anna swallowed thickly, the words stuck somewhere behind her sternum, not that she would be allowed to voice them anyways.

"But no." He breathed out heavily through his nose. "Not only did I find that, no. I also found the email you sent, turning it down."

Anna's mom piped up from the doorway, fuck, she'd forgotten she was even there.

"Anna, honey, why would you throw this away, after all we've put into your future, after everything you've put forward." Her brown eyes were sympathetic, but her mouth was in the same grim line as her father's.

"No! It's everything you've *made me do!* I never wanted to do this, you just wanted to believe that I'd be your perfect poster child too much to notice!"

Anna's chest heaved, and tears burned at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't dare tear her gaze away from her parents.

“Get out.”

“What?”

“I said Get Out, you have an hour. I refuse to let someone so disrespectful as to squander every opportunity given to her, live under my roof.”

“Mark!” The sound of the impending argument between her parents suffused the air. Anna didn’t even bother listening to it, he wanted her gone? Fine. Emptying the contents of her sports duffel into the hall, she stormed into her bedroom.

With each item she stuffed into her duffel, the more her temper started to cool, until she was sniffing more than seething.

The strap of Anna’s backpack dug into her shoulder. It was heavy, stuffed fit to bursting, she was a little worried about the seams. It was still too light. The house around her was quiet, but she could still hear the echoes of the screaming match between her parents. She had no doubt it wouldn’t stay quiet for long though; he had promised to be back in an hour, and she had promised herself she wouldn’t be there when he was.

She looked balefully at her shelves of soccer trophies, the knick knacks she got on their vacations up north. It wasn’t empty, the walls littered with posters and pictures, her and her family, her friends, both current and ones long gone. She’d grabbed some, of course, but not enough. Her bag was full though. She felt empty, an endless pit in her stomach, she knew they were just objects, just things, but there was no time to grieve, despite what her watering eyes may have thought.

The minutes on her digital alarm clock kept ticking down, she felt rooted in place. Maybe she was, this’d been her room forever, literally she’d never known anything else. She took a shuddering breath through her mouth, pointedly not thinking of her mother tucking her under pink covers years ago. Pulling the cord on the ceiling fan, she watched the blades slowly cease their cyclical whirring. She flicked the light switch too, glow-in-the-dark stars, faintly visible through the new gloom.

Anna closed the door behind her. There was nothing left for her to take.

Reality Check

Sasha Syrevych

I know how to be a girl.
Looking at the world through wide untainted eyes,
wondering where my place is, not how to survive
I know how to be a woman.
Now seeing the world for what it is,
wondering what I am doing here and how to find inner peace.

I've seen how it is for girls:
How it starts with "Ha-ha untuck your shirt, it makes your stomach bulge."
and goes to "You'd be a greater athlete if you lost some weight, do not indulge"
and ends with "Wow, you look so skinny, what did you do?"
I refuse my lunch and eat a handful of cashews.

I know that every day I look in the mirror
and see something I don't like.
I know that I shouldn't hate my reflection
and yet
I choose to walk on the hated 5-mile hike.

I know how to look at my food and see numbers
Calories
Macros
Is this enough protein? Is this low-calorie? Will this make me gain weight?
I wish I didn't care about what's on my plate.

I hate the number *one thousand two hundred*.
I don't know who came up with it
but every time it sounds like thunder.

I know the words *intermittent fasting*, *MyFitnessPal*, *portion control*,
I've learned everything about *BMI*.
I've tried *HIIT*, *LIIT*, *cardio*, and anything that gives me a good burn
burn

Why do my thoughts burn as if someone cursed me with an evil eye?

I know how to scroll through hundreds of posts
Half of which are about “accepting how you look”
and the other half is “how to fix your body.”
So, which is it?
I don’t know and I can’t find the answer in any book.

I know when this started but I don’t know the cause.
Who am I doing this for?
Me?

Me...n?
I’m at a loss

I sense that this is not the way life should be,
and yet I know that this is the truth for many like me.
I don’t know how to fix this
how to fix myself
or how to fix the world.
I wish I could make my voice heard.

I know how to be a girl
and yet sometimes
I wish I didn’t know
for each look at my stomach makes my head whirl.

Fine

Sara Malik

I am standing in line
trying to be fine
but all I can think about is what isn't mine

pushing through tonight
so I don't fight
I think I'll be alright

but I hold back
I can't unpack
old wounds from his attack
on my soul's track

so I can't cry
I'll pretend to be shy
but people ask why

just bottle it all up
so it it won't come up
I won't throw up

Crisis Counseling for Commodities

Coann Lin

The couch is stiff, your eyes are hard
As the clock marches much too slow

You ask me a question, you don't like my answer,
As the clock marches much too slow

Though I sit inside, your office is guarded
As the clock marches much too slow

Your cacophony of bright trinkets only make the air more cold
As the clock marches much too slow

I'm trying to tell you, but you refuse to see
As the clock marches much too slow

You just talk about how you're a dad, too
As the clock marches much too slow

You bring him in, make me face him
As the clock marches much too slow

He shakes his head, you nod yours
As the clock marches much too slow

You say you're here to listen to me
As the clock marches much too slow

But I can see your eyes on the clock behind me
As it, too, marches much too slow

You're counting your green, picturing the numbers
As the clock marches much too slow

I'm counting my days, picturing his tantrums
As the clock marches much too slow

your quiet and empty house

Mizha

us, together—

is nothing but a quiet and empty house.

it means nothing to me,

while it means something to you.

—don't catch me.

when i land i would like to break.

would like to pick myself back up.

would like to go on without looking back.

would like to see myself fitting together my own pieces.

would like to hold my own hand,

would like to move forward.

would like to let go of the restraints that keep me in the quiet and
empty house that means nothing to me and something to you.

End of My World

Johnna Lee Borden

The living of San Francisco bustled and boomed as Thomas sped down Market Street and 7th. His shoulders ached with the weight of his backpack and his running grew staggered. His knees felt like giving out. The noises, which fueled the city, surrounded his eardrums. Sounds of businessmen on phone calls or the swooshing of zooming cars were not enough to grab Tom's attention, though. Tom was too entrenched in the fear of being late to his Data Science course that he never bothered to care about the world. Sweat gathered around his temples and with a quick pause to catch his breath, Tom swiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He tossed the locks of auburn hair out of his eyes before setting off, once again, on his path towards the bus stop that would take him to his school. Another tardy on his record would mean the dropping of his summer classes, and the tonnage of that worry only led him to run to his bus station even faster.

Tom was a go-getter. Signing up for summer courses immediately after high school graduation, he was continuously filled with the pure fire of ambition, despite his mother disagreeing. Often, he and she would fight over his summer courses. Whenever they talked, the discussion would lead back to their opinions on his schooling every time, without fail. It never helped that they were the only two in their small family, and she was always the wiser head. Without another family member to defend him, he was alone in his stance, as was she. It wasn't fair, though, in Tom's perspective. Her comebacks were always quick-witted, and he never seemed to relieve her of her worries. She just would not stop nagging him about it. His mother would say things like "You should take a break from schooling!" or "You need to stop and appreciate life."

"Mom, I do appreciate life. I appreciate life so much that I am willing to work this hard," Tom would reply. He made sure to pair this with the roll of his eyes, always.

"Honey, I don't think you understand what appreciation means—" his mother would say, but Tom never listened to hear more of her words. Tom had a feeling that those words were trivial, and that he had the work ethic to successfully continue schooling throughout the summer. If only he could wake up on time!

With his feet pounding the ground beneath them, Tom felt light headed from the summer heat. Anticipation was building deep within his stomach, weighing in like the pit inside a peach. This pit grew deeper as he turned a corner that would introduce him to his stop. With a little twist in fate, Tom's eyes widened when he noticed his bus pulling away from the station and disappearing into the business of street traffic. Shit. Not my bus, he thought, I'm late again! The anticipation evolved into anxiety as Tom walked over and sank into the stop's bench. His chest sank also with the heaviness of his unpunctuality. Slipping his arms out of the straps of his backpack, Tom placed the backpack between his legs, slightly hiding it beneath the bench. This would mean the end to Tom's summer course success, and that burden hit him hard.

The rising guilt brought shame to seep from his eyes as he began to contemplate matters. *Why do I always do this*, Tom thought, *I need to be more responsible*. The tears burned into his skin, and he quickly wiped them away to hide any sign of vulnerability to the world. He watched as passersby took no notice of him, and felt relieved. The weight of his feelings began to show themselves through his posture, though. Tom hunched over with his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands.

God, I'm such an idiot, he tells himself. *What is wrong with me?*

In that moment his thoughts travelled to his mother, which only worsened the state of his tears. He felt terrible as the shameful liquid gathered around his eyes, and all at once his eyelids were a dam ready to break. Tom shook his head at the thought of his mother struggling to stay afloat, working two jobs to support him and her. He recalled times in his childhood. All the late nights that his mom would come home, and even after working past the sun's daylight and into the moon's dawn, she would cook dinner for him, helping him on his grade school homework along the way. Tom yearned for the responsibility of helping her; Tom wanted to succeed in his classes and graduate so they could flourish, and she wouldn't be struck with all the work she had to endure for them. Tom longed to be the man

neither of them ever had. At that moment, Tom just felt like a young boy, fighting the urge to teleport to his mother and hug her. As he sat on the bus stop bench, face in his hands and tears in his eyes, Tom began to question the validity of his manhood.

As he sat this way for a few minutes, his body began to shake.

Seriously, stop it! It isn't that serious, he said to himself, yet the shaking picked up. *Wait a minute. It's not just me. Everything is shaking.*

Tom lifted his head and grabbed the bus pole to steady himself. *What's going on,* he thought, *this isn't right.* What had started as a light buzzing beneath his feet, quickly turned into a fierce roaring. Everything trembled. Using his tight grip on the bus pole for support, Tom slowly stood to his feet, fighting the resistance from the ground. Bikes were falling over, and then people began to fall over.

Now he looked to the left and saw two cars collide. "Oh, shit!" he blurted out. He felt the urge to run and help them, grappling with the consequence of leaving his position. The sounds of people screaming amongst each other and shoving themselves into shop door frames consumed his hearing. Tom quickly looked to the ground, and then looked to his right. He saw a crowd of people desperately grabbing onto anything that could steady them. Some people fell to the ground, some grabbed onto the edges of buildings.

Tom noticed a couple individuals running toward a wide open intersection, fear incredibly apparent on their faces as they stood against braking vehicles. Tom's face twisted up in a sickened wince when one individual got rammed head on by a drifting vehicle. His heart plummeted so low, it was as if it just entered the gates of hell. Surrounded by a paralyzing state of shock, Tom found that the land convulsions began to intensify. He faintly made out someone from the crowd of chaos screaming, "Earthquake?"

Earthquake, Tom answered, inwardly.

He looked up into the sky to see San Francisco skyscrapers swaying left to right, left to right, and so on. It was almost beautiful to see those stationary buildings begin to dance, if it didn't mean the

end of his world. The swaying of the structures looked unnatural to him. The buildings towered over Tom as a wave of shock pummeled his gut, like tsunamis engulfing their sufferers. He watched as the massive glass panels shattered high above, and their steel beams began to form the design of cooked noodles. It didn't look real; it seemed as if Tom was viewing a movie. He couldn't help but gape at the tall buildings, the ones that once stood so prominently, now are seen as his impending doom. Those same buildings that had never budged an inch, just looked weak and ready to topple over. Anxiety overtook Tom as he thought of the possibility that these buildings could fall onto him, ending his existence for all eternity.

He quickly snagged his vision away from this before images of a crushed Tom could surface in his mind. He hastily scanned his surroundings for visual refuge and landed on the faces of the people from the crowd. Upon his scanning, Tom noticed an older woman looking right at him. She was right across the street from him, and she was in the same stance that Tom held. Despite all the shaking he was still able to lock eyes with her, yet everything was trembling far too much for Tom to notice her features. He was able to make out only her gray hair that stuck to the tears on her face, and her hands that gripped the bus pole from across the street. She looked old and frail, a short woman with an unsteady endurance. Tom's grip on his own bus pole tightened at an impulsive attempt to keep her grip strong, too. He had little focus on his thought process, but one notion that stood out to him was how alike they both were in that moment. Each having completely separate lives, each looking and sounding completely different, yet they mirrored each other like interchangeable pieces of humanity. Tom felt very fastened to this mystery woman, as if the bus poles were connecting them in some way like a spiritual landline.

Please hold on, he thought, I am here with you.

Just as quickly as the shaking came, it subsided. All at once, gravity graced its existence back into the lives of the people on the streets. Tom felt as if he had just been kicked in the stomach, the wind was knocked right out of him and his breathing was scattered

into a million different fragments. He felt the weight of his body securely press into the ground and his senses began to settle. All at once, the falling pieces of reality started to form before Tom's eyes. He could feel the blood rushing to his brain, with the pain of a searing headache at the brink of his temples. Tom closed his eyes. He stared at the back of his eyelids, surrounded by this blissful darkness. This space felt quiet for him despite the continued chaos of noises in his ears. The rumbling of engines and the screaming of voices growing silent in his mind. Never had he felt so overjoyed with relief and aliveness. His mind was filled with the consolation of still sensing, still experiencing. Never had Tom felt more grateful for the sensation of a breeze, or the thumping in his head. Even his headache, which at this point was impossible to disregard, was a reminder of his current state. His current state being life, Tom allowed himself these few minutes of blissful serenity. Tom stayed in that moment for as long as he found reasonable, before his mind flashed the images of the chaotic streets around him. This jolted Tom into reality.

When he opened his eyes back up, the world around him was in complete distress. The driver who had hit the individual was crying into a phone call. Women were frantically calling for their children, husbands were shouting for their wives, sisters calling for their brothers. The horde of San Francisco citizens were racing to find their families, running up the roads and occasionally checking in on the ones who seemed the most injured. Tom looked to see the two cars that had collided earlier and sighed the heaviest sigh of relief. Those two drivers were alive and well as they exited their vehicles, looking around with shocked faces. He watched as the drivers ran up to each other, and began to check on one another. The sense of companionship overtook them, and the drivers hugged each other as they cried. This reminded Tom of the woman from across the street, and he quickly turned his head to face her.

Where is she? She isn't here, Tom thought. *She has to be here.*

Tom was panic-stricken as he frantically searched up and down the street. He knew not her name, yet desperately wanted to shout out to see if she was alright, joining the sea of voices screaming

amongst the streets. His heart was sinking as he envisioned the heavy, inevitable debris. His soul felt like it was being crushed with each passing second that he couldn't spot her. Solace finally washed over him, however, when he saw that gray-haired woman. She was in a perfect state, and walking along the street across from him. He wanted to run right up to her and tell her that he was so glad she was alive, but before he could decide on this action, he noticed her approaching a young man of about his age. The young man turned around and when he laid his eyes on her, he hugged her with a love and warmth that could only come from a son. Tom smiled as tears brimmed his eyelids—he knew that type of love all too well.

He quickly grabbed at his pocket, searching for his phone. When he felt the outline of its presence, he gripped the phone tightly and dialed the only number he had ever learned by memory.

“Mom? Are you safe?”

“Oh, God. Tommy, I am so glad to hear your voice.” It sounded as though she had been crying and a wave of temporary sadness hit Tom like a bus.

“Are you okay, Mom? Are you safe?” Tom asked.

“Yes, hon. I'm completely okay. Are you? Where are you?” Worry interlaced with her tone.

Tom quickly replied, “Yes, yes. I am alright. I'm coming home now. I will be there soon.”

“No. I am coming to get you, where are you?” she replied

“No, mom. It is crazy here. It's a 10 minute walk from where I am—”

“Stop!” she shouted. “You have no idea how worried I was about you!” There was a momentary pause, but that silence felt like years. Tom closed his eyes. He missed his mother more than he had ever missed her in his lifetime. He needed to hug her now more than ever. The silence was broken by the sounds of her muffled crying.

“Mom, it's okay. Everything's okay,” Tom said, yet to no avail; her quiet sobs persisted. Tom listened to her crying, hanging on to the relief that both of them were still alive. He shook his head, almost in disbelief. The fragility of life was something that he never quite

understood. He knew life was fragile, but he never felt the fragility of life until that day.

“Mom, I think I’m done with summer classes.” Tom stated, abruptly. Her crying halted and there was yet another pause. Tom felt nervous but was quickly surrounded by relief. Reassurance alleviated him as he heard the sounds of her chuckling mixed amongst her tears.

“Thomas, that’s the last thing I care about.” She said, her voice sprinkled with disbelief. “You better get here immediately. I will be outside waiting for you. And you better not hang up this phone call, or I swear to God—”

“I won’t, mom.” Tom said, tears streaming down his face while he quickly walked back home.

The Accident

Sean Nguyen

There is something so belittling about panic. That vicious trembling—it forces my body to resign itself to the consequences of my actions. It's become so commonplace the more I cause trouble, but I feel like it gets worse with every trip, every slip, every spill, every error. It's just that I have a hard time harboring my composure. I just want to crumble and coil into a fetus, regress back into that innocuous child who cried because he didn't mean to, whose head was coddled and kissed because he didn't know any better. It makes me think of the pale baby cherub, a poster child on a lot of my grandma's postcards. Sometimes I feel like he was mocking me with his eyes gazed away and his mouth in a remorseful pout; it's real easy to feel disempowered by someone who thinks he could get away with it all.

But this time, it's not my fault — really! This Prius was turning super slowly into the parking lot plaza without letting me know they were gonna turn. I slammed right into their left bumper before my shoe could even break the bond between the ball of my foot and the gas pedal and I—

I really don't even know if I have the right papers. That bulb of watermelon-flavored gum under the glove compartment is probably more valuable than the contents of whatever that ream of DMV-ins-tated letters is. Uh, what is it that I need? License, registration, proof of insurance (Jeez, I don't think I have it, but you could ask that gecko dude personally if you don't believe me! I'm serious! He'll tell you what's up!).

I am shaking profusely as I hide behind my wheel. My cold hands are tucked in between my thighs to manage the trembling. I remember reading somewhere that you should never take fault for an accident, especially one you may have caused. But if I'm being honest, I wasn't sure.... I looked at my phone for a millisecond to change the song right when I slammed right into the bumper, so I don't think I had the right puzzle pieces to confirm whether or not this was my wrongdoing.

Nonetheless, I try to exit the car staunchly positioned in my

cherub stance. My left foot is turned inwardly. My face is coy.

The man in the Prius is old and decrepit. His head is stooped downward. Oh god, I say to myself. You really hit the nail in the coffin on this one, or whatever that saying is.

“Sir, are you okay?” I say with a harsh urgency.

He shoots upward and glances at me, almost with a displaced look. I think he’s drooling.

“Can I help you with sumthin?” He seems more disgruntled with the fact that I woke him up more than me hitting his car.

“Sir...so it appears your car has been hit...by another car... that was driven...by a person....”

He then gets out of the car with a bit of swiftness that I did not expect considering his age; it makes me take a step back. “Kid, I will tell you: I can tell you’re shaken and I know you probably don’t have all the right papers. I don’t think you wanna get insurance involved, huh?”

(Thank god! I was lying about the gecko...)

“Stuff like this happens all the time. For a very crucial reason, you know.”

I furrow my eyebrows. “...And it’s normal to be casual about it?”

“I’d like to tell you something that might change your life.

Let me introduce to you the spinning gears of our entire societal infrastructure. The very mechanism that keeps the world going round...it will revolutionize the way you think about our traffic system.... Are you ready to hear the truth?”

Holding his two tightened fists in front of me, he splays his fingers outwardly to reveal one red jelly bean and one blue jelly bean nestled in each palm.

“Choose wisely.” (I’m inclined to pick neither, because the jelly beans are lukewarm and must be belligerently sweaty from holding them in his hands for so long.)

Before I could even answer, he says, “I think I will give the red jelly bean regardless because blue is my favorite flavor—anyway, follow me.”

He walks over to the steaming sewer gate embedded in the asphalt of the street adjacent to us and power lifts an iron slab open to reveal a descending ladder. As I step lower into the hole, I notice the walls surrounding the tunnel are rocky and raw. The rocks feel rough and damp. They smell like mineral and rotten eggs. I would've assumed it naturally emanated from the earth, had the old man not let out a sonic fart that echoed so loudly in the tunnel, it almost caused me to slip.

By now, we've reached the bottom of the ladder, which gives way to a large opening, at which I've begun to realize that we are not alone down here. It's a neck-bendingly tall, hollow cave whose din is accompanied by string lights that stretch the circumference of its walls, as well as the slight murmurs of the old men that now surround us.

The old man from the Prius finally turns to me to meet my eyes, which are widened.

"Welcome to the Secret Society of People Who Don't Use Their Turn Indicator Lights."

"What?"

"Something as silly as proclaiming your next direction to fellow cars is something that is not within our nature. Walk with me."

Now this is something the Batcave wishes it was. There are men hunched over computers embedded in the cave walls that extend all the way across. Some men are sitting at a round table playing cards. There is a trio huddled around a water tank making the worst small talk you could ever bear. There's even a person holding a stack of papers pacing insecurely around a hunk of beige plastics, which I now see is a copy machine as we walk closer. They look really awkward. I wanna reach out and help, but the machine is so archaic. It'd probably combust into smithereens if I did so much as rest my hand on it.

Here, the old man gestures to the wall covered by age-old televisions stacked twenty high. I could probably count more than 200 just by looking at it. He points to one television in particular.

"Are those our cars?"

"Tell me: what do you feel when you cause an accident? Does

your stomach turn over rougher than a high tide? Do your little legs scuttle your fragile body to your bed, where you can finally loosen your grip and cry?”

“I—”

“You thought all of your accidents were accidents, didn’t you? Every incident, every vase you shatter, every time your voice cracks in front of someone important, every crash that happens on this earth is here for a particular reason. Here, this special group of men brake a little harder, drive a little slower.”

I start to feel a bit of resistance at the pit of my stomach.

“Sir, I’m not sure I get what you mean. I’ve driven behind so many slow people, but you don’t mean to tell me it’s on purpose. I mean, those late job interviews, those lost minutes on the commute... why would you want to slow the impenetrable, unstoppable movement of something that’s already as fast as our minds can carry?”

He grimly stabs his index finger into my left shoulder. His fingerprint makes me sore. “Case in point, kid. It is pure, unadulterated impatience that plagues you. These cars are larger than life, kid. You’re human. You’re still fragile as clay.”

I say nothing. I don’t have anything to say to an old man whose car I fender-bendered into. Especially an old man who just led me down a tunnel into a secret society. I realize I probably look stupid with this dumbfounded look on my face.

“You still don’t get it, do you.”

At least now I have a prompt to respond with. I simply shake my head, no.

He places his hand on the same shoulder he jostled his finger into. Ow! It’s still bruised. “I need to tell you about a time. Probably before you were born.”

Look: the way he’s opening this story is already making me tune out. I’ve heard this time and time again from my grandma—I never hear the end of it. It was always pointless, too. There was never a point. She just told me things because I knew it made her feel good to tell me things. I always sat and listened, but jeez, sometimes I just can’t stand it.

He continues: “Technology always seemed to be one step ahead of us. The way we understood things became folly to the computer. Mathematicians always ran short behind calculators. Runners resigned in lieu of robots. But then things began to get really fast.”

“What’s wrong with fast? My mom pays a lot for high-speed internet, I think.”

“Well, you can never have too much of something you love, right? There isn’t anything to tell you when to stop pummeling into your favorite tub of ice cream. Spoon after spoon. Your brain lets you do these things because your brain thinks nourishing and leisure. But you eventually hit a wall when the lining of your esophagus is raw from dairy and you’ve bloated into a buoy. You stop when you are forced to face the consequences. As you get older, these consequences come sooner and sooner. You are duly reminded that you can’t live forever. So that’s what I mean when things got faster than we could bear. When we realized, it was already too late because things were, you know, too fast. Cars, especially. We couldn’t keep up.”

“So what happened?”

“We discovered that turn indicator lights are the most calculated way to preemptively prevent a car crash. So, a group of us banded together to form one chapter out of thousands who solemnly swear to simply never use their indicator lights. But most of the time, we really just forget. We seek those cars that drive too fast for their own good. Then, we brake sooner than those cars behind us might expect.

“You see, those few seconds we allot for you to react are very timely and very crucial. Before you know it, you’re throwing all your life and determination onto that brake pedal. When you’re screeching to a halt, all you can do is pray. You shrink. You become small. In that moment, you acknowledge that your restless fate has now fallen out of your grasp. You start to acknowledge the control that used to belong to you is no longer tangible. In those milliseconds, you begin to think about the one thousand and one ways your car could be totaled. Your body is tense and you brace for impact. You pray to God you can handle it.

“But you then you brake. And then you remember to breathe.

And then you remember that we are not gods on earth. And then you drive a little slower. Now you know how it works.”

On our way out, I acquaint myself with some of the guys by the water cooler. I crack a joke that causes them to breathlessly lean over in a fit of laughter. I didn't think it was that funny, but I'll take it. When we climb back out of the tunnel, the air is crisp. The evening is lulled by a breeze that liberates the heat from the trees and the concrete. He dusts off my shoulders as his way to say goodbye and smiles intently at me. I see the way his crow's feet are etched near his eyes like india ink and the way his wrinkles hug his grin that goes from ear to ear.

I go back to the site of our car crash and I see that my car is neatly parked by the curb all by itself. When I walk over to my right headlight, its former dent has miraculously undented itself. Its scratches are buffed and unblistered. When I look back at the sewer gate, the old man is already halfway down the tunnel. He gives me a solid wink before his fingers slide the iron slab back over the hole.

When I come home that evening, smelling like rotten eggs, I tell my grandma about the accident. I tell her I wasn't paying attention. Surprisingly, I cry. I cry as much as I'll let it. I have a feeling I'm crying not entirely about the accident. She empathetically opens her arms to me; I feel how the warmth of my tears moistens the fabric on her shirt as she gently pets the back of my head.

Sunday Mornings

Vera Czernichowska

Sunday mornings bring about a sense of tradition
Through the window, rays of golden sunlight
Dancing to The Beatles while we cook in the yellow-tiled kitchen
The warmth of the coffee that is brewing, out of sight

These moments bring out the inner-child and peace
During a time of standing in the eye of a hurricane
We become in control of the tides in our internal seas
Temporarily forgetting about the mundane

I had gotten used to an empty home
Now the laughter of children echo down the hall
Political debates to my ears, as sweet as a honeycomb
This is a kind of Sunday service for us, after all

Chipped china and teapots crowd the table amongst the banter
I look up from the old photographs I hold, my soul filled with amber

What I Know, Where I'm At

Vanessa Lund

I know when new comics come onto the shelves,
The first Wednesday of the month,
My dad set up my subscription when I was ten,
Then hand over four dollars and thirty-nine cents,
For new stories of my speeding needle-mouse,
Inked in vibrant blues and red I may replicate at home.

I know how hot caramel really is,
Though the burns across my fingertips have long since healed,
The health department notice requiring heatproof gloves remain.
But the speed at which apples must be submerged in browned sugar,
Seems to get faster everyday.

I know all of Dexter's small sounds,
Scratches at the door to be let inside,
Stretching his six-toed paw out while rolled over,
A signal of the desire for armpit petting,
The soft quiet snores—akin to the whirring and puffs of a humidifier,
The crease in the arches of his eyes and flick of his tail when irritated,
Yet I'll coo and squish his toes all the same.

I've heard wind ensembles in venues large and small,
In all black attire and shoes far too uncomfortable,
A wooden case in hand holding my Selmer E flat,
The other holds pages with lines and code to be read into song,
Some work with the acoustics and push through the tension in the hall,
Some panic, perhaps squeak on the reed aware of the judge's stare,
I've been both in my time as a musician,
Though I shall tune to the flute no matter my confidence

I've felt the ache of muscles stretched to their breaking point,
Breaking properly and tearing slightly more with every routine,
Plié, Rond De Jambe, and Tour Jeté all within the pattern across the stage,
I've been blinded by scorching tree-shaped lights in the wings and above,
With a partner to my side we match in rhythm, our feet land against
 vinyl together,
I've heard the click, tap, slap, and fa-lap of the worn metal slabs held in
 by screws,
It's a different feeling in my ankles with those metal shoes,
Harsher and jarring but the bend of my knees keeps me going,

I don't know what my future holds,
But I know what my roots are,
Art in many forms, my left hand blackened with graphite,
Or the shortness of breath and weariness of my feet struck in flexed pose,
I know that the jingle of keys is a tell that my mother is walking away,
The rumble of a flashy car signals my father's arrival,
And the soft purr of Dexter showing his content,
I know these comforts of life and the rewards of my work,
With them my future doesn't need to be known,
Only lived.

Lost Empire

Leila Kurtz



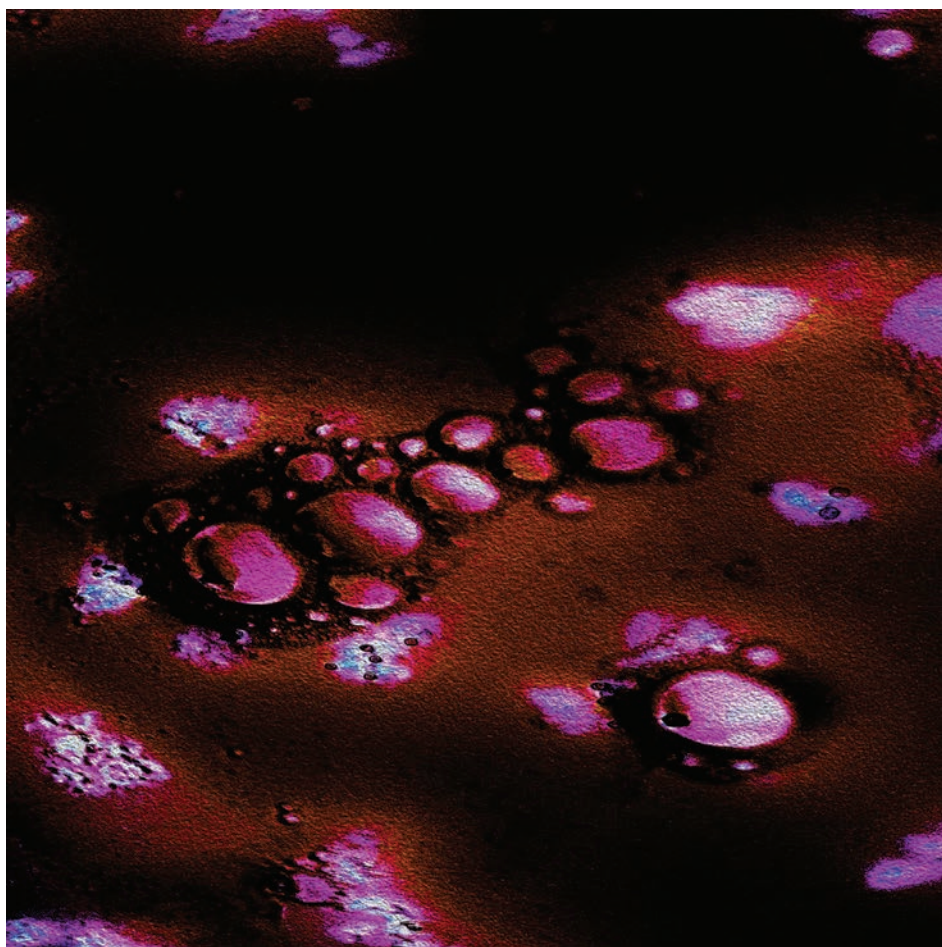
Message in a Boat(tle)

Leila Kurtz



Cycle

Jay Gall



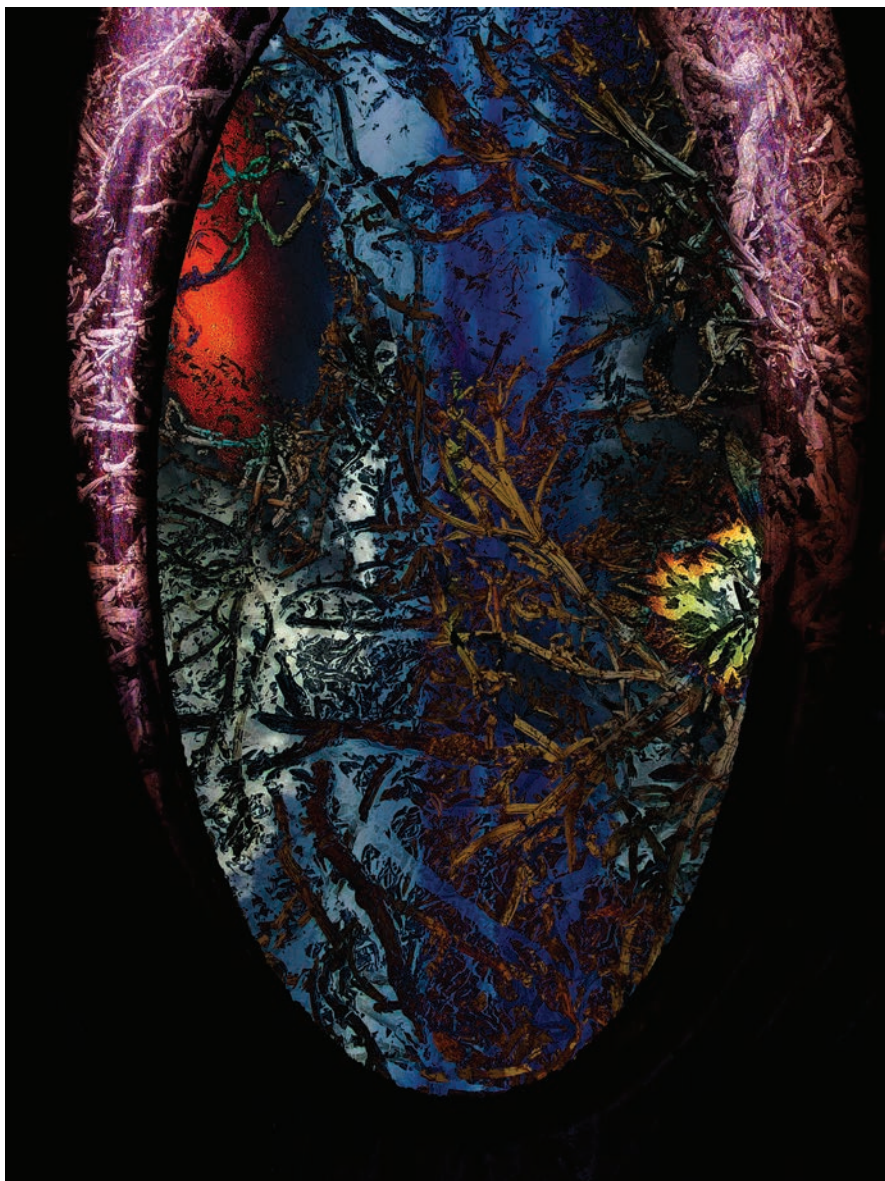
The Legacy of Violence

Charles Haiwen



Who We Are

Jay Gall



La Vie en Rose

Leila Kurtz



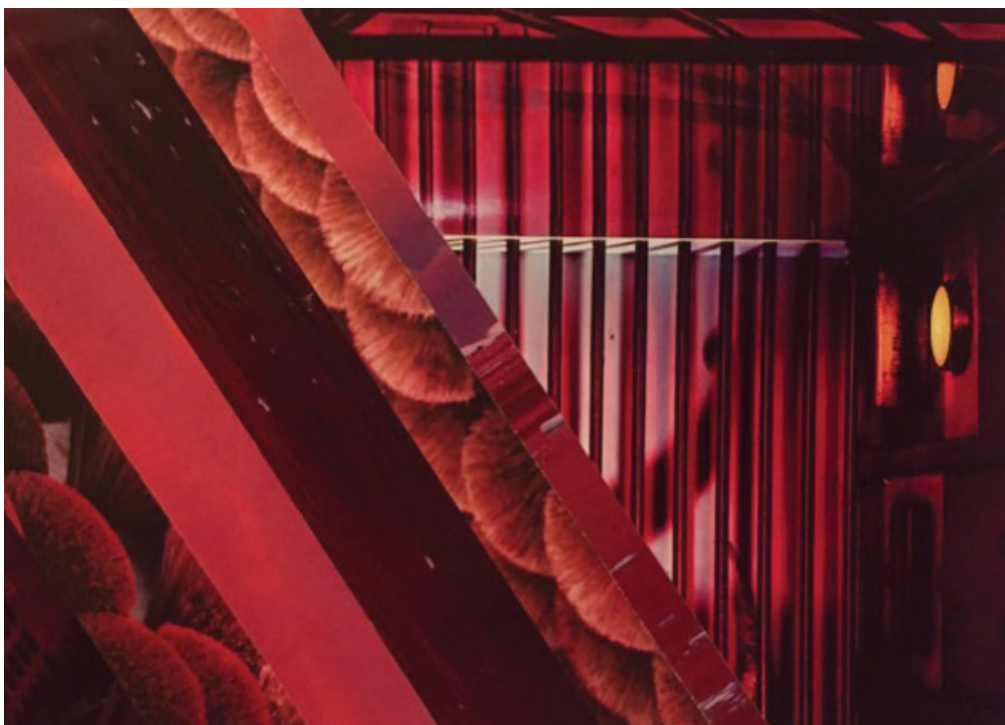
Dancing With The Stars

Leila Kurtz



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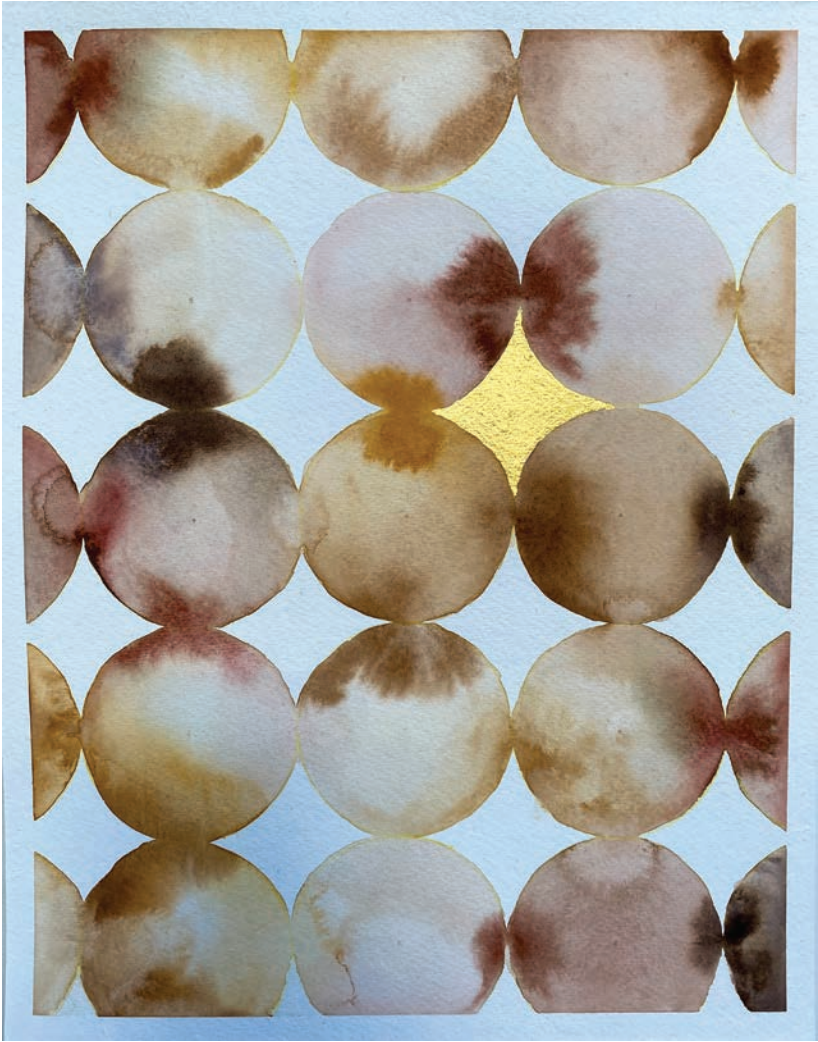
Marie Morley





Superellipse

Bethany Forman



Vitruvian I

Bethany Forman



Plagued by Conformity, Liberated by Solidarity
Sean Nguyen



Code Yellow

Steven Chuong

Whatever happened to the “model minority”?
What happened to the stereotypes
Of Asians being smart and upstanding.

Change

The virus, yes, corona.
It changed praise to hate,
Anti-immigrant thoughts into actions,
Voices into fists. And we were hit hard.

Symptoms

Sore throat
Cough
Fever
“Yellow” skin

Ways to Combat Coronavirus

Wear masks
Stay six feet apart
Wash your hands
Get vaccinated
Beat up Asians

Confusion

You’re telling me that I’m targeted
Just by being born and just because of the color of my skin?
Born in America, yet you tell me I’m from China?
I’ve never even been.

Myth

Old Asian men and women, grandpas and grandmas, adults, teens, kids
Are attacked in the streets, for chasing the American dream.
Yeah, the “model minority”
Doesn’t exist.

Winner, 2022 Jim Luotto Prize for an Essay About Literature
Capitalism's Personas in *Sister Carrie* and "Roman Fever"

Catherine Nguyen

There is no "true self" in this materialistic world; as new trends form, new personas do as well. Theodore Dreiser demonstrates this notion in his novel *Sister Carrie*: "There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human" (Dreiser ch. 1, para. 3). The "larger forces" represent capitalism and its effects on the people. *Sister Carrie* displays the struggles of someone trying to become "something," a young woman struggling to find herself in her consumerist society. Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" also takes up this idea of the inner self, but Wharton instead displays that struggle within the higher class, the type of woman that Carrie is trying to become. However, these women, unlike Carrie, are forced to restrain their "true" selves to remain within the status quo of the wealthy: "So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope" (Wharton 875). Wharton depicts the false pretenses that these women are portraying; even though they have been friends for years, they have never truly known each other, as their interpretations of the other are influenced by their own bitterness and the facades they put up. Both stories present the impacts that materialism can have on one's inner self, using the idea that capitalism and human nature can go hand in hand.

The drive to change themselves is inherently associated with the "ideal individual" that capitalism tries to commercialize; Wharton's characters' societies, though thirty years apart, have forces that push them to create a new "self." All three women from these texts seek out their happiness through material gain, only to realize they will never be truly satisfied with what they have. With this, they internalize all their jealousy of others they deem better than themselves and consistently seek to improve their own false senses of "self."

Capitalism's effects are best shown through the character of Carrie herself; unlike the women from "Roman Fever" who have grown up with this mindset of competitiveness, Carrie comes into this setting naive and hopeful. She deems money not as a means of survival as compared to the rest of her family: "Money: something everybody else has and I must get" (Dreiser ch. 7, para. 1). She does not crave wealth out of greed but desires for it as a way to connect with those she wishes to become, "the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence,

themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained” (ch. 3, para. 43). Three chapters into the novel and the reader can already witness the repercussions of capitalism; as Carrie tours the city in hopes of finding a job, she constantly encounters advertisements for the latest fashion and accessories. People do not give her a moment of their time due to her appearance, deeming themselves better than her because of their luxury goods. Carrie realizes the “self” she displays for the public is not substantial enough for societal expectations; she wishes to seek change through the materialism displayed from the higher class.

Much like the women from “Roman Fever,” her character is dependent on the consistent comparison of others: “A flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart” (Dreiser ch. 3, para. 43). Her persona is built from replication of the women she perceives; seeing how material wealth allows them to be commended, she seeks it through wealthy men. When that is not enough, she seeks a new image through fame, in which she finally loses all sense of self. As Ames, Carrie’s friend, puts it, “Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings. They depend upon others. That is what genius is for. One man expresses their desires for them in music; another one in poetry; another one in a play. Sometimes nature does it in a face—it makes the face representative of all desire. That’s what has happened in your case” (Dreiser ch. 46, para. 162). Carrie, through all her wealth and fame, has lost whoever she was initially, now only being the “representative” of all human desires. Capitalism encourages her to put up all these new guises for the public, convincing her that happiness will only come to her through materialistic desires and public admiration.

Wharton also tries to exhibit this idea in “Roman Fever”; two women are adamant about keeping their high status as they continuously try to achieve “happiness.” Much like Carrie, their identities are made from envy, though in a more hostile sense. While Carrie uses it as a means to better herself, the women in “Roman Fever” tear each other down in hopes of feeling superior to the other. The most apparent difference from *Sister Carrie* is that these women have already developed a permanent “self”—a constant appearance that they maintain throughout their entire lives. For one to remain of high status in capitalism, one has to display “perfection.”

Not only must these women be wealthy, but they must also maintain a good appearance, children, and most of all, a husband.

Mrs. Slade is the best demonstration of this ideology: “As the wife of the famous corporation lawyer, always with an international case or two on hand, every day brought its exciting and unexpected obligation” (Wharton 874). She finds her identity through her status, leading her to become spiteful towards others including the people she considers friends. Once her husband passes, she feels as if she does not have much sense of purpose, her spouse being one of the main reasons for her social standing. Upon the discovery of her friend being in love with her husband, she sets out for revenge and even contemplates indirectly killing the woman. Wharton reveals all of Mrs. Slade’s insecurities: “I hated you, hated you. I knew you were in love with Delphin—and I was afraid; afraid of you, of your quiet ways, your sweetness” (879). Though she already has the life she wishes for, she lives in constant terror that some other woman will try to pry it away from her. This outlook remains true in *Sister Carrie* as well, with Hurstwood being an example of one falling down from the social hierarchy—a man who has had everything dies with nothing. In capitalism, the chance of retaining one’s wealth is difficult, especially in these characters’ time periods. The fluctuating economy and overall notion of gaining material wealth at a high-speed added to the risk for many individuals. So, it is not surprising that Mrs. Slade is overly cautious of everyone she interacts with. With just a snap of her fingers, the status she worked so hard for could be lost within a second.

Discontent and fear are what drive these women; Mrs. Slade holds resentment against Mrs. Ansley for years while the latter abides with her petty comments. Nevertheless, Mrs. Ansley is not free from the pressure of perfectionism; her child, Barbara, is an illegitimate daughter to Mrs. Slade’s husband, but, to cover up her mistake, her parents set up a marriage to save her reputation. She lives through a loveless marriage, her daughter reminding her of the man she truly loves: “I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn’t write.’ [...] ‘I had Barbara” (Wharton 881). She holds this secret for years; whilst Mrs. Slade accuses her of having a fling with her husband, she endures with perfect calmness, never losing her facade. Even in times of conflict, these two women never tuck away their “public face,” resorting to back-handed compli-

ments and witty banter to get their points across. Much like Carrie's ending, these women are to forever suffer through the "selves" they have created.

Both stories represent women on two different sides of the class spectrum, the poor and the rich. In spite of that, they all suffer through the same issue of self-identity. Capitalism has these women in a tight grip, having commercialized this idea of gaining happiness through wealth and attention. The women have to choose between their original "self" or the "self" that is made for the public: "She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe" (Dreiser ch. 10, para. 9). Due to their society favoring those who fit into the societal expectations, their "public self" ends up always winning. No matter what, these women will always lose their original identities because of the capitalist ideals in their time period; their true "self" is bought out by material wealth and recognition.

Dreiser displays the endeavors of someone moving from the bottom of the social hierarchy by attempting to create a valid identity, while Wharton presents the toiling effects of trying to maintain that facade. Capitalism is the biggest factor in these women's construction of self. It feeds into the jealousy of these women, always showcasing how there is somebody that is going to be better than them; there is always going to be somebody with more wealth, fame, and favorable personas to compare to themselves. In their capitalist society, these women are forced to create these various facades to be able to move up in the world. As capitalism grows, they lose all sense of "self"; their original identities are long forgotten in favor of the materialistic happiness that money and acknowledgment bring them. As soon as they are able to achieve said things, it is then revealed how they have only deluded themselves with temporary possessions, as happiness was never achievable through material concepts.

Works Cited

- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Project Gutenberg, 2004.
Levine, Robert S. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.
Norton, 2017.

Trading The Idea Of Summer For An Early Spring

Sky Ward

It's a picture perfect night.

*

The sun set hours ago, but the brightness lingers at the horizon, a blue like aquamarine, yet sweeter. I follow the silhouette of the mountain range with my fingertips, and hope it rains again.

Soon.

*

At the same time I think of clear nights, when the stars fade into focus, shifting and blurring in some worldly focal lens, coming out sharp. A needle lined up point first, aiming for home, my sphere of a planet. Aiming for me.

*

These things coexist, I reason with myself. This is a comforting thought. The lingering brightness gives edges to the clouds, ashen in the sky, and casts phantom shadows on the sidewalk.

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I think of summer, the heat of a day in the evening breeze, because now it pretends to be warm in waking hours. I don't know who the weather is lying to more, me or itself.

Trading the idea of summer for an early spring.

*

It's a picture perfect night, but even this too shall pass. Yet another sign on the freeway, luminous as the moon, and much more forgettable. If you keep driving, the words lose meaning.

Don't miss your exit.